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## **Has Richard Rorty a moral philosophy?\***

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### **Abstract**

*I try to show that Richard Rorty, although is not a moral philosopher like Kant, nevertheless, has moral philosophy that must be taken seriously. Rorty was not engaged with moral philosophy in the systematic manner common among leading modern and contemporary moral philosophers. This paper has two parts: first part, in brief, is concerned with principles of his philosophy such as anti-essentialism, Darwinism, Freudism, and historicism. Second part which be long and detailed, considers many moral themes in Rorty's thought such as critique of Kantian morality, solidarity, moral progress, cruelty and concept of other, etc. Subsequently, I will try to answer the research question of the article namely, has Rorty a moral philosophy?*

**Keywords:** *moral philosophy, solidarity, moral progress, Kantian ethics, Rorty*

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## Introduction

It is well known that Socrates was the first philosopher in the western tradition who attempted to use philosophical arguments to produce an ethics. He started the first systematic philosophical attitude to morality and moral concepts, while many western philosophers, after him (even some Islamic philosophers) continued his way. But, we do not consider the chronological study of moral theories in history of ethics. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, usually, contemporary philosophers such as Levinas<sup>1</sup>, Foucault<sup>2</sup> and other moral philosophers tend to pay more attention to moral issues. Richard Rorty is one famous philosopher from this century whose undoubtedly profound moral messages in his philosophy are not hidden from the eyes of his avid readers. However, many may be surprised at the title of this article which, of course, does not set out to offer complete answers to this question, because the critics will wonder whether Richard Rorty, like Kant, really has a philosophical account of moral thought and practice or not. It has to be allowed that Rorty has not engaged with moral philosophy in the systematic manner common among leading modern and contemporary moral philosophers. He has even been always hesitant to use or apply the label of "philosophy" to whatever it is he sees himself as doing. Therefore, we should be a little cautious about this subject. The issue of morality in his writings (from *Philosophy and Mirror of Nature* (1979) to *An Ethics for Today* (2010)) is sporadically expressed.

This paper has two parts: the first part, briefly, is concerned with principles of his philosophy; the second part, is a long and detailed consideration of many moral themes in Rorty's thought such as the critique of Kantian morality, solidarity, moral progress, cruelty and the concept of the Other, etc. Subsequently, attempts will be made to answer the main question of the article: is Rorty a moral philosopher?

Before going further, it is necessary to present certain explanations to better understand why one cannot say that Rorty is a moral philosopher. The hypothesis I put forward in this article is that when you carefully look at his philosophy, you will see in him a moral message for mankind: it is a morality for living in a liberal society. All his efforts have been directed towards this great goal. Of course, ethics or moral philosophy is the branch of philosophy that involves

metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. In other words, moral philosophy is the area of philosophy concerned with theories of ethics, with how we ought to live our lives. All moral philosophers from Plato to the present age have been considered moral act and value in the mentioned theories. Rorty criticizes all the above theories about ethics.

### **Principles of Rorty's Philosophy**

At the outset, let us consider the principles of the pragmatist philosophy of Rorty. Our purpose is to show those principles form his moral philosophy. I do not want to get into details of the principles because a full explanation of those principles is outside the scope of this article. Here, I will try to explain those principles in brief.

*Anti-essentialism:* This view is a critical reaction against essentialism<sup>3</sup>. Anti-essentialism in Rorty's philosophy is an objection to contemporary essentialism that attempts to look for hidden "reality" under all "appearance". Rorty completely denies it; from the Rortyan outlook, the reality-appearance distinction is a relic of our onto-theological tradition which some contemporary philosophers (like M. Heidegger) have criticized. Rorty, in *Truth and Progress*, writes: "for we have learned (from Nietzsche and James, among others) to be suspicious of the appearance-reality distinction. We think that there are many ways to talk about what is going on, and that none of them gets closer to the way things are in themselves than any other. We have no idea what 'in itself' is supposed to mean in the phrase 'reality as it is in itself.' So we suggest that the appearance-reality distinction be dropped in favor of more useful ways of talking." (Rorty 1998:1). For this reason, in connection with this distinction, he suggests another distinction that has a moral content: the distinction between morality and prudence. He says that the latter distinction forms the Kantian ethics that Nietzsche and Dewey strongly deny. Having been influenced by them, Rorty accepts the pragmatic approach to morality and in *Philosophy and Social Hope* attempts to explain his moral philosophy.

