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RICHARD RORTY AND THE ANALYTIC TRADITION: RADICAL BREAK OR PARTIAL CONTINUITY?

- Tadeusz Szubka -

It is quite widely assumed that at the beginning of his career Richard Rorty was an orthodox analytic philosopher, working in its then current mainstream, and especially fascinated by the linguistic turn taken by this tradition. For instance the editors of the collection on Richard Rorty (Guignon, Hiley [2003]) writes in the introduction to it:

If one knew Rorty only through the handful of papers he published early in his career, he would appear to be a reasonably skilled and well-trained analytic philosopher. He published papers in the mid-1960s and early 1970s on the mind-body identity theory, arguing against the incorrigibility of mental representations and favoring what he termed "eliminative materialism". He edited a collection of essays under the title *The Linguistic Turn*, which brought together a range of philosophers writing on the topics of language, meaning, and truth – then central to analytic philosophy. He wrote on Wittgenstein and Strawson. He seemed to be staking out a career as another talented philosopher applying the methods of analytic philosophy to the perennial problems of the nature of mind, language, and reality (*ibidem*, p. 6).

Subsequently, starting with his 1972 paper "The World Well Lost" he supposedly radically and dramatically changed his views, turning himself from a staunch analytic philosopher into a vigorous critic of the analytic tradition and ultimately paradigmatically postmodern and continental thinker.

I think this picture exaggerates changes in Rorty's philosophical views. He certainly never became fully postmodern and continental philosopher, whatever it means. And what seems here more important, he always had a lot of reservations about analytic philosophy and had less hopes of it than one or two passages from his early writings suggest.

In what follows I shall first present his very early views on linguistic turn in philosophy and its limitations. Then I shall discuss his account of transcendental

arguments, deployed by some analytic philosophers. And finally I shall briefly consider his most recent assessment of analytic movement.

The Linguistic Approach and Its Weaknesses

It would be hard to deny that Rorty was for some time greatly attracted by the linguistic turn and its destructive and revolutionary flavor. While comparing in 1962 traditional and analytic approaches to the issue of realism in its then two main schools, ideal-language philosophers and ordinary-language philosophers, he advised the proponent of the traditional approach “to take seriously the central metaphilosophical argument which is common ground to both ideal-language and ordinary-language theorists: the argument that traditional methods of posing and resolving philosophical questions inevitably lead to dialectical impasses between competing schools, and that only by taking the linguistic turn can we escape from such impasses” (Rorty [1962] p. 322). He also emphasized the unusual historical importance of contemporary analytic philosophy, and especially its linguistic variety, in the following well-known passage from his introduction to the collection *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method*, first published in 1967:

Linguistic philosophy, over the last thirty years, has succeeded in putting the entire philosophical tradition, from Parmenides through Descartes and Hume to Bradley and Whitehead, on the defensive. It has done so by a careful and through scrutiny of the ways in which traditional philosophers have used language in the formulation of their problems. This achievement is sufficient to place this period among the great ages of the history of philosophy (Rorty [1967/1992] p. 33).

He later honestly admitted that this was a gross overstatement that can be explained psychologically as “the attempt of a thirty-three-year-old philosopher to convince himself that he had had the luck to be born at the right time – to persuade himself that the disciplinary matrix in which he happened to find himself (philosophy as taught in most English-speaking universities in the 1960s) was more than just one more philosophical school, one more tempest in an academic teapot” (Rorty [1992] p. 371). Retrospectively one has to agree that it really was nothing but one more school, whose hot controversies seems now strange and antique.

