

Postmodern Relativism and Richard Rorty's Humanistic Philosophy

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Abstract

Text analyzes the two main themes. Firstly, the treatise attempts at a philosophical analysis of the category-public space. It points out the dissension between the traditional and postmodern definition of this conception and the consequences resulting from these different attitudes. As far as the methodology is concerned, the study is based on French postmodern philosopher J F Lyotard, presenting the postmodern approach as a greater contribution. In postmodern public area we can meet two basic types of dissensions, while only the first of them can be solved by further grow of specialization and the expert like know.

The second part of the study discusses Richard Rorty's philosophy, influence of Rorty's ideas on solving some traditional philosophical topics, especially the question of relativism. Richard Rorty's untraditional, provocative and inspiring version of neo-pragmatism enables us to view all the theories created so far by human culture as a case with tools. The main motto of the article is the statement that if we take care of free and critical public space, the truth will take care of itself.

Keywords: Postmodernism; Relativism; Truth; Antidualism; Decoding; Representation; Fragmentation; Public space

Postmodern Public Space

Richard Rorty argued that philosophizing is the art of bringing ideas—in a dialogue with their possible meanings—to the twilight, the time when they lose the right to eternal applicability, when they are sinking like the sun. Summoning such twilight of ideas is the mission of the Western civilization. Those who philosophize are those who consider what we call the “reality” to be an interpretation game, in which you cannot distinguish once and for all between appearance and being, and where the “sense of reality” spreads like circles on the water surface, after we have thrown a stone. And like those circles, it also disappears. Thirdly, therefore, Rorty's humanistic philosophy shows us that none of us can hide from the knowledge that every fact is as leaky as human memory, and wastes away like the human body—after all, ideas are nothing without bodies, in which they have settled. Thus, according to Rorty, those who philosophize are those who are looking for ways to hijack this fluctuating existence and retain it in what Nietzsche called “good character”. I am firmly convinced that all three humanistic messages—the plurality of truths, hermeneutics of understanding, and anti-dualism—shape the sense that Richard McKay Rorty encoded into the word philosophy.

The whole generations of schoolchildren all over the world spoke about something that is now official: William Shakespeare is said to be boring, all-fashioned, untrustworthy, and even ridiculous. At least this is the opinion of a teachers' board appointed by the most important province of South Africa, Gautenberg. It suggested to erase from compulsory reading lists at all the state schools some of the playwright's works. They are said to have an unhappy ending very often, they do not express cultural diversity in a sufficient way, and they do not condemn racism and sex discrimination, all these principles being included in the South African constitution. The works in question included e. g. Julius Caesar, because it allegedly did not correspond to the equality between sexes. Other Shakespeare's plays—Antonius and Cleopatra and Taming of the Shrew—did not do well either. Both of them we labeled undemocratic, sexist and racist. Hamlet was marked off undesirable because the play lacks optimism and it is not encouraging enough. King Lear was considered as too havenless. According to the board, the play is also full of violence and despair, its plot is unlikely and ridiculous. All the same, some Shakespeare's plays managed to escape such judgment,

such as Romeo and Juliet, although it does not have a happy ending, Mackbeth and the Merchant of Venice. However, Shakespeare was not the only one to catch a Tatar. Gulliver's Travels were crossed out as well—for containing a sort of humor which is a far cry from what is close to South African mentality.

Let us take this seemingly funny story as a metaphor suggesting one of the significant problems of the present era. This problem can be expressed by the question: “What is the principle of the public area in postmodern society and how can it be measured?” What is the purpose of the public area functioning? Is it creating the mass loyalty or restoring the idea of the society as a whole, which none of us as an individual really has, into our versions of the world?

There are a lot of keen supporters of the first option nowadays. Many European intellectuals think that at present, an idea prevails in the West that none of the intellectual constructions has a universal acceptance. We often read warnings against the influence of such philosophers as J. F. Lyotard, G. Deleuze, J. Baudrillard or Richard Rorty. These thinkers preach an unacceptable thesis that is reducing the European civilization to one of many cultures. The history of the West is depleted, it resigns to the universal nature of Western thought, laws and institutions. Postmodernism is said to be relativistic, politically dangerous and morally irresponsible. The base of the approach is such a conception of public area which assumes a possibility to give definitive reasons for your options by grounding them in some undisputable evidence or universal system of rules, which must be acknowledged in itself by every sensible person. Such a conception of public area therefore looks for absolutely just view where our version of the world is not conditioned by anything, so we can see the truth or we can see the things as they are in reality.

