RICHARD RORTY, REDUCTIONIST THEORIES OF MIND/BODY DEBATE AND NEUROPHILOSOPHY

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Introduction

Richard Rorty (1931-2007 CE) is considered to be "a lightening rod for conflicting currents in recent philosophy," (Rorty, 2003: 1) because he generated, in his writings, an intense mixture of consternation, enthusiasm, hostility, and confusion. His controversial positions in debates about the nature of mind, language, knowledge, truth, science, ethics, and politics have been regarded by some as opening new possibilities for thought, and by others as undermining the very possibility of meaningful enquiry. (Rorty, 2003:1). In this regard, he is regarded as one who writes with "a self-effacing charm, a quick and biting wit, a dizzying capacity for broad analogies, and a way of dividing through diverse thinkers in a single sentence that in less skilled hands would be mere pastiche." (Rorty, 2003: 2-3). In the several intellectual endeavours of Rorty, the mind-body debate received his attention early in his engagement with philosophy.

This debate, which was an attempt to understand the nature of mental events, or the mind as the case may be, in relation to the body, has generated a lot of intellectual materials espousing the positions of various thinkers engaged in the debate. This debate may be construed simply as the attempt by thinkers to say whether the mind exists, and if it does, what is its nature, and if it does not, what becomes of our common-sense assumption of the existence of the mind, or, say, 'sensation'. On this note, the 1950s and 1960s witnessed the publication of papers by various scholars arguing for or against the possible elimination of sensation-talk from our language by possible neurological discoveries that will allow us to make reference to brain-

processes instead of sensations. The main roots of what has come to be described as "Eliminative Materialism"[1] can, thus, be found in the writings of a number of mid-20th century philosophers, most notably Wilfred Sellars, J.J.C. Smart, Jerome Shaffer, James Cornman, W.V.O. Quine, Paul Feyerabend, and Richard Rorty.

In his 1956 article, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind", for instance, Sellars introduces the idea that our conception of mentality may be derived not from direct access to the inner workings of what we refer to as the mind, but from a primitive theoretical framework that we inherited from our culture. While Sellars regards this theoretical framework as empirically correct, William Ramsey (2011) observes that his claim that our conception of the mind is theory-based, and at least in principle falsifiable, would be influential to later supporters of eliminative materialism, especially Rorty. Still on this debate, Quine endorses the idea that mental notions like belief or sensation could simply be abandoned in favour of a more accurate physiological account. He suggests that terms denoting the physical correlates of mental states will be more useful and, as he puts it: "The bodily states exist anyway; why add the others?" (Quine, 1960: 264). Like Quine, Feyerabend, in his article, "Mental Events and the Brain", explicitly endorses the idea that common-sense psychology might prove to be radically false on the grounds that any version of materialism would practically undermine common-sense psychology. Thus, like many of his contemporaries, Feyerabend argues that common-sense mental notions are essentially non-physical in character. For him, any form of physicalism would entail that there are no mental processes or states as understood by common-sense. (See Feyerabend, 1963: 295-296).

When Richard Rorty entered the debate in 1965 with the publication of his paper, "Mind-Body Identity, Privacy, and Categories," his attempt was to argue that the referring and explanatory use we make of Sensation-discourse might go the way of demon-discourse, that is, sensation-discourse may lose its referring and explanatory roles because some future neurological discoveries may enable us to refer to brain-processes in explaining experiences

that we now appropriate to the mind in sensation-discourse. (See Rorty, 1969: 121). In a similar vein, Rorty, in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), would challenge the idea of the mind as a 'mirror' of reality. That is, the idea that we come to knowledge of what is, by representations in the mind. The core of Rorty's argument seem to be his position on the possible discovery of a scientific language that will allow us to refer to brain-processes in describing experiences that have been hitherto described by reference to sensation-talk. It is this position that this present essay attempts to examine. To do this, we shall first examine, in brief, the philosophy of Rorty as it guided his concerns in the philosophy of mind. Afterwards, we shall examine the position of Rorty regarding his position in the philosophy of mind.

