

About Pictures which Held Us Captive – Richard Rorty Reads Wittgenstein

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1. The Cartesian picture

According to Rorty philosophy underwent deep changes in the 17th century. At this time a certain picture became central to philosophy as a professionalized discipline as we know it today. This was the picture of philosophy as discussion of “perennial, eternal problems – problems which arise as soon as one reflects.” (Rorty 1979, 3) Philosophy of this kind was a successor to theology. It was the search for a neutral standpoint, a place outside of all contexts which wasn’t just one more context. In the words of Thomas Nagel it was a search for the “view from nowhere”. To achieve this goal to provide that sort of foundation, philosophy has to have a special method, purer than the methods of nonphilosophers. John Locke, René Descartes and Immanuel Kant were searching for such pure methods, to find “‘foundations’ to which one must cling, frameworks beyond which one must not stray, objects which impose themselves, representations which cannot be gainsaid.” (Rorty 1979, 315)

The early Wittgenstein also thought that he had made the method of philosophy so pure that philosophy was finally brought to an end. With the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein hoped to show everything that could be reasonably said and to demarcate it from nonsense. He tried to find “foundations to which one must cling” in language. In Rorty’s opinion, the later Wittgenstein wanted to get away from this picture, which held philosophy captive since Descartes. Rorty calls this picture the “Cartesian picture”. This picture has four main themes. Rorty’s continuous critique of different labels like realism, essentialism, representationalism, platonism, metaphysics, epistemology and many more is always related to those four signs of the Cartesian picture.

(1) Truth is a central theme in philosophy, and it consists in some sort of correspondence between subject and object, between the self and a reality.

The traditional view is that there is a core self which can look at, decide among, use, and express itself by means of [...] beliefs and desires. Further, these beliefs and desires are criticizable not simply by reference to their ability to cohere with one another, but by reference to something exterior to the network within which they are strands. Beliefs are, on this account, criticizable because they fail to correspond to reality. (Rorty 1989, 10)

(2) There is one way the reality is and we are obliged to speak in certain ways about it.

I am defining Platonism as the claim that the point of inquiry is to get in touch with something like Being, or the Good, or Truth, or Reality – something large and powerful that we have the duty to apprehend correctly. (Rorty, 1992, 511. Translation modified to fit the German original, S.K.)

(3) The problems of philosophy are eternal problems which arise as soon, as someone starts to reflect.

One has to think of philosophy as a name for the study of certain definite and permanent problems – deep-lying problems which any attempt at vision must confront: prob-

lems which professors of philosophy have a moral obligation to continue working on, whatever their current preoccupations. (Rorty 1976, 31)

(4) The aim of philosophy is to transcend our cultural limitations to get in touch with certainties which come from reality as it is in itself.

My suggestion that the desire for objectivity is in part a disguised form of the fear of the death of our community echoes Nietzsche’s charge that the philosophical tradition which stems from Plato is an attempt to avoid facing up to contingency, to escape from time and chance. (Rorty 1983, 32)

To conclude, the Cartesian picture suggests that there is a way the world is and our thinking has to correspond to this world. In doing so, we close the gap between subject and object. This gap and the problem of how to correspond to the world correctly, arises as soon as someone starts to reflect. So the philosophical problems are deep problems, with which humans have the obligation to struggle.

In his essay *Keeping Philosophy Pure: An Essay on Wittgenstein*, Rorty describes Wittgenstein’s struggle with the philosophical notion of necessity. This is obviously a central part of the points (2) and (4) of the Cartesian picture. Rorty asks: “Can Wittgenstein actually be interpreted as talking against ‘necessity’ rather than about it?” (Rorty 1976, 27) and he gives the answer: “Yes, about half the time”. I want to expand the question: “Can Wittgenstein be interpreted as talking against the Cartesian picture?” and try to answer it with an eye on *On Certainty*. My answer will be: “Yes, about half the time.”

Wittgenstein never mentions Descartes in *On Certainty* but he explicitly deals with a central problem of the Cartesian picture as described by Rorty. Also Moore himself, one central target of Wittgenstein’s comments, wanted to dismiss the sceptical doubt which arises out of the Cartesian picture. There are some paragraphs where Wittgenstein explicitly deals with Cartesian problems. In paragraph 90 for example, Wittgenstein is thinking about the similarity of “I know” and “I see” which is a main feature of the Cartesian picture (Other paragraphs are for example: §178, §199, §230).

The Cartesian picture holds that knowledge – justified true belief – is something that is generated in picturing the facts in the right way. In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein suggests in contrast, that there are different meanings of our term “knowledge” and that it seems that “‘I know’ did not tolerate a metaphysical emphasis.” (Wittgenstein 1969, §482) If we use “I know” with such a metaphysical emphasis, as some kind of foundation, we misuse it. Wittgenstein suggests that it is exactly Moore’s mistake to search for an introspective certainty of our knowledge. In this light, Descartes made the same mistake that is now preserved in the Cartesian picture. But the foundation of our quest for truth and knowledge is not to be found in “certain propositions’ striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the

language-game.” (Wittgenstein 1969, §204) If put this way knowledge has more to do with judgments than with perceived facts. So the question of knowledge is about permissible moves in language games and not about minds mirroring the essential structure of the world.

But Wittgenstein argued in some ways for thesis (3). In his view philosophical problems arise as soon as we misuse our language and overlook similarities and dissimilarities amongst our expressions. That also explains Wittgenstein’s excessive usage of the concept of “nonsense” and why Rorty was arguing indefatigably against this concept. This usage of the concept of nonsense still suggests that we have to talk in certain ways because of the structure of our language (and not because of the structure of the world or the mind).