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A different approach to understanding the conception of public area can be found with philosophers who are usually called postmodern [1]. The plot of the story offered to us by these authors in different varieties could be summarized as follows: Let us found the open society of the Western type on the assumption of fallibility of all its participants. The fallibility in private, political or economic decision-making means that every purposeful and intentional behavior has some consequences which have not been considered before [2]. Therefore, the sensibility of our conduct is not guaranteed by the perfect state of our theoretic ground, which is always imperfect. However, it can be brought about by institutions like free market, independent public opinion or effective public area—compelling us to a change, quick recognition and rectification of those unintended consequences of our decisions. Our sensibility is measured not only by finding a suitable solution, but also by our flexibility—that is how quickly we are able to react to the crisis of our initial ground caused by the fact that the society as a whole never reacts according to the assumption of the theoretical ground.

I would like to use the following example to illustrate as the case would stand if we described them by means of postmodern mode of speech. In his successful book *Sperm Wars*, an American zoologist Robin Baker describes the ability of sperms to attack the sperms from the previous copulation which fertilizes the ovulum. Baker came to the conclusion that human sperms—like male generative cells of a number of other animal species—not only can compete with each other. The sperms of one male also have a destructive effect on his “predecessors”. Individual species from dragon fly to chimpanzee have developed various methods to ensure that the last male’s sperms suppress other males’ sperms the female copulated with shortly ago in her organs. Baker expressed an assumption that men produce special “kamikaze” sperms exploding in close proximity of other individual’s sperms and destroying them by this. This feature, for the rest as everything in nature, must have had some cause. If we bring it to a close, Baker deduces from this that men are in their biological nature used to changing partners. Many colleagues do not agree with him and claim that in a woman’s organism, there are mechanisms checking the quality of the received sperms. Namely the quantity of waste is high and woman organs test the sperms carefully.

In public area of postmodern society, we solve problems of two kinds. Firstly, there are problems that can be solved by further growth of specialized knowledge. The dispute whether men produce “kamikaze” sperms or not can be untwined by increasing the disputants’ competence. R. Baker and his colleagues can then settle their argument e. g. by more careful observation, more complete documentation of the problem, more thoughtful generalization of the facts, broadening the comparative sample, enforcing a miniature camera, using a revolutionary scientific method, etc. Similar situation concerns the questions—whether organized criminal activity grows, whether the inflation increases or decreases, whether T-neutrinos exist, whether the influx of foreign investment rises or falls, whether the drug abuse among teenagers grows—and so on. Secondly, in the public area, we meet problems that cannot be solved by further growth of specialized knowledge. Since 1996, the inhabitants of Iceland, a small island in the north part of the Atlantic, have unwillingly become involved in a unique and controversial experiment. The Iceland’s government sold the genetic information and lines of descent of all the Icelanders to the commercial firm Decode Genetics, which will use this material to try to disclose the genetic ground of the inherited diseases and prepare new procedures to cure them. The government in Reykjavik was offered by the firm to be paid 200 million dollars in the course of the next 5 years for the overall information about DNA, inheritance carrier.