Rorty clearly denies the human essence as one of the sources of moral laws. Dann in his *After Rorty: The Possibilities for Ethics and Religious Belief* (2010) writes: "Rorty's beginning point in his treatment of ethics, questioning the usefulness of extrinsic and intrinsic

definitions of human nature, is a good place to start in the critique of traditional ethical theory" (Dann 2010: 81). Rorty seems to replace traditional morality with a postmodern one. Traditional morality from Socrates to Levinas – in the Platonic-Aristotelian-Christian-Judeo traditions – tends to interpret morality as the means to the fulfillment of a fixed or unchanging human nature. According to this view, there is no fixed human essence. Rorty accepts this view and he becomes an anti-essentialist philosopher. Therefore, Rorty's concept of self-creation begins with a rejection of the traditional idea of a fixed or essential human nature. That is, this neo-pragmatist philosopher begins with a radical sense of sociological and historical contingency of the self (Huang 2009: 229). In other words, he doesn't believe that all humans have a common nature.

*Darwinism:* Through Dewey, Rorty became acquainted with Darwinism in philosophy. He says that "Dewey, in turn, was grateful to natural science, especially as represented by Darwin, for rescuing him from early Hegelianism" (Rorty 1991b: 63). In fact, it can be said that this is also true about Rorty himself because he is a new Dewey who, according to some interpreters, has attempted to combine the postmodern approaches with classic pragmatism in order to make his neo-pragmatism. For example, for Darwin, like Rorty and Dewey, the human nature is a part of material nature and the mind and the self a participant in the flux of events, not spectators. Also, according to Darwinism, there is no absolute, fixed, eternal, and immutable center for human existence. If we accept this view, no longer can the fixed essence of man be accepted, which, consequently leads to anti-essentialism. The clearest descriptions of Darwinism are founded in Rorty's essay, "Dewey between Hegel and Darwin"<sup>4</sup>. In addition, Rorty borrows historicism from Hegel and naturalism from Darwin. Therefore, there is no doubt that his neo-pragmatism is based on the Hegelianism and Darwinism. Rorty's approach to morality is closer to his Darwinism and Hegelianism. He, in "Dewey between Hegel and Darwin" says that "in this attitude towards morality, it seems to me, we get a genuine marriage of Darwin with de-absolutized Hegel" (Ibid: 13).

*Freudism:* He speaks of him in his writings, especially in "Freud and Moral Reflection"<sup>5</sup>. Freud is a pivotal thinker for Rorty, serving as one

of the masters of re-description and decentering of the self. Freud denies a fixed nature for man, dividing it into three parts. It is important to bear in mind that Freud is displacing Kantian–Christian teaching about universal moral claims and dispositions. Freud, Rorty holds, has changed our picture of human nature and his picture is completely different from the pictures which Plato and Kant, even Nietzsche, represented. Rorty summarizes the point: "It has often seemed necessary to decide between Kant and Nietzsche, to make up one's mind – at least to that extent – about the point of being human. But Freud gives us a way of looking at the human being which helps us evade the choice.... For Freud eschews the very idea of a paradigm human being.... By breaking with both Kant's residual Platonism and Nietzsche's inverted Platonism, he lets us see both Nietzsche's superman and Kant's moral consciousness as exemplifying two out of many forms of adaptation, two out of many strategies, for coping with the contingency of one's upbringing" (Rorty 1989: 35). In his view, Freud and Nietzsche have ended all attempts to discover a common human nature or a fixed center for the self. In other words, Freud was to discredit the idea of the true human self, and thereby the idea of the search for a permanent and unchangeable self behind ever changing accidents.

