

“Solidarity at the Time of the Fall:” Adorno and Rorty on Moral Realism

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Einer fragte Herrn K., ob es einen Gott gäbe.
Herr K. sagte: “Ich rate dir, nachzudenken, ob dein Verhalten
je nach der Antwort auf diese Frage sich ändern würde.
Würde es sich nicht ändern, dann können wir die Frage fallenlassen.”
(Bertolt Brecht. *Geschichten von Herrn Keuner*)

1. Introduction

Current discourse in practical philosophy has seen so-called moral realism re-emerge as a controversial topic. Moral realism is here defined as positing the existence of eternal and universal moral values, independent of the discretion of a moral agent. This has not always been a controversial topic. In particular, Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy aimed to put an end to the thesis of the existence of timeless values in favor of the increased life of the individual, and to establish a relativistic vitalism instead of a moral realism. Today, however, we see attempts to defend moral realism against this Nietzschean attack, but these attempts are not without their own fierce criticism.

One of the most prominent representatives of today’s criticism of realist positions within Ethics is Richard Rorty, who in many ways draws on Nietzsche’s philosophy. One of his much-discussed, and also criticized, general theses is the following: instead of eternal and universal values it is *solidarity* with members of one’s own ethnic group that should serve as guide for what is to be understood as good behavior. Thus conventions supersede universal moral values, and respectively concrete conventions in one’s lived life are, through Rorty’s approach, to

be saved from the hubris of a metaphysical grounding of morality, which shifts the scale of moral action into an afterlife.

This paper will not make another attempt to defend moral realism against Rorty's critique. It rather confronts Rorty's position with arguments by Theodor W. Adorno, noting that Adorno also follows the Nietzschean critical attitude towards the assertion of eternal and universal values. In this regard, Rorty and Adorno are connected via similar starting points. By turning these two philosophers against one another, however, it not only becomes clear how diverse relativistic moral critiques can be; we also gain interesting insights into Rorty's critical design, which, in turn, also enables a new understanding of Adorno's critique. Adorno also refers to the actual present life world as a reference point for moral action. However, for him this reality is not unquestionable and also not our ultimate reference for choosing an action, such as it seems to be for Rorty. Adorno rather scrutinizes this reality and its norms of actions.

The purpose of this paper now is to demonstrate that Adorno fundamentally confronts Rorty's position. Rorty's criticism of moral realism does not reach far enough and itself ends up at a rather naive moral realism, in which the ethnic group functions as the ultimate measure of moral judgment, thus without any possibility to criticize this premise itself. By contrast Adorno offers a figure of thought by which even without the assumption of a moral realism in the traditional sense, such a criticism is entirely possible. At the end this paper will finally suggest that Adorno's philosophy could be described as a kind of enlightened moral realism.

In order to achieve these goals the paper first depicts Rorty's position. This is followed by the reconstruction of Adorno's philosophy and a comparison of the two positions, which will show how Rorty's standpoint cannot withstand Adorno's critique.

2. Rorty: Solidarity rather than Objectivity

The idea of moral realism arises from the context of a philosophy that must be understood as a fundamental science, the science of the

general, unchangeable and necessary, by means of abstraction. Rorty set himself the goal to bid farewell to this idea of philosophy, in order to lead the discipline out of its – as stated by Nietzsche – “loss of reality.” Instead, a “postmetaphysical culture” (Rorty 1989, xvi) became an objective in working against the separation of philosophy from life’s reality, which bids farewell to the assumption of “permanent truths of reason and temporary truths of fact” (Rorty 1991 I, 176). The fundamental accusation of a “life-distance” can also be applied to the requirements of a metaphysico-objective morality, which is demanded within the argumentative frame of moral realism and suggests an attitude of escape from the contingencies of life. Showing that this is impossible became one of the main focuses of Rorty’s philosophy, who, following philosophers like the already mentioned Nietzsche, William James, and John Dewey, tried to introduce a pragmatic turn to philosophy, with which philosophy and life praxis could close ranks. Thus Rorty argues for the disavowal of the “belief that there are, out there in the world, real essences which it is our duty to discover and which are disposed to assist in their own discovery” (Rorty 1989, 75). With this in mind, it is pointless to seek for the essence of anything, including morality, if only because our reality constantly alters, and because of this an essence (if such a thing even existed) would be subject to constant change, too. Plato’s distinct different spheres are no longer available with Rorty, nor is the idea of a morality as *the* morality.

