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Education as edification: Richard Rorty's neo-pragmatist philosophy of education

Summary

Rorty draws from pragmatism, conversation, edification, and hermeneutics, but in spite of his reference to Dewey's thesis on pragmatism, Rorty's notion of 'pragmatism' is not offered as an idea of something that might fill the gaps left by slowly dying traditional philosophy. It is rather a more relaxed attitude of mind. He goes beyond the traditional notion of pragmatism and insists that the search should not focus on truth but on solidarity, in other words, what we as a group of people create and decide what is true. Truth, for Rorty, is a society's exercise and agreement of what is true. It is achieved by discourse and not limited conversations.

In order to educate a person as an individual who lives in a particular society with all the factors contributing to his/her growth, Rorty adopts a new word for education, namely edification, with its philosophical consequences. He draws on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer to explore the idea of 'edification,' a word Rorty uses to gloss Gadamer's *Bildung* (education, self-formation) (Rorty 1979).

Key words: Rorty, edification, philosophy of education, ironist, neo-pragmatism, communication, hermeneutics

Looking at the current political and cultural landscape of the world we see changes that have occurred in the recent years at a rapid and erratic pace. It has created a landscape rich in opportunities for either frustration and anger or conversation and tolerance. With so many voices coming to a place of debate we do get confused and sometimes discouraged to take heed of some ideas.

One of the areas of interest is the practice of the philosophy of education as an essential element of providing vital and necessary support for the

generations to come in order for them to be equipped with knowledge and understanding during this inevitable transition.

One of the most influential thinkers who contributed immensely to the philosophy of education during the past few decades was Richard Rorty, who died in June 2007.

Education and politics

When Rorty discusses education, he links the topic to political views on it. In *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Rorty brings to our attention how the education system works in the United States. He shows the tension of views on truth and freedom, and the relationship between them.

Rorty observes that the right offers theory based on the saying that if you have the truth, freedom will follow. Once a person finds the truth using 'reason' and falls in love with it, freedom will follow. The left takes a different approach toward the relationship between truth and freedom. It focuses on Socratic social criticism. The proper function of education is to help people realise that they are free to pursue their own growth without being bound to be socialised. So the left proposes the inverted version of Plato, namely, if you take care of freedom – especially political and economic freedom – truth will take care of itself (Rorty 1999: 114).

Rorty follows those views up with some fundamental questions about the future of education, using his philosophical reasoning by asking questions about the influence of the education system on an individual as well as society. He concludes that for the political parties the solution became a simple and satisfactory compromise; the right is in control of the primary and secondary education and the left is in control of non-vocational higher education (Rorty 1999: 116). This sort of 'education system compromise' situation lacks, in Rorty's opinion, a greater view in which socialisation and individualisations are not simply ignored (Rorty 1999: 117). It serves the parties to achieve their goals but does not provide what education should serve for a person. The right wants to educate a person to be a good citizen. The left wants to educate the individual to make personal informed decisions based on the freedom that one exercises. The sole focus on just one of them does not fulfil the meaning of the word "education" and cannot fulfil the purpose of gaining and utilising knowledge.

John Dewey succeeded William James in being America's most famous and respected academic and so pragmatism continued to dominate American philosophy. "Dewey, in his day, helped American elementary education break out of an outdated mould. But Dewey's followers went too far when they began saying 'teach the child, not the subject'" (Prado 2003: 231).

Rorty takes Dewey's philosophy of education as a foundation and offers new perceptions and ideas that laid foundation for his own neo-pragmatist philosophy of education. He stated that for the most part his predecessors relied too much on experience, which should be abandoned and replaced with 'discourse' (Rorty 1991a: 93). Our mind does not work as a mirror that reflects and represents the world. On the contrary, "there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves" (Rorty 1991b: xlii).