*Historicism:* As already mentioned, historicists like him, Rorty says, deny "that there is such a thing as "human nature" or the "deepest level of the self". Instead, they "insist that socialization goes all the way down – that there is nothing "beneath" socialization or prior to history." (Kuipers 2013: 86). Although Historicism of Rorty is similar to Hegel's but there are differences. It should be stressed, however, that the sort of historicism Rorty represents and describes is a nominalist, heroic, Romantic, existential, poetics, and narrativist historicism<sup>6</sup>. Also, in *Essays on Heidegger and others* (of course in footnote 8, p55), Rorty explicitly says "Historicism is a special case of naturalism" (Rorty 1991a: 55). So it can be concluded that the two (Historicism and naturalism) are intertwined and both of them have been included in his Darwinism. We should not forget that his view of morality is based on these principles. He believes that to accept non-representationalism is to require historicism. This marries up with his belief that "if one adopts a non-representationalist view of thought and language, one will move

away from Kant in the direction of Hegel's historicism<sup>7</sup>." (Rorty 2007:133). He proposes, for instance, putting a stop to providing justifications for different democratic institutions with an appeal to supra-historical reason. Therefore, according to him, Solidarity, as a core of moral philosophy, doesn't need to be based on objective foundations and is actually rather a matter of contingency. Historical stories about social and spiritual movements are the best instrument for studying human beings, for they supply vocabularies for reflection on morality, by means of which the individual is able to tell coherent stories about his own life (Rorty 1989: 69).

### **Critique of Kantian ethics**

We must first examine his critique of Kant's moral philosophy and, by extension, his endorsement of John Dewey's critique of Kant's morality. All above principles as already noted, Kant's conception of distinct and discoverable moral principles in practical reason and, by extension, the conception of morality as being based upon a rational and universal human faculty for resolving moral dilemmas by referring to such principles is, for Rorty, simply metaphysical principles derived from religious teachings. Rorty uses the Darwinian attitude for considering Kantian ethics. He suggested that:

*"All inquiry – in ethics as well as physics, in politics as well as logic – is a matter of reweaving our webs of beliefs and desires in such a way as to give ourselves more happiness and richer and freer lives. All our judgments are experimental and fallible. Unconditionality and absolutes are not things we should strive for ...Darwinians cannot be at ease with the Kantian idea of a distinctively moral motivation, or of a faculty called "reason" that issues commands. For them, rationality can only be the search for intersubjective agreement about how to carry out cooperative projects... To say that moral principles have no inherent nature is to imply that they have no distinctive source. They emerge from our encounters with our surroundings in the same way that hypotheses about planetary motion, codes of etiquette, epic poems,*

*and all our other patterns of linguistic behavior emerge. Like these other emergents, they are good insofar as they lead to good consequences, not because they stand in some special relation either to the universe or to the human mind" (Rorty 1989:188–90).*

This Deweyan or post-Darwinian view of morality fits well with Rorty's conception of morality. Thus, Rorty, a strong recent critic of Kant, in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, writes: "Kant, acting from the best possible motives, sent moral philosophy off in a direction which has made it hard for moral philosophers to see the importance, for "moral progress", of "detailed empirical descriptions". Kant wanted to facilitate the sorts of developments which have in fact occurred since his time – the further developments of democratic institutions and a cosmopolitan political consciousness. But he thought that the way to do so was to emphasize not pity for pain and remorse for cruelty but, rather, rationality and obligation – specifically, moral obligation. He saw respect for "reason", the common core of humanity, as the only motive that was not merely empirical – not dependent on the accidents of attention or of history. By contrasting "rational respect" with feelings of pity and benevolence, he made the latter seem dubious, second-rate motives for not being cruel. He made morality something distinct from the ability to notice, and identify with, pain and humiliation" (Rorty 1989: 192-193). In addition to this, at odds with Kantian moral philosophy, Rorty denies the universality of moral principles and human nature. And he insists that the progress of social morality is the extension of solidarity on the basis of 'we-intentions' and the destination of individual morality is a 'liberal ironist'. The "ironist", according to Rorty, is one who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires, namely his or her dependence on his or her cultural and social context and process of socialization. Therefore, "liberal ironists" are those people who include among their ungrounded desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease (ibid.). The concept of solidarity is related with irony.

This solidarity is achieved by a perpetual extension of her concept of 'we' or 'one of us'. The liberal ironist's sense of solidarity does not result from trying to attain some putative human essence, but by cultivating her sensitivity to manifestations of suffering and cruelty, a sensitivity which increases with the assistance of literary criticism.

