

Critical Approach of Understanding Other Cultures

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Abstract

アメリカの哲学者リチャード・ローティ、ドイツの哲学者ハンス-ゲオルグ・ガダマーやユルゲン・ハーバーマスの理論を引用しながら、著者は他の文化をいかに理解したらよいかについて論じている。著者はローティの自文化の価値観を基準に他文化を理解する考え方やガダマーの解釈学的異文化理解を批判し、ハーバーマスの批判理論を援用しながら、異文化理解とは他文化の中での社会現象や創造される表現を解釈することよりは、むしろそれらの現象や表現を表出するのに機能し、現象や表現に特定な意味を与える社会構造により注目すべきだといひ、異文化を理解することは、自文化が持っている価値観や意味創出の社会構造をも再検証することであると主張する。

Understanding other cultures accurately is difficult and sometimes frustrating. Even though communication among people living in different countries has improved vastly and modern transportation system has made it easier to travel to other countries, understanding a whole way of life and value system in another society is very challenging. There are no clear and agreed criteria with which people truly understand other people in a different society. In this paper, I will attempt to articulate how we can better understand arts, customs, and beliefs originated in another society.

First of all, I would like to explain a pragmatist view on learning and realizing other traditions, which is represented by Richard Rorty, an American philosopher. He incorporates a sense of expanding community into learning. He uses “edification” instead of education, because for him the word “education” does not constitute the idea of how one interprets and learns the world. According to him, edification is the explicit attempt to find better and more worthwhile ways of learning things, not the attempt to discover and possess truth.

Richard Rorty furnishes two ways of edification. One is a “hermeneutic” approach that leads to creating connections between one’s culture and other cultures that are not compatible with each other

but still demonstrate interdependency. Consequently, for Rorty, hermeneutics regards “the relations between various discourses as those of strands in a possible conversation, a conversation which presupposes no disciplinary matrix which unites the speakers, but where the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts.”¹⁾ In this locus, one can expand a community in which various beliefs, values, and doctrines exist as a loosely interwoven unit as long as one involves critical dialogue. The other is a “poetic” approach that involves thinking about one’s familiar surroundings in a new vocabulary and reinterpreting them from a totally different angle. However various, Rorty believes that “...the heroes of liberal society are the strong poet and the utopian revolutionary.”²⁾ He defines the poet and revolutionary as the persons who can resist arbitrary social restrictions that diminish the intellectual capacities of people. Both the poet and revolutionary seek self-actualization and thereby get rid of some obstacles that society imposes on them. What emerges is that in either approach, edification is the activity in which one sheds a new light on oneself with a supposedly unusual discourse.³⁾

In appropriately considering edification and learning other cultures, it is of vital significance to distinguish between solidarity and objectivity. Solidarity is exemplified in relation to the actual communities that involve people. Solidarity, in short, is the consequence of contributing to a community. Richard Rorty, a pragmatist, regards the desire for solidarity as extending consensus as much as possible. By contrast, objectivity is shown in regard to communities where a detached self is required in order to observe phenomena without any particular human reference. To pursue objectivity is to seek truth and to distance oneself from the actual communities in which one lives.⁴⁾ Richard Rorty is not so much concerned with “the gap between truth and justification.”⁵⁾ As its centerpiece, he is more concerned with substituting objectivity for solidarity: “There is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society-ourselves in one or another area of inquiry.”⁶⁾ The threads of interests and purposes within a society need to be based on tradition because without understanding basic values of the society, one cannot engage in truth inquiry to largely improve society. As a rule, Rorty affirms that edification “has to begin with acculturation.”⁷⁾

A valid reaction is that before one was born the existing environment has already been imbued with beliefs, values, and forms of expressions that were ingrained in a community. Moreover, the culture of the community has been transmitted from generation to generation through various means, though it might have changed in some ways due to the influence of some external values and beliefs or the internal rebellion of someone who wanted to challenge the status quo. Local history is, in general, full of wisdom of older people and ancestors, and without reference to the worldview that ancestors molded, we cannot develop our moral and intellectual faculties to cope with many issues. Hermeneutic thinkers assert that tradition is an ongoing reflection on historical identity, and education needs to begin “in conformity with what others have thought about, and been interested in, before us.”⁸⁾