The Island’s population, whose language belongs to the Germanic branch of the Indo-European family, is regarded as one of the most homogenous populations in the world. Since the 9th century when the Vikings’ fleet from Norway landed on the island, its genetic ground changed as late as 100 years later—at that time several hundred Scotsmen and Irishmen settled on the island. Settlement records, church registers, regular census and even carefully kept lines of descent cannot be compared to anything else in the world. The Islanders collect their long ago deceased ancestors as others collect stamps. The transaction between the government and the Decode Genetics arouses a number of questions. Besides the ethical questions concerning commercial use of genetic heritage of a nation, there are issues of the privacy and agreement of the individuals, their rights against the state, etc. According to Thomas Zoega, the chairman of the ethical board of the Iceland’s Medical Association, the government took an illegal action by selling sensitive personal data without the approval of the people concerned. Doctor Kari Stefansson, a charismatic founder and boss of the Decode Genetics, avows that he has bought a treasury of genetic information. He is absolutely confident that accessing the information will signify revolution not only on Iceland, but all over the world. The above stated questions, similar to the questions—whether we should reconcile to overwriting DNA with plant and animal species, whether education system should be considered private or public property, whether globalization brings about economic growth and well-being or ecologic degradation, what is progress or whether the existing abortion law should be made more strict—cannot be answered by further growth of the specialized knowledge, referring to universal truths or a more complete enumeration of facts.

These questions can only be resolved by uncovering hidden moral, historical and value prerequisites of the stories in which these issues are assessed and evaluated. A French postmodernist J. F. Lyotard offers us the following methodologist approach. He shows that each perception not only includes imperfection, but that this separation, this selection is absolutely essential for our ability to perceive [3]. To put something on the map means to make something else—the background, outside, against the surrounding—invisible in a way, to force out other structure into the latency state or oblivion [4]. Every problem, theory or event attracting our attention, offers us something or brings a wide choice of new opportunities, therefore it is a visible shape thanks to the power of separation. However, in the end the background overpowers the shape, transfigures it by incorporating it into the co-existence with the rest of the world and our preceding experience. Let us use Lyotard’s term for the second type of the questions appearing in public area and let us call them the background questions. What we mean is the fact that e. g. the question of cloning men or interfering in human DNA for medical purposes, will certainly have different background for those who live their lives in the creation story and for those of us who believe in evolution.

In the background of these two stories there are two fascinating metaphors with their own poetics, the gracious God the Creator versus a selfish gene, which contradict each other. Public area has its tension because those great metaphors crash all the time while solving various topics, their dispute making us better people and increasing the quality of our decision-making, and making it more legitimate. The questions whose background is created by those great metaphors cannot be solved by a more professional argumentation, the expert’s impersonal jargon, or accumulation of universal truths. Postmodern public area emphasizes the second type of the questions, making the dispute of those great metaphors more dramatic. Thanks to the conflicts they invoke, these metaphors open up the questions in the background for

us, whose charming power we do not realize in the whirl of everyday life. A process called globalization entangles postmodern public area in unsolvable antinomy. It was I. Kant who gave the status of philosophical term to the word antinomy. He denoted it as insolvable issues inherently connected with the existence of mankind. The questions like—Does the world have any beginning or is it infinite? Is it complex or simple? Is everything in its rightful or accidental?—can never be answered in a definitive way, because both thesis and antithesis are acceptable. It only depends on how we envisage the question. According to Kant, a liberal state has its own role which cannot be replaced by anything else. All the time it must guard its citizens against the fanaticism of the searchers for the definitive solutions, who are not able to bear the fact that the situation of mankind is very problematic. Thus the promise of “final solution” is the archetype and the largest intellectual temptation of modern style of life and thinking.

Richard Rorty and Overcoming the Tradition

A lot of people think that the philosophers tell you what is real and what is nothing but an illusion. As if the philosophers were those who could decide that e.g. the science is right and the religion is wrong. In my opinion, such ideas about the mission of philosophy are misguided. The philosophers have not made a single discovery so far, something like e.g. the astronomers discovering a new planet or the entomologists a new kind of insect, nor have they achieved anything yet, in the sense of the mathematical proof of theorem or the juridical proof of the validity of a document. Therefore we should stop feeling concerned for the purity of our discipline and dramatizing our status. Richard McKay Rorty is one of the most inspiring philosophers of the second half of the 20th century. For the last thirty years, Rorty has created very original philosophical stories whose echo long ago fascinated the readers on the European continent as well. Richard Rorty (together with D. Davidson) is one of the most discussed contemporary American philosophers within the European philosophical discourse. On 8th June 2007, Richard McKay Rorty died at the age of seventy-five in Palo Alto in the state of California. Rorty was an inspiration for many others. Harold Bloom, a brilliant literary critic, considered Rorty even during his life to be a philosopher who tried to identify the reasons for the decline of his own discipline, using irony and dispassionate point of view. In *The New York Times* of 11th June, Russell A. Berman, Rorty's boss of many years' standing and the head of the Department of Comparative Literature at the university of Stanford, characterized Rorty's lifelong efforts as an attempt to liberate us from the limits of analytical philosophy and focus our attention to the way we as individuals, states or humankind as a whole, form a political community. Jurgen Habermas stated that for him, Richard Rorty was a permanent source of subtle and very sophisticated arguments, who, at the same time, never forgot that philosophy must not ignore the problems of everyday life. Rorty was a personality who keeps bringing inspiring views and formulations of philosophical problems. For Rorty's irony nothing was sacred.