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He takes most of his ideas from Dewey whom he adored as a philosophical hero, two others being Heidegger and Wittgenstein. Rorty, in *Philosophy and Mirror of Nature* (1979), holds Dewey as one of the most important thinkers of the twentieth century. In particular, Rorty finds in Dewey an anticipation of his own view of moral philosophy, taking himself as continuing the work of Dewey to criticize traditional metaphysics and its basic problems such as theory of Truth, concept of Experience and ethics. Rorty claims that Dewey tries to liberate our culture from supposed obstacles which hold up its further development and the realization of social hopes. Certainly, Kantian philosophy and especially his moral philosophy is an obstacle which holds up the realization of social hopes. Dewey and Rorty agree that philosophers should turn their attention toward the questions of a just society because democracy as a just society is the common search for justice. He is a liberal relying on democracy instead of philosophy; and he is a pragmatist comfortable with contingency and solidarity instead of theories. Finally, he follows his old teacher John Dewey. About Dewey on democracy, Rorty says that "he praised democracy as the only form of "moral and social faith" that does not "rest upon the idea that experience must be subjected at some point or other to some form of external control: to some 'authority' alleged to exist outside the process of experience" (Rorty 2007: 40). Of course, Rorty is an atheist philosopher and by no means can it be said that he has a theology, whatever it is, in his philosophy. The common point between both of them is the view that the essence of democracy is in moral values



expressed in societal procedures and human relationships, and in critical citizens who are committed to these values.

Rorty introduces morality in *Philosophy and Social Hope* more than in his other writings. He is strongly influenced by Dewey's naturalistic and Darwinist pragmatism. He, like Dewey, does not accept the distinction between prudence and morality. "Dewey suggested", Rorty says "that we reconstruct the distinction between prudence and morality in terms of the distinction between routine and non-routine social relationships. He saw prudence as a member of the same family of concepts as 'habit' and 'custom'. All three words describe familiar and relatively uncontroversial ways in which individuals and groups adjust to the stresses and strains of their non-human and human environments. It is obviously prudent both to keep an eye out for poisonous snakes in the grass and to trust strangers less than members of one's own family. 'Prudence', 'expediency' and 'efficiency' are all terms which describe such routine and uncontroversial adjustments to circumstances" (Rorty 1999: 73). The distinction between prudence and morality compares with that of social custom and law.

According to Rorty's 'philosophical hero', John Dewey, this Kantian morality-prudence distinction and the Kantian notion of moral autonomy (autonomy "in the sense of obedience to reason's unconditional command") are irreconcilable with the Darwinian account of the origin of the human species.

Rorty believes that the bases of ethics are neither a religion nor a moral law. He says: "as I read the history of philosophy, Kant is a transitional figure – somebody who helped us get away from the idea that morality is a matter of divine command, but who unfortunately retained the idea that morality is a matter of unconditional obligations. I would accept Elizabeth Anscombe's suggestion that if you do not believe in God, you would do well to drop notions like "law" and "obligation" from the vocabulary you use when deciding what to do" (Rorty 2007:187). Moreover, it can be said that emotions are not reason and rational arguments do not play a role in Rorty's moral philosophy. In other words, Rorty attempts to re-establish the central role that emotions played in the early Enlightenment. While in Kant's morality, there is a question of obedience to universal rules of pure practical

reason, for Hume the grounds and ultimate ends of morality should not rest on intellectual faculties but on sentiments. In Hume's morality, emotions are not under the control of reason but within a web of sentiments that allow feelings to control themselves.

### **The priority of solidarity to objectivity**

Perhaps, it can be said that the central core of the article is "solidarity", for it forms the spirit of his moral philosophy. I want to explain and elucidate what Rorty means by the two concepts of "solidarity" and "objectivity" and why he strongly advocates choosing the former over the latter. In other words, in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, he searches for forms of solidarity which are not determined by objectivity. He opposes attempts to anchor solidarity or responsibility for each other in human nature, a commonly shared humanity, or in natural human rights. Solidarity with others is a chance hit, a form of alliance with others which we have created and which is based on our ability to see others as members of a "we community."