Concerning tradition and culture, Richard Rorty undeniably takes an ethnocentric position, which means that we can only start a conversation by recognizing where we are virtually standing now. In short, one’s *ethnos* is a starting point to engage in dialogue and debate: “to be ethnocentric is to divide the human race into the people to whom one must justify one’s beliefs and the others.”⁹⁾ In this regard, to be ethnocentric is to have ways of refining prejudices, to a great extent, with which one can rationalize one’s beliefs and value system. Rorty insists that we need to privilege our own group, which particularly

refers to western liberal democrats, over other groups, because he believes that the western liberal democratic society has provided the possibly best environment in which people have a critical dialogue.

In regard to Rorty's ethnocentrism, I argue that it is possible for people who do not belong to western civilization to find the space where they can take the initiative in understanding other cultures. Rorty's account of community is narrowly defined and only includes Europeans and Americans of European descent, thereby taking advantage of only Euro-centric or American-centric views on humanity.¹⁰⁾ Rorty's definition of ethnocentrism may lead to the danger of supporting one particular racial or ethnic and gender identity, and I regard Rorty's viewpoint as insufficient to provide a more fruitful and useful springboard for critical conversation among different racial or ethnic groups.

Richard Rorty demonstrates confidence in western civilization, stating that "even if our civilization is destroyed, even if all memory of our political or intellectual or artistic community is erased, the race is fated to recapture the virtues and the insights and the achievements which were the glory of that community."¹¹⁾ This is an extraordinary claim, even an arrogant one for those who don't fully share the western democratic liberalism. Civilization is an outcome of human exchange on a large scale, and it involves increasing cultural complexity. Cultural exchange within and between civilizations is very powerful and extensive, and it involves sharing traditions that are ingrained in language, custom, environment, and other factors that fairly shape culture. Through the process of cultural evolution, the human in one area accumulates myriad modes of culture. Keeping this in mind, each ethnic group stores up different modes of culture due to distinct encounters with other cultures. When the argument of hegemony of western civilization is considered, it is not safe to say that more critical dialogues have been exchanged among different ethnic, racial, and cultural groups in Europe, and more recently in the North America than in any other regions of the world. I just would like to point out that Rorty's account of history is not overly rigorous, and I believe that there is room for people who do not wholeheartedly embrace what Rorty calls western liberal democratic civilization to engage in the critical conversation.

In the same vein, Richard Rorty fundamentally asserts that our experience is essentially linguistic; it is not one that corresponds to the pre-linguistic reality that primarily exists independent of the human. For him, it is not a worthwhile effort to seek truth and to find what the reality is as the educational end because it is not, in fact, relevant to one's experience. Rather, he thinks that the aim of education needs to be self-fulfillment, namely within a community, and the attempt to morally and intellectually grow by keeping in touch with tradition.¹²⁾ Rorty maintains that "we cannot be educated without finding out a lot about the descriptions of the world offered by our culture."¹³⁾

When considering the tradition and culture out of which one engages in critical thinking, it has been thought that one's "prejudice" is an obstacle to hinder a clear vision of truth and reality; but instead, Hans-Georg Gadamer, a hermeneutic philosopher, contributes a valid point that prejudices are indeed necessary to have mutual conversation within a community. Gadamer remarks that "preconceptions or prejudices are what make understanding possible in the first place."¹⁴⁾ Preconceptions and prejudices play an important role in Gadamer's hermeneutic understanding of social life. He thinks that these factors make it possible for people in the community to establish the relationship with past events in history. In this connection, the encounter of one's beliefs and biases with those of people outside the community creates new understanding of social reality by revising and modifying the self-consciousness of presupposition in one's ways of thinking.

For Hans-George Gadamer, understanding social life is the ontological condition of being. What he means is that interpreting human activities, beliefs, norms, and artifacts is a part of human activity fundamental to its existence, not just for enhancing the knowledge of social science. It is essential for him to understand the textual meanings of social practice that promote the discovery of deep meanings beyond texts. By doing so, people generate new meanings for social reality.