Rorty and Philosophy

Richard Rorty's complex intellectual background gave him a comprehensive understanding of the traditional analytic philosophy, such that the early years of his academic career seemed firmly grounded in this tradition. His publication, "Mind-Body Identity, Privacy, and Categories" – where he argues against the incorrigibility of mental representations and favouring what he called the "Disappearance Theory" of the Identity Theory – and the edited essays under the title *The Linguistic Turn* – which brought together a range of philosophical writings on the topic of language, meaning, and truth – in the mid-1950s and 1960s, portrayed his training in the analytic philosophical tradition. However, when he became acquainted with the American philosophical movement known as pragmatism, particularly the writings of John Dewey, he took a shift from his earlier method of analytic philosophy in favour of his own brand of pragmatism, which incorporated some form of analysis. In this regard, Ramberg (2009) opines that he espoused a pragmatic understanding of contemporary analytic philosophy.

A sketch of the philosophical programme Rorty developed included the rejection of the representationalist account of knowledge, which he reviewed as a holdover from Plato and pervasive throughout

the history of Western philosophy. Rorty sees contemporary philosophy as the great divide between representationalists – the belief that there is an intrinsic nature of non-human reality that humans have a duty to grasp – and anti-representationalists – the view that scientific, like moral progress, is a matter of finding ever more effective ways to enrich human life. (see Rorty 2007b: 137). This clash, in Rorty's view, produced the Cartesian notion of ideas as appearances on the stage of an inner theatre, as well as the Lockean account of words as signs of such ideas. More generally, it produced a picture of knowledge as an attempt to acquire accurate mental representations of non-mental reality. Representationalist accounts of the relation between language and non-language emerged from the attempt to divide language into assertions that represent real things and those that do not. In this regard, Rorty believes that Wittgenstein's importance lies in his having helped wrench us out of our Cartesian-Lockean mind-set. For Rorty (2007c: 162-163), Wittgenstein helped us overcome the temptation to ask: "Which pieces of our language lock on to reality, and which do not?" According to Rorty (2007c: 163), Wittgenstein did not show metaphysics to be nonsense, but simply showed it to be a waste of time. The pragmatic Wittgensteinians, according to Rorty, think that replacing Kantian talk about experience, thought and consciousness with Wittgensteinian talk about the uses of linguistic expressions helped us to replace worse philosophical theories with better ones.

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), Rorty's principal target was the philosophical idea of knowledge as representation, as a mental mirroring of a mind-external world. In this vein, Rorty avers that though the notion of an inner arena with its inner observer had been suggested at various points in ancient and medieval thought, it had never been taken seriously long enough to form the basis for a problematic. But the seventeenth century took it seriously enough to permit it to pose the problem of the 'veil of ideas', the problem which made epistemology the central concern during this period. For him, once Descartes had invented that "precise sense" of "feeling" in which it was "no other than thinking," we

began to lose touch with the Aristotelian distinction between reason-as-grasp-of-universals and the living body which takes care of sensation and motion. A new mind-body distinction was required – the one which we refer to that between consciousness and what is not consciousness. This was a distinction between two series of events; like a distinction between two sides, or even parts, of a human being. (Rorty, 1979: 51). In response to this, Rorty advocates for a novel form of American pragmatism, sometimes called neo-pragmatism, in which scientific and philosophical methods are merely a set of contingent "vocabularies" which were abandoned or adopted over time according to social conventions and usefulness. (Ramberg, 2009). In this regard, Rorty thinks of a new world where we shall no longer view either thought or language as containing representations of reality. A philosophical world where we shall be freed both from the subject-object problematic that has dominated philosophy since Descartes and from the appearance-reality problematic that has been with us since the Greeks. In this sense, Rorty (2007b: 133) views philosophical progress not as a matter of problems being solved, but of descriptions being improved.