In European philosophical discourse, Richard Rorty (together with D. Davidson), is one of the most discussed contemporary American philosophers. Firstly, it is because in many respects, his style of writing reminds us of essay writing, conceived as original meditation on significant cultural topics. Rorty's essayistic baggage include irony, metaphors, plurality of stories, doubts on the meaning of looking for the principles, anti-philosophical conception of philosophy, etc. It is Rorty's style of writing, together with extensive knowledge of facts originating from his insight into the history of philosophy and contemporary philosophical thinking that makes him attractive and easy to understand even for readers without professional philosophical

background. The second reason why Rorty is so popular not only in the Czech Republic, but also in other European countries is the fact that he, as one of few American philosophers, pays attention to Continental philosophy [5]. Two philosophers (Wittgenstein and Heidegger) out of the three Rorty considers the most important philosophers of the 20th century, are Continental counterparts of Rorty's great hero J. Dewey. However, we must not forget Rorty's interpretations of so called postmodern philosophy, that is Derrida, Foucault or Lyotard [6].

In this context, I would like to point out that Rorty sometimes professed himself to be a postmodernist. “Sometimes,” Rorty writes, “I profess myself to be a postmodernist, as far as my opinions on the truth and rationality presented through pragmatism are concerned [7].” For example, on pages 41-44 in the above mentioned text, Rorty uses the term—we postmodernists, or the philosophers like me, classified as postmodernists—nine times. “I,” Rorty writes, “interpret the difference between the Enlightenment rationalist and us postmodernists in the following way. For the rationalists, the Reason has the authority, because the Reality, the real state of thing, has the authority. The reality is worthy of respect and the Reason is the ability which can bring us to the contact with the Reality. For us postmodernists, on the other hand, the reason is viewed in dialogic form. Therefore, we handle it only as a different term for—the willingness to discuss various subjects, listen to the other part, the effort to reach a spontaneous agreement. We do not see the reason as the term for the ability to come to understanding the inner nature of scientific or moral Reality through phenomena. For us, to be rational simply means to be capable of a dialogue, not to be obedient.”

In the last decade, there was an apparent move with respect to study and role of Rorty's philosophy within the context of the 20th century. A number of monographs mapping Rorty's work from different points of view as well as at different levels of analysis depth bear testimony to this. Hence, the range is very varied. From monographs that are simply an introduction of the topic—(R. Rumania: *On Rorty*, Wadsworth 2000, Ch. Guignon, D. Hiley: *Richard Rorty*, Cambridge University Press 2003), to monographs offering much deeper analysis of the work itself, its context and relations—(A. Malachowski: *Richard Rorty*, Princeton University Press 2002, J. Pettegrew: *A Pragmatist's Progress? Richard Rorty and American Intellectual History*, Rowman 2000, M. Festenstein, S. Thompson: *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2001), and finally the publications expressing the opponents' critical view of Rorty's philosophy—(Brandom R: *Rorty and His Critics*, Oxford: Blackwell 2000, HJ Saatkamp: *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*, Vanderbilt University Press 1995).