In the process, I emphasize the moral messages of Rorty's philosophy, and show that Rorty himself admits that there is some sort of mysterious "moral foundation" which takes the place, or plays the role, of a metaphysical foundation. The moral philosophy that he has pursued since the publication of his famous book, that is, *Philosophy and the Mirror of nature* has not any similarity with current philosophies of ethics. In other words, it is neither deontological<sup>8</sup> morality nor a religious ethics but is a neo-pragmatic ethics. This ethics is different from other moral philosophies. First, it focuses on society, rather than on lone individuals, as the entity which achieves morality. For example, in Dewey's words, "all conduct is ... social." Or in Rorty's words, "imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers". In fact, his social hope as a substitute for Kantian or religious ethics plays a role in his neo-pragmatic ethics. Secondly, it does not hold any known moral criteria beyond the potential for revision. Third, pragmatic ethics may be misunderstood as relativist, as failing to be objective, but it is like suggesting that science fails to be objective. Ethical pragmatists, like scientists, can maintain that their endeavor is objective on the grounds that it converges towards something objective.

It allows that a moral judgment may be appropriate in one age of a given society, even though it will cease to be appropriate after that society progresses or may already be inappropriate in another society<sup>9</sup>.

Now another point is that Rorty devotes parts one and two to exhaustively exposing the flaws in the traditional interpretations of the mind as a mirror of nature (for example, in Descartes and Kant), of knowledge as the perspicuous representation of or correspondence to a nonhuman and independent reality, (corresponding theory of truth) and of philosophy as the discipline which evaluates the claims to knowledge of the rest of our culture. In the process, he surveys the history of epistemology from its Greek origins to its recent demise. Then in part three, he sketches out an alternative picture of an "edifying" philosophy as opposed to a "systematic" philosophy. He portrays the picture of his moral philosophy within "edifying" philosophy and this picture becomes very clear in his last writings (such as *Philosophy and Social Hope*). Here, Rorty begins with the following proclamation:

*"There are two principal ways in which reflective human beings try, by placing their lives in a larger context, to give sense to those lives. The first is by telling the story of their contribution to a community. This community may be the actual historical one in which they live, or another actual one, distant in time and place, or a quite imaginary one, consisting perhaps of a dozen heroes and heroines selected from history or fiction or both. The second way is to describe themselves as standing in immediate relation to a nonhuman reality. This relation is immediate in the sense that it does not derive from a relation between such a reality and their tribe, or their nation, or their imagined band of comrades. I shall say that stories of the former kind exemplify the desire for solidarity, and that stories of the latter kind exemplify the desire for objectivity. Insofar as a person is seeking solidarity, he or she does not ask about the relation between the practices of the chosen community and something outside that community. Insofar as he seeks objectivity, he distances himself from*

*the actual persons around him not by thinking of himself as a member of some other real or imaginary group, but rather by attaching himself to something which can be described without reference to any particular human beings" (Rorty 1991b: 21).*

Pragmatism defends the solidarity against objectivity:

*"Pragmatists would like to replace the desire for objectivity – the desire to be in touch with a reality which is more than some community with which we identify ourselves – with the desire for solidarity with that community. They think that the habits of relying upon persuasion rather than force, of respect for the opinions of colleagues, of curiosity and eagerness for new data and ideas, are the only virtues scientists have. They do not think that there is an intellectual virtue called 'rationality' over and above these moral virtues" (Rorty 1991b:39).*

It can also be said that solidarity has particular relation with moral progress. For Rorty, we can even find some moral virtues in scientific developments. Thus, Rorty suggests that "we substitute for familiar discussions of scientific method an inclination to praise the sciences for their frequently exhibited moral virtues and for their contributions to human solidarity" (Guignon & Hiley 2003:91).

Rorty, in fact, develops his notion of solidarity as the foundation of a liberal culture in direct confrontation with the main tenets of Kant's moral philosophy. Although one possesses a skeptic attitude towards the existence of a common human nature, this does not, in Rorty's opinion, remove the fact that we have a particular kind of "moral obligation to feel a sense of solidarity with all other human beings." This is an important principle particularly for Rorty, because the liberal society outlined by him rests on its wide ranging recognition.

Solidarity, according to him, is not something pre-existing that we can find outside in life-world, yet it is something that needs to be created by the "imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers" (Rorty 1996: xvi). Therefore, to Rorty, there is no solidarity

objectively in the world. He proposes that we can create it among our fellow sufferers.