However, the careful reader of early writings of Rorty may notice that even in the 1960s he was to some extent skeptical about the lasting value of linguistic philosophy and its apparently incontrovertible arguments and results. In one of his first publications acknowledging that analytic philosophy increased our metaphilosophical self-consciousness, he also made the following charge:

But analytic philosophers have too often been “reductionist” metaphilosophers: that have used metaphilosophical analyses to reduce their opponents to absurdity, but they have lacked the courage to apply these analyses to themselves. Just when it seemed that the clamor about “metaphysical nonsense” had been stilled by pointing to the unverifiability of the Principle of Verifiability, metaphilosophical reductionism received a new lease on life in Ryle’s notion of “category-mistakes” and in the notion that one can detect philosophical “confusions” by listening for divergences from the ordinary use of terms. Nowadays the air is filled with talk of the “mistakes,” “howlers,” and “blunders” which past philosophers, or one’s unfortunate colleagues, have committed. This lapse in to the scholastic habit of winning easy victories by invoking distinctions *ad libitum* bodes ill for the future. It is quite as important to ignore irrelevant distinctions as to formulate relevant ones, and fruitful philosophical controversy is possible only when both sides have patience to investigate their opponents’ criteria of relevance (Rorty [1961] p. 317-318).

Why easy victories are not possible in philosophy and what does it happen when both sides of philosophical or metaphilosophical dispute listen to their mutual “criteria of relevance”?

Here is an example taken from Rorty’s [1963] review of Brand Blanshard’s massive attack on analytic philosophy. The gist of this attack are Blanshard’s criticisms of main tenets of analytic movement, including widely held in the middle of the twentieth century the linguistic conception of a priori and necessary truths. Proponents of this conception insisted, among other things, that “the only method for deciding whether a purported underived a priori truth is what it claims to be is to ask oneself, or others, about the uses of words” (*ibidem*, p. 552). Blanshard thought this belief was based on confusion. Of course, one has to know the uses of words “red” and “green” in order to establish that red is incompatible with green, but those uses do not make this incompatibility claim true but rather the way the world is. Blanshard’s point, as Rorty rightly notices, is sound only if one agrees that there two sorts of independent activities: discovering relations between colors and other universals, on the one had, and establishing relations between the uses of relevant words, on the other hand.

For, if we *can* do the former independently of the latter, we can compare the relations between the universals that “red” and “green” denote with the uses of these words and thus discover whether “Red and green are incompatible” is dictated by the former or only by the latter. Further, if we can do this, [...] it is false that deter-

mining whether a given sentence expresses an a priori truth must proceed by way of inquiry about the use of words. For we can, instead, turn to an inspection of the universals meant by these words (*ibidem*, p. 553).

If all this is admitted, then certainly Blanshard is fully entitled to claim that the linguistic theory of the a priori is deeply confused.

It is widely held that Wittgenstein in his later works successfully undermined the independence of this kind, on the grounds of giving the distorted picture of our mental life and separating two sorts of activities that cannot be separated. Blanshard remained unconvinced by Wittgensteinian arguments. He writes:

“You learned the *concept* pain when you learned language,” says Wittgenstein. That is to exalt words absurdly. The use of universals both antedates the use of words and is presupposed by it; one could not use the word “cat” in one’s recognition of cats unless one already recognized the mark or sound “cat” as itself an instance of the word. If, in order to recognize this instance, one had to have a further word for it, then to recognize this further word one would need a still further word, and so would have to go through an infinite series of words before one recognized anything. This process is plainly needless. If so, it is because the recognition of something as the same or similar is so far from being a verbal matter that it can occur in both the race and the infant before language arises (Blanshard [1962] p. 391-392).

One may argue against Blanshard that there is no threat of infinite regress here, since the ability to use a given word and to recognize its instances does not require possessing a further word for it, and so on. However, Blanshard would then presumably respond that it certainly requires possessing some concept of its use, and possessing this concept cannot be explained without recourse to apprehension of relations between universals.

After a brief account of the twists and turns of this debate Rorty comes to the conclusion that to settle who is right here and who is confused “one would need to formulate neutral methodological criteria in terms that provide a neutral characterization of the nature and procedures of philosophical inquiry” (Rorty [1963] p. 556). But such a neutrality seems impossible, since the proposed criteria always turn out either arbitrary, or circular. Thus one is entitled to the following pessimistic conclusion:

It may be a peculiarity of philosophical controversy about first principles that methodological and substantive issues are always joined in this exasperatingly circular way. If so, then the real basis for deciding whether philosophy is an application of our faculty of grasping necessary connections between universals *in rebus*

or is linguistic analysis will not be a philosophical conclusion about the nature of thought or language, but rather a practical decision about what one wants to get out of philosophy, and how, in the light of the course of the history of philosophy so far, one is most likely to get it (*ibidem*, p. 556-557).