Rorty as neo-pragmatist

Rorty draws from pragmatism, conversation, edification, and hermeneutics, but in spite of his reference to Dewey's thesis on pragmatism, Rorty's notion of 'pragmatism' is not offered as an idea of something that might fill the gaps left by the slowly dying traditional philosophy. It is rather a more relaxed attitude of mind. He goes beyond the traditional notion of pragmatism and insists that the search should not focus on truth but on solidarity, in other words, what we as a group of people create and decide what is true. Truth, for Rorty, is a society's exercise and agreement of what is true. It is achieved by discourse and not limited conversations. This view on truth achieved by discourse in particular has faced a lot of criticism over the years from a great variety of philosophers including Frank B. Farrell, John McDowell, Hilary Putnam, and Susan Haack, just to mention a few.

In order to educate a person as an individual who lives in a particular society with all the factors contributing to his/her growth, Rorty adopts a new word for education, namely edification, with its philosophical consequences. He draws on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer to explore the idea of 'edification,' a word Rorty uses to gloss Gadamer's *'Bildung'* (education, self-formation)' (Rorty 1979: 359–360).

Rorty approaches reality without asking typical philosophical questions such as: What is being? What is the certain knowledge? He turns his attention in the opposite direction from our interpretation of the history of ideas so

as to downplay the Sisyphean search for the primordial quality of existence. In Rorty's quest we can discover the meaning of his view on education, namely edification, as well as his reflection on various institutions and their role or purpose in our present world, which includes places and spaces for education (Rorty 1990a: 21). He admits that 'philosophy' is just a pigeonhole in which over the centuries, ideas and views were placed and stored only to be retrieved and learned (Rorty 2005: 96–97).

In his unique way of thinking, Rorty provokingly asks a question about the future of philosophy. Do we want to learn archived knowledge, trying to get to the bottom of things while at the same time defining the 'mirror of nature' or do we want to be more open and creative in the process of thinking and processing the reality? In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty states that 'philosophy' is not a name for a branch of knowledge confronting indefinite issues with awkwardly handled dialectical instruments but rather it is a cultural genre, a "voice in the conversation of mankind" (Rorty 1979: 264). Interesting philosophical change happens when a new set of problems surfaces and the old ones fade away. So it is not about dealing with old problems in a new way but discovering new quests.

Edification could be simply expressed as a way of approaching reality and knowledge through creative and interactive curiosity in a timely manner using communication and hermeneutics as tools for gaining such knowledge.

Hermeneutics as an avenue to edification

Rorty ponders on the notion that epistemology is the sole judge of what is rational in Western cultures. He says that "the demise of foundational epistemology, however, is often felt to leave a vacuum which needs to be filled" (Rorty 1979: 315). He continues his thoughts by introducing hermeneutics as the new approach, but not to replace failed epistemology or introduce a new way of obtaining knowledge. He brings hermeneutics into the education process as an expression of hope (Rorty 1979: 315–316).

From this point on, Rorty provides a deeper analysis of why hermeneutics is a better notion of obtaining knowledge than the previous method (epistemology). Hermeneutics states that meaning is within people, so hermeneutics is a listener-centred exercise theory. But the listener has to primarily consider the other communicators and listen from the perspective

of others. This way new meanings and understandings could be derived. Hermeneutic utilises an idea of a circle: going from specific to general, general to specific by adding knowledge where it can be discovered. In other words, hermeneutics is the art of interpretation, explanation, and experiencing meaning within communication.

Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method* explains hermeneutics as understanding that comes through the reader's assumptions and presuppositions. We are simultaneously part of the past, in the present, and anticipating the future. Hermeneutics is not only a process of questioning the meaning of the text but also of allowing the text to question us. The hermeneutic circle is a recognition that any individual part of a communication experience cannot be understood without the whole, and the whole cannot be understood if any of the constituent parts are missing, thus forming a circle of meaning. Awareness and understanding always has a linguistic element. In Gadamer's view, "not only are texts understood, but insights are acquired and truths known" (Gadamer 1998: xxi–xxii).