But in order to approach the phenomenon that we call “morality” (escaping our vocabulary is only conditionally possible) we have to – in a pragmatic sense – focus on social practices, because “there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have to put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions” (Rorty 1982, xlii).

Thus it is necessary to lift the veil of our commonly used terms and to become aware of social practice as a constitutive variable. The same applies to morality. Morality can be understood as a result of social practice, which implies a constant and always contextually embedded change:

If we are inclined to philosophize, we shall want the vocabulary offered by Dewey, Heidegger, Davidson, and Derrida, with its built-in cautions against metaphysics, rather than that offered by Descartes, Hume, and Kant. For if we use the former vocabulary, we shall be able to see moral progress as a history of making rather than finding, of poetic achievement by “radically situated” individuals and communities, rather than as the gradual unveiling, through the use of “reason,” of “principles” or “rights” or “value” (Rorty 1991 I, 188-189).

Although Rorty obviously polemicizes against metaphysical principles of philosophy, he also adheres to a principle, which can be associated directly in the sphere of morality: solidarity. This term can serve as an example of how Rorty’s understanding of a moral principle in a specific context of life is supposed to work. Rorty’s view of solidarity is an alternative to an understanding of solidarity that is dependent on objectivity (which traditionally depends on the belief of the Humane), as the so-called realists construct it. Rorty claims that such realists necessarily demand implausible additional assumptions, as they

have to construe truth as correspondence to reality. So they must construct a metaphysics which has room for a special relation between beliefs and objects which will differentiate true from false beliefs. They also must argue that there are procedures of justification of belief which are natural and not merely local. So they must construct an epistemology which has room for a kind of justification which is not merely social but natural, springing from human nature itself, and made possible by a link between that part of nature and the rest of nature (Rorty 1991 II, 22).

According to Rorty these necessary assumptions cannot be designed convincingly. He therefore considers it preferable to focus on the concrete life context to illustrate solidarity. This depends on identification-categories with which we calculate the proximity of a person to us, in order to develop a sense of solidarity. Even though this is a psychological (and intuitive) and not a systematic argument, Rorty applies it against the notion of universal moral principles. Specifically, he applies his ar-

gumentation against humanism: identification with the humane is not enough to motivate solidarity, claiming that “‘because she is a human being’ is a weak, unconvincing explanation of a generous action” (Rorty 1989, 191). A thus-constructed ethical universalism therefore ignores the fact that we feel closer to people, with whom “imaginative identification is easier” (Rorty 1989, 191).

Of course, Rorty is aware of the fact that such thinking does not come without presuppositions, but rather depends on an age-old ethical discourse that recognizes human solidarity as a value. It hence becomes clear that Rorty cannot get away from a specific vocabulary, which is the product of an indubitable ethnocentrism (Rorty 1991 II, 23, 29). Rorty here agrees with Putnam (a well-known colleague in the criticism of moral realism), that we can only obtain a better view of morality whilst speaking of a tradition (with its echoes of the Bible, philosophy, democratic revolutions and so on), instead of proclaiming a supposedly ahistorical position, as moral realists do. This leaves us with a simple formula for the definitions of our moral values: those beliefs are “true [...] which he or she finds good to believe” (Rorty 1991 II, 24) – and this cost-benefit calculation is always embedded in different contexts of history, life circumstances etc. A realist will tend to interpret this type of view as another positive theory about the nature of truth, that is, as a theory according to which the truth is only a respective opinion of an individual or a group. “But the pragmatist,” Rorty says, “does not have a theory of truth, much less a relativistic one. As a partisan of solidarity, his account of the value of cooperative human inquiry has only an ethical base, not an epistemological or metaphysical one. Not having *any* epistemology, *a fortiori* he does not have a relativistic one” (Rorty 1991 II, 24).