Furthermore, Rorty argues that the central problems of modern epistemology depend upon a picture of the mind as trying to faithfully represent or "mirror" a mind-independent, external reality. (see Ramberg, 2009). If we give up this metaphor, then the entire enterprise of foundationalist epistemology is misguided. Rorty's criticism against "foundationalism" in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* was the attempt to justify knowledge claims by tracing them to a set of foundations (e.g., self-evident premises or non-inferential sensations); more broadly, he criticises the claim of philosophy to function foundationally within a culture. In this vein, Rorty's arguments could be seen to have been drawn from both Sellars's critique of the idea that there is a "given" in sensory perception and Quine's critique of the distinction between analytic sentences and synthetic sentences. (Ramberg, 2009). Rorty believes that once the philosopher abandoned foundationalism, one of the few roles left for a philosopher is to act as an intellectual gadfly, attempting to induce a

revolutionary break with previous practice, a role that Rorty was happy to take on himself. This abandoning of foundationalism, Rorty believes will lead to a state of mind he refers to as "ironism", in which people will be completely aware of the contingency of their placement in history and of their philosophical vocabulary. For Rorty, this brand of philosophy is always tied to the notion of "social hope"; such that without the representation accounts and without metaphors between the mind and the world, a fully humanistic culture will emerge where we will discard the question: "Do I know the real object, or only one of its appearances?" and replace it with the question: "Am I using the best possible description of the situation in which I find myself, or can I cobble together a better one?" (Rorty, 2007b: 139).

In all, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* popularised and extended the ideas of Wilfred Sellars, W.V.O. Quine and others who advocated the Wittgensteinian doctrine of "dissolving" rather than solving philosophical problems. (Rorty, 2007c: 164). Views like this have led not a few to identify Rorty's philosophical enterprise of questioning many of philosophy's most basic assumptions as postmodernist/deconstructionist philosophy. Indeed, from the late 1980s through the 1990s, Rorty focuses on the continental philosophical tradition, examining the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida. His works from this period included *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers* (1991) and *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers* (1998). These latter works were attempts to bridge the dichotomy between analytic and continental philosophy by claiming that the two traditions complement rather than oppose each other. (see Ramberg, 2009).

Rorty and the Philosophy of Mind

Rorty says that the picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations – some accurate, some not – and capable of being

studied by pure, non-empirical methods. Without the notion of mind as mirror, Rorty believes that the notion of knowledge as adequate representation would not have suggested itself. (Rorty, 1979: 12). In this regard, the position Rorty sought to defend was that our so-called intuition about what is mental may be merely our readiness to fall in with a specific philosophical language-game. This (so-called intuition), in fact, he says, is no more than the ability to command a certain technical vocabulary – one which has no use outside of philosophy books and which links up with no issues in daily life, empirical science, morals or religion. (Rorty, 1979: 13). Retrospectively, this was the position Rorty espoused in the "Mind-Body Identity, Privacy and Categories," where he argued that 'Sensation-discourse' might go the way of 'Demon-discourse' given the proper neurological discoveries and resulting neurological ways of explaining behaviour. (see Rorty, 1970a: 121).

Rorty attempts to show the analogy between mental events and supernatural events; followed by the attempt to rebut the objection that 'privacy' is of the essence of mental events. In arguing that 'sensation' might lose its reporting role as well as its explanatory role, just as 'demon' had lost these roles, and that both of these roles of 'sensation' might be taken over by reference to brain-processes, Rorty comes up with what he describes as the "disappearance" form of the Identity Theory. This holds that the sort of relation that obtains between existent entities and non-existent entities, when reference to non-existent entities once served some of the purposes presently served by reference to existent entities, is not a relation of strict identity. Thus, for this form of the identity theory, it is a mistake to assume that "X's are nothing but Y's" entails 'All attributes meaningfully predicated of X's are meaningfully predicated of Y's," for this assumption would forbid us ever to express the results of scientific inquiry in terms of "cross-category identity." (Rorty, 1969: 148).