This conclusion, contrary to what is widely assumed, is not a far cry from metaphilosophy that Rorty defended in his later writings.

In addition, even in his early days Rorty was not fully convinced that there is really something special in the analytic tradition or school. Comparing it, in a rather forgotten and neglected paper (Rorty [1967]), with what is now widely called continental philosophy (and what he called there the “metaphysical” school), he made the following observation:

It is, to my mind, widely misleading to say that analytic philosophers take language as their subject-matter, whereas metaphysicians take nature or experience as theirs. I should hold that the common subject-matter of both schools is, simply, the history of philosophy. In other words, I think that the only way of describing the subject-matter of either school which does not beg important metaphilosophical questions is to say that both take as their subject the various perplexities and paradoxes found in the philosophical tradition. The aim of both schools is to find a set of truths which will resolve these perplexities and problems – truths which will have a maximum of intuitive plausibility and, taken together as a system, a maximum of theoretical elegance. In my view, the dialectical moves which are made in formulating and defending such truth are much the same on both sides of the fence. Among both analysts and metaphysicians, the ultimate criteria are set by a common aim – that of striking a proper balance between effectiveness (at resolving problems), plausibility, and elegance. The apparent differences of subject-matter and method are illusions created by the use of different jargons in which to formulate these dialectical moves (*ibidem*, p. 39-40).

Transcendental Arguments

A significant number of analytic philosophers, including P. F. Strawson and S. Shoemaker, tried to devise transcendental arguments, to support various substantial philosophical claims, and especially to rebut epistemological skepticism. Following Kant, Strawson made an attempt to show that from the way our experience works, one may infer that this must be for the most part experience of outer objects, distinct from inner experiential episodes. According to Rorty [1970], this attempt, called by him the Strawson’s objectivity argument, is promising, yet one should not expect too much from it.

He begins his careful examination of this argument by noticing that while extracting the argument from Kant's work Strawson did not successfully disentangle it from "the misguided picture of intuitions and concepts as distinguishable sorts of representations" (*ibidem*, p. 207). In his construal Rorty suggests that the objectivity argument should start with the thesis of the conceptualizability of experience which requires to think of experiential episodes as consisting, generally, in the recognition of particular items as falling under a given kind, as being of this or that sort. Thus making judgments involves "*particulars* to be subsumed, and – to give the essence of the argument in a nutshell – *particularity requires objectivity*. That is: we cannot formulate judgments without words for particulars, and we cannot give a sense to these words which will keep their role distinct from words for universals if we do not have the notion of *object*" (*ibidem*, p. 234). Does the objectivity argument, so construed, constitute a powerful weapon against skepticism? By establishing these conceptual or linguistic connections it certainly does not rebut skepticism in the straightforward sense, but it constitutes a challenge to the proponent of skepticism: the challenge to show how one could consistently dispense with the particular–universal distinction and its commitments.

It is a challenge, in other words, to explain what sorts of judgments could be made by a being who lacked both physical-object concepts and experience concepts. Whether the skeptic can meet this challenge is [...] a question of whether he can show that a language could work which contained, e.g., only notions of sensory qualities, "next to," "resembles," and the logical constants. Without examining such proposals in detail, we cannot make the argument for the claim that all consciousness is self-consciousness any more conclusive than we were able to make the argument for the objectivity thesis. All that we have done is again to show that the task of the skeptic is more difficult than it first appears (*ibidem*, p. 235).

To put it briefly, the task of the skeptic is difficult, since she has to show that a certain language-game can be devised, from scratch and without any outer input, which is arguably parasitic on some other language-game. And the main role of Strawson's objectivity argument, and other transcendental arguments, is to identify those "parasitic" connections.