Similarly, Richard Rorty endorses Gadamer's position that prejudices comprise the structural framework for establishing a relationship with historical tradition. Like Gadamer, Rorty, as a matter of course, believes that "to share a language is to share a form of life that is, a certain minimal agreement on what is reasonable to do or say under various circumstances."¹⁵⁾ However, there is a significant difference between Gadamer and Rorty in terms of how people come to share the same language, beliefs and values. Gadamer clearly presupposes that "otherness" plays an important role in expanding the knowledge of one's community while Rorty embraces the seemingly ever-expanding community in which different intellectual properties and cultural products would be included if the expansion of the boundaries of the community occurs.¹⁶⁾ The blurred territories of the communities and weakened recognition of otherness can undermine the serious differences that exist in a society.

By contrast, Jürgen Harbermas' critical theory goes beyond the interpretation of social reality. Language, which is an interpreter of a certain discourse, carries domineering power over beliefs, norms, institutions, and relationships. Notably, Harbermas pays more attention to a system of creating the language that supports conceptual schemes in society. He states that "social actions can only be comprehended in an objective framework that is constituted conjointly by language, labor, and domination"¹⁷⁾ In short, social life is controlled by these factors of which participants are rarely aware, and Harbermas attempts to emancipate the people who are entrapped by a nearly invisible system of oppression.

While Gadamer's hermeneutics presupposes that human social actions have certain meanings, Harbermas' critical theory delves into the presupposition of social life and to investigate the understanding of existential being. It is little wonder that there are some social actions that cannot be rationally interpreted when interpreting social phenomena. It is logical to assume that the absurdity of those social actions can be understood at a deeper level as a social mechanism that meticulously promotes power struggle behind the scene. The truth of social reality is revealed when disagreement or dispute arises among the members of society, and the meaning of social reality is not congruent with the interpretation of people at that moment. I think that critical theory provides us with more means of coming to understand the solid concepts of the social reality through the process of argumentation.

Jürgen Harbermas thinks that interpretation is not the whole story of understanding social reality. He emphasizes that people should recognize the human capacity for self-reflection that has a positive impact on the understanding of social life. He claims that self-reflection leads observers to look back to the past in light of the present and with a view to the future, and that it brings about more meanings to their social action. There are no saturation points at which observers can give complete meanings to their behavior, because the present and future are arbitrary. The more they ruminate over their social action and the social institutions in which their behavior is directed, the more meanings they can make in regard to their social practice. When observers reflect upon structural forces that control their social action, they can gain an insight into the constraints of their life and possibly escape from oppression

embedded in cultural tradition.

I am inclined toward Harbermas' position rather than Gadamer's and Rorty's approach of recognizing social reality. Harbermas' position is more likely to open the possibility of expanding the observer's perspective on social practice and of validating strong foundations for critical analysis of social phenomena. Harbermas' critical theory focuses on the systems of maintaining stratified society behind description. Without considering that structural forces existing for subjugating certain classes and marginalized groups, the understanding of other social life and practice is partial and insufficient.

I think that the act of understanding other cultures is the modification of one's preconception about one's own value system. People who try to understand other cultures have to engage in seriously considering others' claims ingrained in a different culture and take a risk of being challenged. By doing so, they expose their prior understanding to scrutiny and are able to develop a stronger and more sound perspective.

Everybody has essential values and beliefs shaped by parents, relatives, and community, and it is undeniable that one starts with a specific point or value from which to engage in understanding and acknowledging the outer world. Richard Rorty supports the idea that language is not a medium bridging the difference between the self and the reality.¹⁸⁾ For him, one's fundamental and existential entity is situated in the surrounding social group. Since he privileges western liberal and democratic society over other societies, he assumes that only persons living in that kind of society can have initiative in engaging critical dialogue to expand and strengthen the community.