By making reference to the analogy between sensation-discourse and demon-discourse, Rorty dispels a seeming fatal weakness of the 'disappearance" form of the Identity theory. This

weakness was that when we say "What people call X's are nothing but Y's" we are prepared to add that "There are no X's," implies that it might turn out that there are no such things as sensations.[2] In this vein, Rorty says that the claim of the Identity Theorist is that sensations may be to the future progress of psycho-physiology, as demons are to modern science. Just as we now want to deny that there are demons, future science may want to deny that there are sensations. He, however, notes that the only obstacle to replacing sensations-discourse with brain-discourse seems to be that sensation-statement has a reporting as well as an explanatory function. Again, by making analogy to the demon-talk, Rorty maintains that "it is clear that the discovery of a new way of explaining the phenomena previously explained by reference to a certain kind of entity, combined with a new account of what is being reported by observation-statements about that kind of entity, may give good reasons for saying that there are no entities of that kind." (Rorty, 1969: 151). Thus, Rorty (1969: 158) adds that the absurdity of saying "Nobody has ever felt a pain" is no greater than that of saying "Nobody has ever seen a demon," if we have a suitable answer to the question "What was I reporting when I said I felt a pain?" To this question, the science of the future may reply "You were reporting the occurrence of a certain brain-process, and it would make life simpler for us if you would, in the future, say 'My C-fibers are firing' instead of saying I'm in pain."

In his attempt to sketch a general theory of the conditions under which terms such as sensation, demon, may cease to have a referring use without those who made such use being convicted of having held false beliefs, Rorty highlights what he sees as the two crucial conditions that must be satisfied if we are to move from 'X's are nothing but Y's' to 'there are no X's. These are; (i) the Y-laws must be sufficiently better, and not just equally good, at explaining the kinds of phenomena explained by the X-laws. This is because the inconvenience of changing one's linguistic habits by ceasing to make inferential reports about X's should be less than the inconvenience of going through the routine of translating one's X-report into Y-reports in order to get satisfactory explanations of the phenomena in question;

(ii) either Y-reports may themselves be made non-inferentially, or X-reports may be treated as reports of mental entities. This is because we ought to be able to respond to the question "What am I reporting when I non-inferentially report about an X?" by saying that "You are reporting on a Y" or "You are reporting on some merely mental entity." (Rorty, 1969: 160).

Noting that while the requirements of (i) above may not be satisfied because of the inconvenience involved in ceasing to talk about sensations, Rorty claims that if the analogy between the past disappearance of supernatural beings and the possible future disappearance of sensations is to be pressed, we must claim that the possibility of non-inferentially reporting of X's with Y's is still open. Hence, we can hold that the question "What was I non-inferentially reporting when I non-inferentially reported a stabbing pain?" can be sensibly answered "You were reporting a stimulation of your C-fibers." (Rorty, 1969: 164). However, Rorty notes that the proponent of the disappearance form of the Identity Theory must show that reports of brain-processes are neither incapable of being non-inferential nor necessarily made with the periscope-microscope gadget used to give a view of our trepanned skull. In this regard, Rorty avers that unless we can overcome our intuitive conviction that a report of a private matter cannot be identified with a report of a public matter, we shall not be able to take seriously the claim of the proponents of the Identity Theory. To resolve this, Rorty tries to show that the distinction between private and public subject-matters is as relative as that between items signified by observation-terms and items not signified.

In addressing the distinction between reports of private matter and those of public matter, Rorty examines Kurt Baier's position that since "introspective reports are necessarily about something private, and that being about something private is incompatible with being about something public" (Baier, 1962: 59), the Identity Theory involves a conceptual confusion. Baier argued that:

> To say that one day our physiological knowledge will increase to such an extent that we shall be able to make

> absolutely reliable encephalograph-based claims about people's experiences, is only to say that, if carefully checked, our encephalograph-based claims about 'experiences' will always be correct, that is, will make the same claims as a truthful introspective report. (Baier, 1962: 60).