This idea of relatively modest role of transcendental arguments is developed further in subsequent Rorty's papers on transcendental arguments [1971, 1979]. If the sceptic is someone who presupposes, among other things, that the world of her inner experience, consisting for the most part in representations and other mental states, is relatively autonomous and independent from other worlds, then her transcendental opponent argues that this presupposition is indefensible

since the very idea of such a world does not make sense without admitting that in addition to representations and other mental states there are also non-representations, including material objects and persons. The skeptical ideas and presuppositions are thus revealed by transcendental arguments “as *parasitic* on more conventional notions” (Rorty [1971] p. 4). This point could be even better expressed, Rorty suggests, not in traditional terms of representations, experiences, and the like, but in modern terms of languages and language-games. The skeptic is then construed as someone who takes it for granted that there is an autonomous language of inner experiences, which is a kind of private language, and the transcendental arguer as someone who shows that such a language is parasitic on other languages or language-games.

It has been often suggested that transcendental arguments are designed to cross the gap between the way one thinks about the world and the way the world is, and thus prove the necessary existence of various entities, including material objects and persons. Rorty thinks this is an unfortunate suggestion, since “there is no sound inference from the way we think or speak to truths about the possibility of experience or language” (*ibidem*), and thus such ambitious transcendental arguments are simply impossible. The only available arguments of this kind are parasitism arguments that show various independencies between our conceptions and languages, including conceptions and languages describing our inner world and ones describing the outer world of material objects and persons. “For the purposes of such arguments, it does not matter whether there are persons and material objects or whether we simply believe there are” (*ibidem*, p. 5). Hence while embracing this construal of transcendental arguments one does not have to worry too much about the famous charge against transcendental arguments, put forward some time ago by Barry Stroud, namely that in order to reach the anti-skeptical conclusion that there are external objects one must invoke a version of verification principle. The reason is that the conclusion of transcendental arguments, construed as parasitism arguments, is not so strong: it is merely a very modest claim that we must be able to talk about external objects in order to make sense of the idea of the inner world.

It is also quite plausible that transcendental arguments are less diversified than they seem to be. Perhaps they ultimately boil down to “a single anti-Cartesian argument which keeps popping up in different guises”, whose target is always the same, namely “the notion that we can start with knowing about nothing save our experiences and go on from there” (*ibidem*, p. 14). To put it in modern linguistic jargon, all transcendental arguments amounts to the private-language argument.

The search for one master transcendental argument is continued by Rorty in his contribution to a symposium on transcendental arguments, published in the same year as his celebrated *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979). He insists there that the term “transcendental argument” is a name “for a certain logical structure (or, more loosely, a certain dialectical strategy)” (Rorty [1979] p. 77) that can have other uses than defusing skepticism. With gradual change of emphasis in his views he is inclined to see the master transcendental argument in Donald Davidson’s argument against “the very idea of a conceptual scheme” and the scheme–content dualism. In a sense it is the master argument on different level, since for Rorty it makes impossible, apparently once and for all, “the whole Cartesian and Kantian dialectic which makes skepticism and anti-skeptical transcendental argumentation possible” (*ibidem*, p. 78). In a sense the Davidson’s argument is a transcendental argument against epistemology. Rorty’s views on this matter are wonderfully summarized, although not without a pinch of salt, by P. F. Strawson:

Transcendental arguments in general belong to the family of attempts to validate or legitimate knowledge-claims in the face of philosophical skepticism. But this task or problem, in its general form, arises only for those who are “held captive” by an erroneous picture: the picture of reality-as-it-is-in-itself on the one hand and the representation of reality on the other, the tasks of inquiry being to bring the latter into correspondence with the former and the task of epistemology to demonstrate that, and how, this is in general successfully done. As for the distinction between conceptual scheme and content, it is merely a variant form of this same delusive picture; but Davidson (the hero of the story) has delivered us from captivity by demonstrating that the “very idea” of a conceptual scheme is empty since, as consideration of the problem of radical translation shows, we cannot make intelligible to ourselves the notion of alternative schemes. Thus delivered – by a “transcendental argument to end all transcendental arguments” – we can freely embrace [...] a pure pragmatism according to which truth simply *is* the most powerful and coherent theory attainable; and the philosophic Spirit can then move on, in Hegelian wise, from the preoccupation of these last centuries into fresh (Heideggerian?) woods and pastures new (Strawson [1982] p. 47).