Rorty's solidarity is, by no means, achieved by philosophical inquiry or reflection, or by removing prejudice and achieving any supposed objectivity. Rather, it is actively created through using the imagination to see and describe others as fellow sufferers, sensitizing ourselves to the pain, and in particular humiliation, of other human beings. Then, for creating solidarity, there is no need for a larger shared power such as God, Truth, or rationality which has to be invoked in order to demonstrate that we all share something in common (Rorty 1996: 91). Rorty's call for putting aside the quest for metaphysical foundations for solidarity comes not only from his pragmatist philosophy; it also builds on the practical ethos common to human beings. Rorty clearly denies the essence of human as one of the sources of moral laws. He seems to replace traditional morality with Nietzsche and Levinasian vision. Traditional morality from Socrates to Levinas – in the Platonic-Aristotelian-Christian traditions – tends to interpret morality as the means to the fulfillment of a fixed or unchanged nature of human. According to this view, there is no fixed essence of human. Rorty accepts this view and he becomes an anti-essentialist philosopher. Therefore, Rorty's concept of self-creation begins with a rejection of the traditional idea of a fixed or essential human nature. That is, this neo-pragmatist philosopher begins with a radical sense of sociological and historical contingency of the self (Huang 2009: 229). In other words, he doesn't believe that all humans have a common nature. In this area, he was inspired by criticisms provided by Hegel's historicism, Nietzsche's attack on metaphysics and Derrida's deconstruction of logocentrism.

Here, Rorty speaks of a 'de-theologized and de-philosophized' notion of solidarity, in which solidarity is not a characteristic of human's fixed nature but the effect of a process of acculturation developed in specific historical circumstances. Imagination would also contribute to the cultivation of the 'feeling' of solidarity as an 'expansive sense of solidarity' would be the offspring of the 'imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers.' In this context, Rorty defines ethics as 'the ability to notice, and identify with

pain and humiliation', and portrays a 'greater human solidarity' as the main path to moral progress.

### **Moral progress**

Rorty holds that the task of moral education is not to overcome one's natural feelings and emotions, but to expand it. To create solidarity is to be sensitive to the pain and sufferings of other people. He claims that moral progress is a matter of ever-present sympathy with others. Increasing sympathy leads, Rorty claims, to creation of solidarity. Rorty suggests that "it is best to think of moral progress as a matter of increasing sensitivity, increasing responsiveness to the needs of a larger and larger variety of people and things. Just as pragmatists see scientific progress not as the gradual attenuation of a veil of appearances which hides the intrinsic nature of reality from us, but as the increasing ability to respond to the concerns of larger groups of people... so they see moral progress as a matter of being able to respond to the needs of ever more inclusive groups of people" (Rorty, 1999:81). Is his view similar to a Benthamian utilitarianism? Obviously, Jeremy Bentham and the utilitarian program are obvious points of origin for Rorty's political and moral outlook. Utilitarianism, the ethics of the "greatest happiness principle", is probably the best known system of making decisions. Basically, according to the utilitarian, those actions are good which maximize happiness in our society and those actions are bad which minimize happiness and cause pain. In other words, Utilitarianism is the idea that the moral worth of an action is determined solely by its contribution to overall utility: that is, its contribution to happiness or pleasure as summed among all persons. Rorty was quite aware of it: "utilitarians like me think that morality is the attempt to decrease the amount of suffering among human beings"<sup>10</sup>.

Moral progress happens in history and that is why it is a historical contingency. Rorty says: "in the course of history, we clever animals have acquired new desires, and we have become quite different from our animal ancestors, for our cleverness has not only enabled us to adjust means to ends, it has enabled us to imagine new ends, to dream up new ideals. Nietzsche, when he described the effects of the cooling off of the sun, wrote: "And so the clever animals had to die.'" (Rorty

2010:13). Rorty's approach to moral progress is upon our understanding of social and historical conditions which we can change some conditions. Also he holds that:

*"My position entails that feelings of solidarity are necessarily a matter of which similarities and dissimilarities strike us as salient, and that such salience is a function of a historically contingent final vocabulary... The view I am offering says that there is such a thing as moral progress, and that this progress is indeed in the direction of greater human solidarity. But the solidarity is not thought of as recognition of a core self, the human essence, in all human beings. Rather, it is thought of as the ability to see more and more traditional differences... as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation – the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of "us". That is why I said... that detailed descriptions of particular varieties of pain and humiliation (in, e.g., novels or ethnographies), rather than philosophical or religious treatises, were the modern intellectual's principle contributions to moral progress" (Rorty 1989:192).*

For Rorty, moral progress is not a matter of increasing moral knowledge whereas modern philosophers such as Kant, Rorty says, who see morals as resting on metaphysical questions like "but is there a God?" or "do human beings really *have* these rights?" presuppose that moral progress is at least in part a matter of increasing moral knowledge, knowledge about something independent of our social practices: something like the will of God or the nature of humanity (Rorty 1999: 84). Unlike Kant, Rorty is almost closer to Hume<sup>11</sup> than other modern philosophers, because, for the latter, morality is a matter of sentiment not reason.

Sentiment and imagination in moral progress are two interrelated concepts that Rorty has included in his view of moral philosophy. His point is that moral progress is not a matter of an increase in rationality,

nor does it involve developing what Dewey called intelligence. The crucial factor is sympathy, how widely one is willing to draw the limits of one's moral community. Thus, moral progress for Rorty is a matter of increasing "sensitivity" and one's responsiveness to "the concerns of ever larger groups of people" (Rorty 1999: 81). Moreover, Rorty repeatedly and strongly insists that our commitment to human rights and other fundamental moral principles (like justice) cannot be effectively justified by resorting to universal rationality and rational laws but instead depend on shared emotions and sentiments. What makes us moral is that we feel our common emotions like empathy, suffering, etc. Rorty clearly claims that moral progress is this progress of sentiments. For example, we can imaginatively feel ourselves "in the shoes of the despised and the oppressed" (Rorty 2001: 358).

The most important message in moral progress, according to him, is that cruelty and suffering should not be existing in liberal democracy. Rorty believed that "a democracy is distinguished not only by its form of government, but also by the presence of institutions such as free press, free universities, and an independent judiciary. These intuitions help the nation come to grasp with the existence of previously unrecognized forms of cruelty and suffering: the cruelty of whites against blacks, for example, or the suffering of gays. In a fully democratic society, unnecessary suffering would not exist (Rorty 2006:81-2). Of course, note that the condemnation of cruelty does not mean that liberal democracy will prevent the suffering, cruelty, and humiliation in democratic societies because suffering, cruelty, and humiliation cannot be eliminated from human life, but can be decreased. Therefore, it is clearly evident that suffering, cruelty, and humiliation cannot be totally ignored, playing important roles in Rorty's moral philosophy.

### **Conclusion**

To put things in perspective building on the above, it can certainly not be said that Rorty, this neo-pragmatist thinker, is like Kant, a moral philosopher. Therefore, one can attest that the answer to this question will not be easy. Rorty has a special moral philosophy that does not refer to or correspond with any Kantian or Christian morality. Rorty is standing on Darwin's and Dewey's shoulders. However, his moral



philosophy is based upon Darwinian-Deweyian ethics none of which has any metaphysical foundations. As already mentioned, Darwinism as one of his principles of Rorty's thought, manifests itself in moral topics. According to Rorty moral consciousness as a historical conditioned is a product of social and political consciousness. Of course, this does not mean that he is not a Marxist thinker because the grand narrative has no place in his philosophy. Two points arise here: obviously, Darwinism and historicism are both components of Rorty's philosophy. Also moral progress and solidarity are interrelated concepts in his moral philosophy. Rorty's assertion of the contingency of self and his appropriation of the Freudian conception of the self will serve as a basis for a discussion of Kantian versus Deweyan morality, moral deliberation and, finally, Rorty's notions concerning cruelty and human solidarity. If anyone wants to know what pragmatic ethics is, he must directly listen to these among Rorty's words: "I don't think pragmatists have a special ethics. They have, if you like, a special meta-ethics. That is, they're dubious about the distinction between morality and prudence. Immanuel Kant is still the greatest influence on academic moral philosophy. If you read Kant, you think of morality as a very special, distinct phenomenon having little in common with anything else in culture. Dewey wrote book after book saying we don't need a great big distinction between morality and everything else; we don't even need a great big distinction between morality and prudence. It's all a matter of solving the problems that arise in relations between human beings. When these problems become acute we call them moral problems, when they don't become acute we call them prudential problems. It's a matter of importance rather than, as Kant thought, a difference between reason and emotion, or reason and sentiment, or the a priori and the a posteriori, or the philosophical and the empirical, and so on. Basically what Dewey did for moral philosophy was just to help get rid of Kant. I don't think the pragmatists have any further contribution to make to ethics"<sup>12</sup>. I think that the question this paper raises is an open question and Rorty is a moral philosopher unlike Kantian or Christian or even utilitarian moral philosophers. He wants us to embrace social life back so that we can live in peace with others and in this life we do not resort to philosophical principles to make life better, but our motto is one thing, and that is solidarity with other