Thus, Baier posited that however good the evidence may be, such a physiological theory can never be used to show to the sufferer that he was mistaken in thinking that he had a pain, for such a mistake is inconceivable. The sufferer's epistemological authority must therefore be better than the best physiological theory can ever be.

In challenging this claim of Baier, Rorty presents a case in which suitable similarities are found to occur between someone's experience and what the encephalograph records, until one day it happened that someone thinks he has no pain, but the encephalograph says that the brain-process correlated with pain. In this regard, Rorty asserts that in most cases in which one's observation throws doubt on a correlation which is so central to current scientific explanations, one tries to eliminate the possibility of observational error. As a result of this, one begins to suspect that he does not know what pain is, that is, that he is not using the word "pain" in the way in which his fellows use it. What this portrays, according to Rorty, is that the vocabulary employed in making introspective reports involves a possible difficulty of distinguishing between "misuse of language" and "mistake in judgment." In this light, Rorty avers that the only device that would determine when one is correctly reporting an introspective experience would be to establish a convention such that anyone who sincerely denied that he felt pain, for instance, while exhibiting pain-behaviour did not understand how to use "pain." As such, there would be a public criterion, the satisfaction of which would count as showing that the subject had such a sensation. (Rorty, 1969: 164).

Rorty sums up his point by asserting that being infallible about a private report would be useful only if we could draw the usual distinction between misnaming and misjudging; and having ascertained that we were not misnaming, we may know that we were

not misjudging. But where there are no criteria for determining a case of misjudging, then, Rorty opines: to say that we are infallible is to pay ourselves an empty compliment. In a similar vein, Rorty rebuts the argument of James Cornman that even if we grant that a pain is identical with a stimulation of C-fibers, it would seem that we still need sensation-terms to make the true description of certain pains, or stimulation of C-fibers, such as, intense, sharp and throbbing. He further argues that no neurological sentence is synonymous with "This pain is intense, sharp and throbbing," and thus no neurophysiological sentence can be used to make the same true description. (Cornman, 1968: 30).

Concluding Remarks

Rorty's thoughts and arguments for a possible future wherein brain-processes will replace the explanatory and referring use of sensation espouses an air of plausibility; that is, it gives much to be fancied, after-all, reports of pain may not point to a strange fact about a special ontological genus called mental, but just a remark about a language-game – the remark that we conventionally take people's word for what they are feeling. (see Rorty, 1979: 32). This is on the basis that language changes as empirical discoveries are made; and as such, what we now call 'sensations' might be discovered to be 'brain-processes.' The plausibility of Rorty's hypothesis derives from switching vocabularies, which involves the elimination of "sensation" but not sensations themselves, giving room for a neurophysiological language which will serve us both explanatory and reportive roles in the talk about mental experiences. Rorty's position is strengthened by some developments in other related disciplines, such as Psychology. For instance, the most influential theory explaining pain is called the 'Gate theory,' developed by psychologist, Ronald Melzack and anatomist, Patrick Wall. The "Gate theory" suggests that the sensation of pain is controlled by a series of "gates" that open and close in the spinal cord. If the spinal "gates" are open, pain is experienced; if they are closed, no pain is experienced.[3]

In a similar vein, the mind/body problem has received much attention from the interdisciplinary research works of philosophers and neuroscientists, to the effect that the underlying neural path or mechanism for mental experiences which were hitherto ascribed to the mind as a non-material substances have been shown to be brain-processes. However magnificent development as this may be, such elimination remains quite impractical and inconvenient; it remains to be seen how that future that Rorty hopes for would overcome the inconvenience involved in making the linguistic shift needed in replacing sensation-talk with talk about brain-process. The point here is that the mind-referent role in ordinary discourse might not simply be replaced by brain-process language, such that instead of saying that "I feel pains," I would say that "my C-fibers are firing" or "I have an intense pain," I would say "my C-fibers are firing intensely".