Although Strawson distanced himself from these “large claims” of Rorty’s as being far from “models of cool reasonableness”, his own later account of transcendental arguments is surprisingly similar to idea that they establish various “parasitic” connections between concepts and language-games. He is fully prepared to admit that transcendental arguments under his own modest construal do not tackle the skeptical challenge head-on but bypass it by refusing to engage in “the

unreal project of wholesale validation” and focus on “the real project of investigating the connections among the major structural elements of our conceptual scheme”, with the proviso that even within these limits they “are not strictly conclusive, i.e., do not successfully establish quite such tight and rigid connections as they initially promise” (*ibidem*, p. 50).

In the light of these declarations Rorty seems to be right when he maintains that it is misleading to suggest that with Strawson analytic philosophy turned in the direction of anti-empiricist Kantian “metaphysics of experience”. Of course, one can discern in analytic philosophy a move away from phenomenism. However, for Rorty this is not a significant methodological shift, and certainly not one which marks a return to transcendental philosophy.

Rather, it is simply the bringing forward once again of certain traditional anti-phenomenalist arguments used by Reid, by Kant, by British Idealists such as Green, by American pragmatists such as Dewey, and by phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty. The only thing transcendental about these arguments is that they include some arguments used by Kant in the “Transcendental Deduction” (Rorty [1978] p. 138).

Philosophical Problems, Conversations, and Transformations

In the last three decades Rorty was approaching analytic philosophy with increasing distance and growing metaphilosophical doubts. Although widely taken as a renegade and betrayer who switched from the analytic school to the continental movement, or left heavy analytic industry for, to use Strawson’s wording, “fresh (Heideggerian?) woods and pastures new”, he himself had never failed to learn and discuss recent analytic works. He also thought that the analytic–continental distinction, being the odd mixture of geographical and sociological criteria, is of not much use in describing current approaches to philosophy. Rorty proposed to replace it with two metaphilosophically oriented distinctions: between analytic and conversational philosophy, and between analytic and transformative philosophy ([1999/2000] and [2003/2007]). He describes the former as follows:

Analytic philosophy may crudely be defined as an attempt to combine the switch from discussing experience to discussing language – what Gustav Bergmann called “the linguistic turn” – with one more attempt to professionalize the discipline by making it more scientific. The linguistic turn is common to all twentieth-century philosophy – as evident in Heidegger, Gadamer, Habermas and Derrida as in Carnap, Ayer, Austin and Wittgenstein. What distinguishes analytic philoso-

phy from other twentieth-century philosophical initiatives is the idea that this turn, together with the use of symbolic logic, makes it possible, or at least easier, to turn philosophy into a scientific discipline. The hope is that philosophers will become able, through patient and cooperative research, to add bricks to the edifice of knowledge. So there will no longer be philosophical schools, but only philosophical specialities (Rorty [1999/2000] p. 56).

Conversational and transformative philosophers strongly disagree with such a metaphilosophy, and especially with its scientism and the belief in the unique and constant set of philosophical problems, as well as in their right and incontrovertible solutions. They emphasize that what constitute a philosophical problem varies enormously from one historical period and tradition to another. For some time philosophers in the past were under the illusion that there is a unified natural kind of philosophical problems, constituted by “the set of interlinked problems posed by representationalist theories of knowledge” (Rorty [1992] p. 371), but this is no longer so, since the representationalist framework is in recent times taken by many a philosopher as optional and unfortunate. Thus in philosophy there are no stable and unchangeable “natural explananda” requiring “right explanantia”. Conversational and transformative thinkers maintain that while doing philosophy we should not be obsessed with what is natural and should give up efforts to get things right. We should rather think of ourselves as “expressing impatience with a certain familiar mind set, and as attempting to entrench a new vocabulary, one which uses old words in new ways” (Rorty [2003/2007] p. 125). Hence the main aim of philosophy is not finding solutions to a certain set of problems and seeking consensus, but continuing iconoclastic conversation and proposing wide-ranging narratives having transformative effects on their readers. The latter should be especially stressed, since philosophy under this conception is paradigmatically humanistic discipline, and as Rorty insists:

the existence of the phenomenon of existential transformation is as important for the humanities as the phenomenon of consensus among knowledgeable experts is for the scientific culture. If there were no such phenomenon, there would be no literary culture, just as there would be no scientific culture if attaining consensus were not a familiar and expected product of conducting laboratory experiments (Rorty [1999/2000] p. 66-67).