The accusation of being a relativist can thus be read as a projection of the realists, “for the realist thinks that the whole point of philosophical thought is to detach oneself from any particular community and look down at it from a more universal standpoint” (Rorty 1991 II, 30), but those who think they can see axioms are just victims of a “Cartesian fallacy of seeing axioms where there are only shared habits, of viewing statements which summarize such practices as if they reported constraints enforcing such practices” (Rorty 1991 II, 26).

Ultimately Rorty's critique of metaphysics culminates in an argument promulgated by Nietzsche, who demands we renounce the metaphysical ghost constructions and dive into the "real:"

[the] traditional Western metaphysico-epistemological way of firming up our habits simply isn't working anymore. It isn't doing its job. It has become as transparent a device as the postulation of deities who turn out, by a happy coincidence, to have chosen *us* as their people. So the pragmatist suggestion that we substitute a 'merely' ethical foundation for our sense of community – or, better, that we think of our sense of community as having no foundation except shared hope and the trust created by such sharing – is put forward on practical grounds (Rorty 1991 II, 33).

3. "Solidarity at the Time of the Fall:"¹ Metaphysics and Ethics in Adorno

Rorty's accomplished anti-metaphysical and pragmatist turn in favor of an emphasis on solidarity can, on the one hand, be seen as a demand to free actually lived morality from the claims of moral realism, which urges people to follow the supposedly morally higher sphere of timeless values instead, a sphere separated from actual life. On the other hand, the difficulties of such a conception are particularly evident when one's own ethnocentric standpoint becomes a subject of critical assessment, because Rorty cannot provide any sort of standard against which his theory can be proven. However, as noted earlier in the introduction, this section of the paper is not supposed to go further into the development of a transcendental argumentation, but instead wants to ask: Does Rorty's supposedly enlightened critical attitude, with which he rejects moral realism in favor of the fullness of lived morality, go far enough to deserve the name of profound criticism? Or is Rorty's pragmatism to be characterized as mere opportunism, compared to a standard of criticism that will be introduced in the following?

¹ Adorno 1992, 408: "There is solidarity between such [i.e. negative dialectical] thinking and metaphysics at the time of its fall."

The figure of thought that will be consulted for this exam is Adorno’s critique of society. Like Rorty within his concept of pragmatism, Adorno refuses to use metaphysical arguments for the discussion of the question of the successful life. If moral realism is to be understood as a concept that postulates or tries to prove the existence of timeless values that, in the end, tell us what we should do, and prove the quality of moral goodness or define moral obligations, then Adorno is no more a realist than Rorty is. However, the motive that leads Adorno to such a decline is slightly different to Rorty’s – in general, it can be named “Auschwitz.”

For Adorno, Auschwitz is the bankruptcy of any metaphysics that either tries to transcend the finite world altogether or claims to deduce some meaning of finite being from a transcendental world. “After Auschwitz, our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victim’s fate” (Adorno 1992, 361). This metaphysical thesis of the significance of finite being implicitly sanctions the horrors of the concentrations camps, instead of making it explicit and thus become an ally to fascism. However, the absurdness that Auschwitz has brought to light is the radical nullity of individuals that suffer a mechanized and industrialized death in the gas chambers:

The administrative murder of millions made of death a thing one had never yet to fear in just this fashion. There is no chance any more for death to come into the individual’s empirical life as somehow conformable with the course of that life. The last, the poorest possession left to the individual is expropriated. That in the concentration camps it was no longer an individual who dies, but a specimen—this is a fact bound to affect the dying of those who escaped the administrative measure. Genocide is absolute integration. It is on its way wherever men are leveled off—“polished off,” as the German military called it—until one exterminates them literally, as deviations from the concept of their total nullity. Auschwitz confirmed the philosophy of pure identity as death (Adorno 1992, 362).