More importantly on Rorty's position is the question on the possibility of the elimination of sensation-talk from the point of view of an 'ideal' language, like the one Rorty hopes neurological discoveries would help us achieve. Put differently, the question revolves around the possibility of a linguistic shift from a dualistic language construct to a monistic one. The linguistic shift Rorty talks about is one that requires us to translate the statement, "The pain I am experiencing is my C-fibers firing" as "The pain I am experiencing is nothing but my C-fibers firing."[4] In this regard, Rorty appears to be arguing for the elimination of sensation, and not just sensation-talk. James Austin in "Rorty's Materialism" argues that if brain-state-talk is to replace sensation-talk as Rorty supposed, then Rorty's account encounters a dilemma, which is either that brain-state-talk fulfils the descriptive function as sensation-talk does or it does not. He says further that if it does not, then it is not adequate to account for the same kinds of things that dualistic talk can account for; and if it does fulfill the descriptive function then it can only do so by virtue of the fact that it is a two-seated language and is implicitly committed to a dualist language. That is, it explains, by referring to neurophysiological movements, and it describes sensation in the exact same way that sensation talk "used to" describe sensations. Thus if

brain-state-talk does fulfill the descriptive function, then it is as much involved in a dualistic talk, and it is no less committed to a mind/body dualism. From the foregoing, Rorty's approach appears untenable because it attempts to say in the framework of one language something about the hidden and inaccessible conditions of another. He asks us to use everyday English to hypothesise about the ontology inherent in an alien language – one whose vocabulary contains terms which resemble our present neurophysiological terms, but which fail to carry the same denotations as them.

On a different note, the validity of the name Rorty titles his variant of the Identity Theory, has been criticised. For Daniel C. Dennett, for instance, the disappearance form of the identity theory is misnamed; and as such, it is really not an identity theory but only a physicalistic alternative to the Identity theory. In a similar vein, Quine questions the distinctiveness of an eliminativist form of materialism, implying that there is no significant difference between explicating mental states as physiological states, and eliminating mental state terms in favour of physical state terms. He asks: "Is physicalism a repudiation of mental objects after all, or a theory of them? Does it repudiate the mental state of pain or anger in favour of its physical concomitant, or does it identify the mental state with a state of the physical organism (and so a state of the physical organism with the mental state?)" (Quine, 1960: 265). In answering this question, Quine suggests that there is no interesting difference between the two cases: "Some may therefore find … that the distinction between an eliminative and an explicative physicalism is unreal." (Quine, 1960: 265).

In all, as noted by Dennett, though, there is no denying the value of the tactic of semantic analysis in the philosophy of mind, it has, however, not turned out that all the problems in philosophy of mind evaporate under linguistic analysis, and it is fair to say that a great deal of the researches into ordinary idiom failed to produce anything more importantly enlightening than an intense appreciation for the subtlety of English expression. Though, however, the most characteristic doctrines and methods of ordinary language, according

to Dennett, has been widely rejected or abandoned, its contributions to the new way with words which destroyed the traditional way of composing a philosophical theory of mind is noteworthy. For Dennett, "the traditional theorists were guilty of making aprioristic generalisations, which were nothing if not the products of ill-considered and un-self-conscious conceptual analysis, mixing these with a handful of causal introspection and observations about normal people's experiences and powers, and promoting the mixture to the status of metaphysical verities about the essences of things mental." (Dennett, 1978: 250).

Notes

[1.] The term "Eliminative Materialism" was first introduced by James Corman in 1968 while describing a version of physicalism endorsed by Rorty.

[2.] The demon-talk is about the witch-doctors' belief in the existence of demons as a reference to explain certain illness. But, as Rorty pointed out, this has been replaced by evidences from modern sciences that germs are also responsible for illness.

[3] Patrick Wall & Ronald Melzack have expanded the principles of this theory in several publications following their findings.

[4.] The question is discussed and analysed in James Austin's 1975 work "Rorty's Materialism", published in *Philosophy; Auslegung: A Journal of Philosophy.*

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