However, this approach is unilateral and shows somewhat an arrogant way of understanding other societies. I do not think that participation in such a critical dialogue is determined by birth, by genealogy, or by the community in which one was born. How Rorty defines the members of the community is ideological, but it implies racial and ethnic membership to participate in the community. I would strongly argue that persons who can identify with a peripheral position in regard to western democratic society can find such a space where they can project new ideas and new insights into the common sense of the community if they understand principles of liberal democracy. In contrast to persons who absorb into the core of culture where firm and well-established beliefs and values are strong, people on the periphery can question what is taken for granted and project different sets of ideas and knowledge that examine the strengths and weaknesses of the community once they are empowered. I firmly believe that participants in strengthening what Rorty calls solidarity are not necessarily persons who were originally born and grew up in the places where western liberal democratic ideas placed great emphasis on civic life. Above all, Cornel West is correct in explaining that:

Rorty's perspective creates new discursive space especially in the academy for those on the underside of history. Its explicit ethnocentrism — of which there is much to preserve and reject — solicits critiques from those victimized by the North Atlantic conversation which often excludes them and by the North societies which usually oppress them.¹⁹⁾

When Richard Rorty articulates the idea of solidarity in a community, I recognize a tension in it. The word "community" serves as a worthwhile expression to describe the boundaries between one group and another. Moreover, we are apt to use the word "community" when we want to refer to the limit of common interests, consensus, and local tradition. Of course, what we regard as community may have ambiguous boundaries; but when Rorty talks about solidarity, the term "community" highlights

characteristics in order to distinguish one from another. Solidarity, in fact, implies centripetal force that tries to find the common threads in the community; but at the same time it insinuates centrifugal force that excludes deviants from there.

John Dewey once implied that expanding the boundaries leads to the breakdown of the lines between race, class, and nationality:

The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity.²⁰⁾

It is of vital importance to be aware of both centripetal and centrifugal forces operating in the community when we seek solidarity, and a cleavage created by both forces is the space where we can insert critical and fruitful insights and conversation about differences. Race, gender, and class are the codes with which we can analyze the social phenomena. Richard Rorty tries to find disreputable themes across these boundaries, but his stance may undermine serious disputes in regard to these differences.

In conclusion, the deeper understanding of other cultures can be achieved if one has the ability to presumably take a position of others while maintaining his or her core values. One can make progress in understanding other values if one has a specific point from which he or she start to examine. As the result of serious examination of both one's own and others' beliefs, one may change what he or she held previously. It is extremely important to recognize the whole structure of controlling cultural values and beliefs, which are resilient and versatile, in another society by engaging in the dynamic comparison between one's own culture and others' culture.

Endnotes

- 1) Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 318.
- 2) Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 60.
- 3) Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 360.
- 4) Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in *From Modernism to Postmodernism. An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Cahoon (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 573–574.
- 5) Ibid., 575.
- 6) Ibid., 575.
- 7) Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 365.
- 8) Rene Vincente Arcilla, *For the Love of Perfection: Richard Rorty and Liberal Education*. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 85.
- 9) Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" 583.
- 10) Carol Nicholson, "Postmodernism, Feminism, and Education: The Need for Solidarity," *Educational Theory*, 39:3 (1989): 201.
- 11) Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" 583.
- 12) Richard Rorty, "Hermeneutics, General Studies, and Teaching." in *Classic and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Education*, ed. Steven M.Cahn. (New York, The McGraw Companies, 1997)., 528.
- 13) Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 365.
- 14) William Outwaite, "Hans-Georg Gadamer." in *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences*, ed. Quentin Skinner (New York; Cambridge University Press, 1985), 25.
- 15) Rorty, "Hermeneutics, General Studies, and Teaching." 528.
- 16) Richard J. Bernstein, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward: Richard Rorty on Liberal Democracy and Philosophy," *Political Theory*, 15 (4), 1987, 554–555.

- 17) Jurgen Habermas, "A Review of Gadamer's Truth and Method." in *Understanding and Social Inquiry*, ed. Fred R. Dallmayr and Thomas A. McCarthy (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 361.
- 18) Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 3–22.
- 19) Cornel West, "The Politics of American Neo-Pragmatism." in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, ed. John Rajchman and Cornel West (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 270.
- 20) John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*. (New York: The Free Press, 1916), 87.