If we take a close look at this quote, several aspects become clearer which show us why metaphysics is no longer an option in the face of the

Holocaust. First of all, every thought refuses to grant the mass murder a metaphysical sense. Secondly, the industrialized killing and dying destroys one of the fundamentals of traditional metaphysics, the retrospective dependence of metaphysical speculation on the experience of the single person that was established by the personal fear of one's own death. Death now faces the individual in a mechanized form and proves the nullity of the individual: the nullity of its existence at all, the nullity of its own individuality. This becomes clear when the individual, as a mere copy of a type or race, i.e. a general disposition, suffers the same automated death with several other individuals. Thirdly, there is, in Adorno's opinion, an even deeper structure that causes the failure or "fall" of metaphysics. This is, again, due to the fact that Auschwitz is not only a failure of a particular form of metaphysically impregnated philosophizing, but also a failure of culture, to which this metaphysical philosophy belongs as a part and an expression of itself. Therefore "[a]ll post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage" (Adorno 1992, 367). This diagnosis by Adorno, namely that metaphysics should not just be regarded as a superfluous counter model to, but rather as the very expression of a failed culture itself, profoundly subverts Rorty's opposition of metaphysical speculation (at least for morality), on the one hand, and seemingly the healthy, life-world rooted reality of actions on the other. "That this could happen in the midst of traditions of philosophy, of art, and of the enlightening sciences says more than that these traditions and their spirit lacked the power to take hold of men and work a change in them. There is untruth in those fields themselves, in the autarky that is emphatically claimed for them" (Adorno 1992, 366-7). That means that the dreadful kind of thought that finds its manifestation in the concentration camps is also at work in philosophy and science in a clandestine way. This thought even functions as a basis for the highest forms of culture – such as philosophy, art, and science – and it essentially neglects the special and singular features of the particular being in favor of the identical aspects this being has in common with other things. It is this tendency to neglect and to level what is special and non-identical which is essential to theoretical and metaphysical thought and which becomes reality in the fascist genocide. Thus it becomes clear, that for Adorno, metaphysics (which is deeply based on the deluded

principle of identification and the conceited preponderance of the universal), cannot present a remedy for a horrid reality that is constituted by the same principles and of which it is a part.

Now, one might be inclined to turn Adorno’s considerations in a way that might lead one to admit that the Holocaust was just one breakthrough of barbarism with roots specifically in Western European culture and its cultural forms. One then could call for a different way of thinking that takes the non-identical more strongly into account and for a philosophy that also gives us the consolation that thought will develop in such a way that we will never let Auschwitz happen again. By this Auschwitz would somehow get a meaning, namely just that we would have now been placed in a position, once and for all, to learn from our mistakes and to change our thinking and living. Furthermore, one could think that it is exactly Rorty’s undogmatic approach that answers to the non-pragmatic but metaphysical based Western European thought that led to Auschwitz.

That this is no option for Adorno has been made clear before. But why this is so becomes clearer whilst understanding how far reaching Adorno’s diagnosis is. First of all, Adorno would disagree with the thesis that the barbaric logic of identification, that is the very texture of Auschwitz, is just a past Western European phenomenon that could be eliminated by decision. The reason for this gives a second point, which is that none of the forms of high culture (philosophy, art, science) are autonomous regions, which only accidentally come into contact with society. On the contrary: All three of them are essentially connected with society, which enforces its fixed constants and structures of thought upon them. Thirdly: The very essence of this kind of thought, which is substantiated as society and the forms of life imposed by it, consist in identifying and making the unequal equal. In Adorno’s eyes, this is true not only for Western European culture but also for North American capitalism – in which Adorno sees as nothing else but the totalitarian completion of Western European culture. Thus, Adorno’s diagnosis which concerns European culture also concerns North American capitalism; both are deeply rooted within the logics of identification.