Of course, one has to be an outstanding and brilliant philosopher to bring out massive existential transformation. More often philosophers produce stories about past transformations, and “especially narratives connecting many successive

transformations in social and individual self-images" (*ibidem*, p. 67). These narratives, however ingenious and well-supported, are endlessly contestable and revisable. They are the result not of piecemeal arguments for the truth of this or that proposition, but, to use Wilfrid Sellars memorable phrases, the outcome of "having one's eye on the whole" and an attempt "to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term" (Sellars [1962/1963] p. 1).

Of course Rorty clearly and unambiguously favors conversational and transformative philosophy. He explicitly declares:

I prefer conversational to analytic philosophy, so defined, because I prefer philosophers who are sufficiently historicist as to think of themselves as taking part in a conversation rather than as practising a quasi-scientific discipline. Despite my admiration for, and sedulous borrowing from, the writings of many analytic philosophers, I am dubious about analytic philosophy as disciplinary matrix. The problem is that philosophers shaped by that matrix tend to take for granted that the problems that they were taught to discuss in graduate school are, simply by virtue of that very fact, important. So they are tempted to evaluate other philosophers, past and present, by the relevance of their work to those problems. This sort of professional deformation seems to me more damaging than any disability characteristic of conversational philosophers (Rorty [2003/2007] p. 126).

However, one should not simply infer from this that Rorty is against analytical philosophy in all its forms and manifestations. He is certainly against rigid and scientific versions of it, and this is what the term "analytic philosophy" means in the distinction between analytical and conversational or transformative philosophy. In the commonly used opposition between analytic and continental philosophy the term "analytical philosophy" has much wider scope. From such a widely understood analytical philosophy Rorty has never failed to learn and has been always eager to discuss it. He also does not recommend, as some of his one-sided and radical enthusiasts claim, that we should avoid it at all costs. He rather wisely suggest that we need "to study certain selected analytic philosophers in order fully to appreciate the transformative possibilities which the intellectual movements of the twentieth century have opened up for our descendants" (Rorty [1999/2000] p. 77). Among these movements analytical philosophy has a very distinctive place. Rorty closes one of his paper with the following assessment of it:

Analytic philosophy may not have lived up to its pretensions, and may not have solved the puzzles it thought it had. Yet in the process of finding reasons fo put-

ting those pretensions and those puzzles aside it helped earn itself an important place in the history of ideas. By giving up on the quest for apodicticity and finality that Husserl shared with Carnap and Russell, and by finding new reasons for thinking that the quest will never succeed, it cleared a path that leads us past scientism, just as the German idealists cleared a path that led us around empiricism. The anti-empiricist lesson of German idealism took a long time to learn, and so may the anti-scientific lesson of analytic philosophy. But someday intellectual historians may be able to see these apparently opposed movements as complementary (*ibidem*, p. 78).

This balanced assessment speaks for itself and does not require any further elucidation. So let me finish by emphasizing once more two points: (i) there is more continuity between the earlier and later Rorty than it is usually assumed; (ii) even in his later writings Rorty is strongly opposed against some forms of analytic philosophy, and not to all its varieties and manifestations¹.

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¹ Ancestors of this paper were presented at various scholarly gatherings, including an international conference on Richard Rorty’s philosophical legacy, University Pécs, Hungary, May 2008; an international conference on argumentation as a cognitive process, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Poland, May 2008; and the Joint Session of the Aristotelian Society and the Mind Association, University of East Anglia, July 2009. Its shortened penultimate version was given, and instructively commented by Professor Brian Leiter, at the Central Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Chicago, February 2010. I am grateful for many valuable and helpful suggestions made on all these occasions; they will be taken into much fuller account in my future work on Rorty’s metaphilosophical views. The financial support of the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education is also gratefully acknowledged (individual research project N N101 317234).

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