people, whether Muslims or Christians or Buddhists, etc. According to him, experiencing solidarity with others is the basis of a democratic society and should be strengthened so that moral life could improve, namely, the reduction of all forms of cruelty and suffering through strengthening our moral solidarity with others, which is the central aim of Rorty's moral philosophy. Despite Rorty's pragmatist eschewal of a theory of the Good and a foundationalist morality, he can be seen as a moralist. Finally, it can be said that his morality is similar to a postmodern ethics.

### Notes

- 1 . Both Rorty and Levinas are critics of a foundation-orientated metaphysics. Rorty plays down the question of the final foundation by showing that it is asked from a metaphysical tendency which is better resisted. Metaphysical foundations are not necessary and not desirable. Not necessary, because our actions do not change through their presence or absence.
- 2 . Foucault, like Rorty, was an anti-representationalist and historicist thinker. See: Chandra Kumar, (2005) "Foucault and Rorty on Truth and Ideology : A Pragmatist View from the Left", in *Contemporary Pragmatism Vol. 2, No. 1 (June 2005)*, 35–93
- 3 . History of essentialism is long. We know that "essentialism originated from Parmenides, Plato, and specially Aristotle, but has declined since the criticism of British empiricism beginning in the seventeenth century. It was revived in the middle of the twentieth century and is represented in particular by Kripke. Contemporary essentialism claims that some properties of an object are essential to it and that so long as it exists, the object could not fail to have them." See also, Bunnin, Nicholas & Yu, Jiyuan (2008) *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy* (John Wiley & Sons).
4. See "Dewey between Hegel and Darwin" by Richard Rorty In Herman J. Saatkamp (ed.), *Rorty & Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*. Vanderbilt University Press (1995)
- 5 . Look at: "Freud and Moral Reflection." In *Essays on Heidegger and Others*. Vol. 2, *Philosophical Papers*, 143–163. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991
- 6 . I think that the most clear description was found in the following book: Hall, David L.(1994) *Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism*, SUNY Press
- 7 . Of course, he has raised the issue of holism

8 . Deontology is an approach to ethics that focuses on the rightness or wrongness of actions themselves, as opposed to the rightness or wrongness of the consequences of those actions. It argues that decisions should be made considering the factors of one's duties and other's rights (the Greek 'deon' means 'obligation' or 'duty').

9 . For more see: LaFollette, Hugh (2000). "Pragmatic ethics". In LaFollette, Hugh. *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*. Wiley-Blackwell. pp. 400–419

10 .Rorty, Richard (2012) "the moral purposes of the university: an exchange", <http://www.iasc-culture.org/THR/archives/University/2.3IRortyetal.pdf>.

11 . In making sentiment the primary constituent of a common moral identity, Rorty invokes the legacy of David Hume. That Hume's's thought is a source of protopragmatist stirrings is nothing new; William James suggested as much in the 1898 essay credited with launching the pragmatist tradition. For further study, see: Rasmussen, Dennis. C (2013) *The Pragmatic Enlightenment: Recovering the Liberalism of Hume, Smith, Montesquieu, and Voltaire* (Cambridge University Press)

12 . For more see: an interview with Richard Rorty in Philosophy Now 2016 at [https://philosophynow.org/issues/43/Richard\\_Rorty](https://philosophynow.org/issues/43/Richard_Rorty)

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