Auschwitz, thus, is not a break-in of barbarism into the enlightened capitalist society, but the realization of its very structure. This is the rea-

son why the end of the concentration camps is not the end of the spell of identification. It rather subsists within capitalist societies and takes over all spheres of life. That is why “there is nothing innocuous left” (Adorno 2005, 25). The seemingly innocent affable small talk is doomed by the spell of identification and implicitly sanctifies the existing order. “Even the blossoming tree lies the moment its bloom is seen without the shadow of terror” (Adorno 2005, 25). Every human and interpersonal relation is determined by this leveling, identifying, that is thought and form of existence and life at the same time. This has severe consequences for Rorty’s position. The selfsame living environment that according to Rorty serves as a corrective against metaphysical ideas, which are out of touch with the real world, is, according to Adorno, nothing else but a monstrous structure of repression itself.

Things get even worse for Rorty’s concept. The spell of identification, that haunts society, tends to conceal itself. It is a universal context of deception and a ban that does not release its subjects but deludes them by making them think of themselves as free persons whilst they are ruled and compelled. This context of deception affects all regions of culture and thus also philosophy. For example: a philosophy that promotes the liberalistic conception of a human society promotes a society constituted by autonomous selves, who use instrumental rationality to pursue their own interests and to maximize utility. In Adorno’s eyes, such a philosophy indeed is a mere reproduction of the solipsist way of existence which is imposed upon people by a repressive society in order to make them subjects of control using the delusion of freedom of choice (an argument that, again, Nietzsche already developed). Thus, this philosophy sanctions, as a theory, the selfsame structures of power that make the people submissive to the mechanisms of capitalist society. From this perspective, Rorty’s theory does not appear to be an enlightened position which restores the immediate ethical substance of everyday life but an unconscious affirmation of the machinery of power.

Although thinking and philosophy are enmeshed within the spell of identification and power, and unable to get out of it, Adorno does not vote for a retreat from culture, thought, and philosophy for a return to rural life. This retreat again would simply sanction the power of society and its immanent logics that would finally creep up again upon the retreaters. Ra-

ther, we must think in a way that keeps the basic structure of identification – that rules every thought – conscious, in order to overcome its own barbaric tendency to level the non-identical and, in particular, in this self-reflexive manner. In other words: It is selfsame thinking that is cause and cure of the problems at the same time by thinking “against itself” and its brutal tendency of identification. The utopian aim of such thinking is to unlock the non-identical and release it from its forced deformations, to let it show itself and to give it a language of expression without imposing leveling and identifying categories upon it. Such thinking would then not come to postulate some positive contents as examples of “the non-identical,” but would consist in a constant negative dialectical criticism, which, in its process, would try to retrieve the non-identical out of the context of deception. This is the reason why such a negative dialectics is able to offer a certain potential consolation without being urged to name and strictly determine the consoling utopia; even less it is forced to evoke a belief in transcendental eternal values in order to find some “metaphysical comfort” against which Rorty so eloquently polemicizes. At the end stands a comfort that is only negative; it consists “in the gaze falling on horror, withstanding it, and in unalleviated consciousness of negativity holding fast to the possibility of what is better.” (Adorno 2005, 25) In this figure of negative dialectical thought Adorno is able to find his own idea of solidarity, which is, as quoted above, solidarity with metaphysics “at the time of its fall.”

4. Conclusion

We can conclude that Adorno’s approach goes far beyond the boundaries of Rorty’s criticism without restoring a simple naive moral realism of a metaphysical kind. However, does this mean that we finally have to dismiss moral realism altogether? This does not seem necessary. At second sight one could indeed see a certain kind of “moral realism” in Adorno’s philosophy. This, however, is not the moral realism Rorty attacks. It rather is a moral realism that recurs on something “real,” i.e. the non-identical that serves as the measure of a thinking, that tries to

break the ban of identification without being so naive to think that the mere intention is the deed.

This realism would be a moral one insofar as the negative dialectical movement of thought follows the intention to let the non-identical to be free in its otherness and dissolve it from its forced transformations. This is not realism because it claims the existence of eternal values; it is realism because it aims at a change of reality; it is realism because the non-identical is “real” as much as it can be freed from the spell of identification by negative dialectical thinking.

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