As far as the conversation and interpretation lasts thus far does the notion of learning flow freely without any constraints and rules which provides much better opportunities for discoveries of the 'new' as well as the hope for agreement, so important in today's 'global village' world. This approach provides humanity with much needed hope to bring a better understanding rather than division. "This hope is not a hope for the discovery of antecedently existing common ground, but simply hope for agreement, or, at least, exciting and fruitful disagreement" (Rorty 1979: 318).

Hermeneutics refrains from a certain set of rules by which agreement could be reached and likewise the assumptions of the proceedings. Epistemology leads to the known or assumed results where hermeneutics would provide new ways to move on into a new understanding and thus obtaining broader knowledge. Rejection of epistemology leads Rorty to offer 'philosophy without mirrors' which could be guided by hermeneutics and edification, more specifically by 'edifying philosophers' as opposed to 'traditional philosophers.' Thus, Rorty develops a contrast between philosophers whose work is essentially constructive and those, whose work is essentially reactive, a contrast between philosophy which centres in through epistemology and the sort of philosophy which takes its point of departure from suspicion about the pretensions of epistemology. This is the contrast between 'systematic' and 'edifying' philosophies (Rorty 1979: 366).

Epistemology provides the essential language in which conversation takes places according to Platonists, Kantians, and positivists, so if we eliminate the notion of epistemology, we might be left with almost nothing. This way of thinking does not worry Rorty, who promotes hermeneutics to fill the gap left by epistemology. Hermeneutics, for Rorty, is not a “method for attaining truth”, following Gadamer’s insight, “but an attempt to understand what the human sciences truly are, beyond their methodological self-consciousness, and what connects them with the totality of our experience of the world” (Rorty 1979: 358).

Rorty observes that the most important growth happens when we become more of ourselves or in his own words ‘remake’ ourselves through simply reading more, talking more, and writing more. This learning process is based on the willingness to accept the learning outcomes that hermeneutics provides. “From the educational, as opposed to the epistemological or the technological, point of view, the way things are said is more important than the possession of truths” (Rorty 1979: 359). It is at this point in Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* when he introduces the word ‘edification’: “Since ‘education’ sounds a bit too flat, and *Bildung* a bit too foreign, I shall use ‘edification’.” – concludes Rorty (1979: 360).

Education as edification

The education process to which we are subjected contributes to the ways we journey with meaning and understanding in our lives. If we stay isolated in our knowledge, we may never become part of the greater society of people, namely the world, and we may never become the better versions of ourselves. We would stay judgmental in our interactions with the ‘unknown’ and reluctant to enter into that reality because we have not made the connections with others, their cultures, and knowledge.

Rorty stresses the importance of using many fields of knowledge in order to edify oneself and others. If we decide to abandon the notion of essence altogether, as he suggests, we may take advantage of the many alternative avenues “offered by poets, novelists, depth psychologists, sculptors, anthropologists, and mystics. [...] They are simply among the repertoire of self-descriptions at our disposal” (Rorty 1979: 362).

Moving forward from a systematic philosophy toward an edifying philosophy requires us to establish a starting point at which education could take place. Such a point for Rorty is acculturation. This seems to be a natural process that continues throughout the process of learning the results of natural science, which may allow us to open ourselves to the norms of the discourses going on around us (Rorty 1979: 365).

Rorty emphasises the importance of utilising the materials that our contemporary cultures provide for us. In that sense Rorty does not encourage us, in the process of education, to abandon and dismiss all possible ways of obtaining knowledge but rather insists on doing it in an 'abnormal' way. This abnormality relates to the 'out of the box' way of using discourse to learn. Normal way of inquiry could lead to an education reduced to instruction (Rorty 1979: 363).

In order to be successful in our attempt at edification, we ought to look at the language in which the process is being managed. The first purpose of communication is to understand. So, if the language during communication has 'attachments' that are not commonly understood or misinterpreted, the outcome could be very different for each of the people involved in the communication process. The meaning could be lost during the process whereby misunderstanding takes place.