So I conclude that the later Wittgenstein really could be interpreted as arguing against important aspects of the Cartesian picture. But that’s not the whole deal. To interpret Wittgenstein the way Rorty does leaves aside central areas of Wittgenstein’s philosophy.

2. Rorty’s picture of Wittgenstein

For Rorty Wittgenstein wasn’t just a therapist, who fought in the “battle against the bewitchment of or intelligence by means of language” (Wittgenstein 1958, §109). He also had a view of “how the things in the largest sense of the word hang together in the largest sense of the word”. (See Rorty 1976, 29) This simply means that Wittgenstein had some new ideas of how to talk about certain philosophical problems. For Rorty Wittgenstein’s main achievement was that he helped us to get away from the idea that we have to gain a “view from nowhere”. He helped us to get away from a central point of the Cartesian picture – the search for the points, where our concepts and the world correspond – and let us understand language as a set of tools. The main arguments Rorty picks from Wittgenstein are the arguments against the ostensive definition, the private language argument and the rule following considerations.

But on the other hand, Rorty ignores large parts of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, because they are not fitting in his view of Wittgenstein arguing against the Cartesian picture. For example Rorty doesn’t think that the concept of nonsense plays any interesting role in philosophy. Furthermore he can’t make any sense of Wittgenstein’s early attempts in the *Tractatus*, especially the ending passages, and he sees fragments like the paragraphs 89 – 133 of the *Philosophical Investigations* simply as leftovers from Wittgenstein’s positivistic views. (Rorty 2007, 164 and Rorty 1976, 29) Beside his favorite arguments Rorty isn’t interested in further reconstruction of Wittgenstein’s original thinking.

Pragmatic readers of Wittgenstein are not much interested in his selfimage – his claim to be doing something radically different from what other philosophers do. [...] Pragmatic Wittgensteinians do not see him as exemplary, either morally or methodologically. But they do think that he formulated an assortment of powerful and original criticisms of Cartesian–Lockean views. (Rorty 2007, 164)

On other occasions Rorty suggests reading Wittgenstein as a satirist who is making fun of philosophical ideas like the concept of necessity. (See Rorty 1976, 27 and 34) But in my opinion, pragmatic readers of Wittgenstein *should* see him as morally and methodologically exemplary. I want to understand the term “methodologically” in a wider sense and capture Wittgenstein’s whole style of doing philosophy with this term. It then contains his rather

serious struggle with philosophical problems, ethics and religion. Given this background, is it then plausible to read Wittgenstein as a satirist?

The question is not so much “Do we laugh, when we read Wittgenstein?”, the question is rather “Did *he* laugh when he wrote it?”. The *Lectures on Aesthetics* suggest a “No” as answer to the latter question: “I am in a sense making propaganda for one style of thinking as opposed to another. I am honestly disgusted with the other.” (Wittgenstein 1967, 28) So he makes a kind of serious propaganda for a certain style of thinking in the *Investigations*, in *On Certainty* and elsewhere.

I think that Rorty’s propaganda contains satire, but Wittgenstein’s is not. But for sure there is irony in the examples of the *Investigations* and even more in *On Certainty*. Philosophers always liked to see themselves as the intellectual guidance in a world of unreasonableness and Wittgenstein compares them to children and natives. But behind this irony Wittgenstein’s intention is very serious. There is a difference between lighthearted, not all too serious satire and profound irony. I think the latter is part of Wittgenstein’s propaganda while the former isn’t.

In my opinion, the attempt to read Wittgenstein as a satirist, who made fun of philosophical ideas is a compromise to handle the inconsistencies which arise of ignoring large parts of his philosophy. Rorty tries to explain his airy handling of Wittgenstein in the following way:

Admirers of Dewey like myself think that the point of reading philosophy books is not self-transformation but rather cultural change. It is not to find a way of altering one’s inner state, but rather to find better ways of helping us overcome the past in order to create a better human future. (Rorty 2007, 169)

But maybe such a cultural change can only be achieved through self-transformation. The roots of the Cartesian picture may lay much deeper than Rorty suggests. To possibly get rid of the Cartesian picture it needs a change of the whole style of thinking, an ironic propaganda to see new aspects which are needed for a better human future. Rorty seems to try kind of hastily to get rid of pictures were Wittgenstein was a very serious investigator. In my opinion, Wittgenstein’s careful approach will be of much more help to eventually get over the Cartesian picture than Rorty’s satiric “No problem rhetoric”.

Ultimately I share Rorty’s opinion that some of Wittgenstein’s ideas are very helpful to get over the Cartesian picture but I think that Rorty is wrong about the relevance of Wittgenstein’s moral and methodological approach. With the abandonment of the Cartesian picture comes the abandonment of philosophy as a professionalized, science-like discipline. Wittgenstein’s thinking is a possible way of how philosophy could look like after the Cartesian picture. I want to give a short outlook of some features of this new picture. Clearly there is a renunciation of unifying theory-building. This is a renunciation of the view, that science is the paradigm for philosophy. That is why Wittgenstein tried to replace explanation with description, why he concentrated on different examples and showing diversities rather than theoretical or metaphysical unification. Strictly speaking there are no conclusive philosophical arguments in his later philosophy, just maps and sketches which could be used in different ways. But if unification plays such a minor role in Wittgenstein’s picture, it is not surprising that the same goes for his writings. In my opinion, Rorty is ignoring the ambiguities of Wittgenstein’s picture, when he condemns everything that isn’t usable against the Cartesian picture. But maybe this irreducible

diversity is central to philosophy after the Cartesian picture and Rorty is in his unifying and eliminative argumentation closer to the criticized picture than Wittgenstein.

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