Edification is based on the process of communication, discourse, and conversation. Therefore, Rorty suggests that language (vocabulary) should be value free in order to attain edification (Rorty 1979: 364). If we successfully separate facts and values, discourse could provide us with a more reliable foundation for understanding and more meaningful communication. If knowledge should be based on recreating meaning, then that would be a better way to remake ourselves based on the facts. If the separation does not happen, we can only communicate perceptions and maybe never come to a mutual understanding. Edification happens through endless ways of 'looking' at facts and pondering their meaning.

What is important is what we can make of ourselves, not what we can come to know. Edification is our capacity to recreate ourselves, versus our ability to merely reflect and mirror the world. That recreation makes us more worthy humans. It is the possibility of human creation or recreation that is the focus on edification in Rorty's reflection on education. An edifying thinker is someone who re-describes, takes on a project of re-description in a morally appropriate way. Rorty thinks that all people should be aware of the

conditional nature of their beliefs and desires, and to be able to sociologise how they have become what they are. Here we can hear echoes of the German idea of *Bildung*.

For Rorty, it is more important that we pay attention to discovering or making “descriptions of ourselves” than find ways we can talk about intrinsically human traits. His claim is that ‘truth’ is best viewed as a term we use to describe valid statements rather than as a ‘Truth’ that refers to accurate representations of the world ‘as it really is,’ and as such, this term is an important one for education. Such a view brings hope for education, Rorty says, taking the form of edification.

From this perspective culture is no longer seen as the quest to mirror the world, to discover Truth through epistemology, but a space where conversation is taking place. This creates a view of culture with the focal point on conversation. There are no limits here, because there are no limits to human interactions and “there is no limit to the human imagination – to our ability to re-describe an object, and thereby re-contextualise it” (Rorty 2000: 25). We are not to discover the true essence of something anymore but to set out to continue the conversations coming from the past.

In the introduction to *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty pictures the West as dependent on the idea of an inherent human nature. When Rorty replaces the question: ‘What is it to be a human being?’ with questions like: ‘What does it mean to be a meaningful part of twentieth-century democratic society?’ and ‘How can a member of such a society be more than the enactor of a role in a previously written script?’ he rejects the notion of “springs... of human solidarity” (Rorty 1989: xiii).

Irony and solidarity

Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity tries to show “how things look,” Rorty says, “if we drop the demand for a theory which unifies the public and private, and are content to treat the demands of self-creation (edification) and of human solidarity (acculturation) as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable” (Rorty 1989: xv). In order to achieve that, Rorty invites us to meet the ironist.

“I use ‘ironist’” – writes Rorty – “to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those

central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance” (Rorty 1989: xv). Rorty’s ironist does not believe that there is some kind of hierarchy of responsibilities by which problematic questions should be answered. Therefore, an ironist is not a welcome individual in our democratic societies, because her approach does not follow the paths of created and safe answers but rather questions the existing nature of things. Those ironists are outnumbered by those who believe that there must be some order in our hierarchy of responsibilities mostly reflected in moral philosophies (Rorty 1989: xv).

Rorty says that an ironist has the following three qualities:

- she has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered;
- she realises that arguments phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts;
- insofar as she philosophises about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others that it is in touch with a power not herself (Rorty 1989: 73).

Ironists are always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies and this awareness leads them to realise how fragile they are themselves. They are respectful of other vocabularies since they are aware of the fragility of their own and so are willing and open to learn from others. The opposite of irony is common sense as it is so broadly used in our societies. Rorty points out that only when ‘common sense’ is challenged and we are willing to go beyond platitudes that our conversation may go Socratic (Rorty 1989: 74).

But even at this point making this Socratic demand does not qualify one to become ironist in Rorty’s view. One becomes a ‘metaphysician’ in Heidegger’s view, who is still attached to common sense. In this sense, a ‘metaphysician’ analyses old meanings and descriptions rather than re-describes them. An ironist, in Rorty’s view, thinks that nothing has an intrinsic nature, a real essence. Ironists are “never quite able to take themselves seriously because they are always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change” (Rorty 1989: 73–74).

The ironist lives with the constant tension between who she is and who she may become. This tension is filled with the search for answers derived from the language and social context in which she is immersed. The ironist

walks into the library full of books and looks for books to expand her interest versus the 'metaphysician' who likes books divided according to disciplines and sorted by different objects of knowledge where every book belongs to a specific category. Ironists take the writings of all people with poetic gifts, of all those original minds who had a talent for re-description – Pythagoras, Plato, Milton, Newton, Goethe, Kant, Kierkegaard, Baudelaire, Darwin, Freud – as grist to be put through the same dialectical mill. Ironists prefer to re-describe ranges of objects and events in a new language, in 'neologicistic jargon', with the hope that others will adopt and extend that jargon. This hope is focused on the 'new' language in which people would be able to ask questions about the object or event being re-described and redefined. It may happen through dialectical discourse, endless conversations that lead to the remaking of the interlocutors and the language itself (Rorty 1989: 76).

Instead of the word 'dialectic' Rorty prefers to use a more up-to-date term, 'literary criticism' (Rorty 1989: 78). The main purpose of Rorty ironist's re-description is to be open to the 'outside' and to recreate meanings in order to understand the world better, followed by our own growth (the remaking of ourselves).

Edification moves the ironist into the adventure of finding new ways of explaining things as well as of understanding herself. Ironists use any possible literature to learn and grow. "It helps the ironist not to get trapped in the vocabulary of any single book" (Rorty 1989: 80–81).

Rorty insists that irony as such applies to a private life with its focus on creative self-actualisation, while solidarity is the essence of the public life of our societies. The role of an ironist through such processes is to go and directly face the contingency of her own beliefs and desires and move forward beyond the common sense understanding and approval of them. At the same time, Rorty cannot imagine a society where young people are exposed to an education through the socialisation process with constant doubts about almost everything.

Rorty's view on education is a division into the two parts; socialisation and individualisation. Following this distinction, it is safe to say that for Rorty there is also a distinction between the higher educator and lower educator. Rorty expects the higher education teacher to be an ironist who uses her expertise to learn along with the students as she re-describes reality and oneself, and guides students on the path to becoming the best that they can be. At the same time Rorty reminds us that the lower education teacher "must still produce students whose story about the society they live in overlaps

sufficiently with their parents' story so that those parents do not think of the schools as subversive institutions" (Rorty 1990: 42).

Rorty recognises the need for education as an instrument of society's socialisation and at the same time strongly encourages individual creativity and personal fulfilment. In this way, he establishes clear goals for higher and lower education by reconciling the demands of solidarity and irony.

Conclusion

Rorty's philosophical journey has touched a lot of topics and his works turned upside down a lot of 'old views' which could be upsetting to some and 'uplifting' to others. Considering the influence Rorty's philosophy may have on education we can come across different reactions. Rob Reich points out about his claim that philosophy may not have much to say for education, "Rorty is a bundle of seeming contradictions" (Reich 1996: 342).

For Rorty, edification means progress and growth. Those who decide to undergo this kind of education will be rewarded by a re-descriptive and novel view of themselves. This novelty may bring hope to the world of education and be more open and intertwined with different cultures, religions, and points of view on any important matter. For some it may look like utopia and again for some as a hope to grow into a society that can coexist and work toward the future. The image of one who could become the best possible person that one could be sounds like a risk I would take to switch from education to edification with the full meaning and all the consequences Rorty's view contains. Rorty's edification, as a concept and a philosophical idea of education, is worth talking about and reflecting upon and it has been for many years by many philosophers and thinkers from the field of education. The discussions between those who find Rorty's ideas appealing and those who reject them based on philosophy, are ongoing and so extended that I chose to focus mostly on Rorty's idea of edification. This philosophical conversation between ideas is valuable and exciting as we are learning something new through the discovery of hermeneutics.

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