In opposition to the prevailing trend to present Rorty as a philosopher belonging to the main stream of American philosophy, it is necessary to point out a wider context of forming Rorty's philosophy, mainly his (even though considerably unconventional) anchorage in the ideas of J. J. Dewey's pragmatism he retold. It is precisely the detailed analysis of the beginnings of his carrier that shows that classifying him as belonging to the “group” of analytic tradition is, in view of the concept, considerably premature. Some authors (C. West: *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, Macmillan Press 1989, C. G. Prado: *The Limits of Pragmatism*, Humanities Press International 1987, D. Vaden House: *Without God or His Doubles*, New York 1994) refer to this very aspect of forming Rorty's writings.

In his very first published essay *Pragmatism, Categories and Language*, Rorty states that pragmatism becomes respected again, even if for many philosophers grown from logical positivism it stays obsolete.

In the period of 1961-1972, when he worked in Chicago and Yale, at the time when he was influenced by R. McKeona and then by P. Weisse, Rorty wrote texts that bring many commentators to the conclusion that he is fully absorbed in the problems of analytical philosophy, (the issues of the relationship between mind and body, reductionism, etc. see: R. Rorty: *The limits of Reductionism*, in: *Experience and the God, I Lied*, University of Illinois Press 1961), however, what bears better testimony to Rorty's ideas and the subjects he was deeply interested in are the books that he was studying at that time, which he later reviewed. These include the titles showing his interest in pragmatism again. Among others, they are the following ones—J. Blewett: *J. Dewey-His Thought and Influence*, E. Moor: *American Pragmatism* etc. Precisely this retrospective makes it possible to evaluate seriously with the benefit of hindsight Rorty's introduction from Linguistic Turn, in which he clearly shows his liking for Heidegger's anti-Platonism and late Wittgenstein, and he clearly shows his distance from analytical philosophy. Rorty's so called analytical period distinctly manifests his sensitivity towards historical context of philosophical problems, absence of clearly defined universal method of solution, considerable inclination for the classics of American pragmatism as well as interest in meta-philosophical issues. Hence the features that are at obvious variance with analytical tradition. However, in spite of the above mentioned arguments for the mainstream, in the 1960s, Rorty was an analytical philosopher.

Obvious sign and, at the same time, clear manifestation of Rorty's leaning towards meta-philosophical problems is his essay from 1972 *The World Well Lost*, which he incorporated in his book *Consequences of Pragmatism* as the first chapter ten years later. Hence, this essay was written earlier than Rorty's cult work called *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* from 1979. Rorty's key study is clearly influenced by J. Dewey's pragmatism. The influence recognizable by the form as well as the content, but mainly by the style, which then becomes typical of Rorty. After 1972 J. Dewey becomes central source of inspiration for Rorty's writings. In his essay *Overcoming the Tradition: Dewey and Heidegger* from 1974, he characterizes both of them as two great characters in the story of overcoming Western philosophical tradition. The last of the fragments of the mosaic is the considerably controversial essay *Experience and Nature* from 1975, in which Rorty tries to retell Dewey's instrumentalism in a very original way. In his interpretation, the matter is not only accurate depiction of the things as they are in reality, but also looking for ways to liberate oneself from traditional philosophical dichotomies (essence-phenomenon, fact-value, etc.).

The fact that all the above mentioned studies were published even before *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* suggests that Rorty's roots in originally interpreted pragmatism are necessarily reflected in his other works which are often taken separately, without the link to this period of his work. However, only a comprehensive analysis will make it possible to examine the relations through which this trend is manifested in various forms in the consequent Rorty's works.

The very titles of some of Rorty's essays (*Etics without principles*, *World without substances and essences*, *Pragmatism is political through and through*, *The truth without corresponding to the [8]*), show Rorty's ability to grasp so called traditional philosophical problems in a provocative way, to leave the established stereotypes and let oneself carry away by a stream of arguments that do not end in any postulates. Such Rorty's ideas result in the fact that even the characters well preserved by carefully watched interpretations—Plato, Spinoza, Nietzsche etc. suddenly appear in new, surprising light, inviting us to study the history of philosophy and to contemplate how the arguments and metaphors of geniuses of philosophy influenced our contemporary views of ourselves. Thus Rorty releases great names of

philosophers departed long ago into the circulation of philosophical conversation as abbreviations referring to certain argumentation procedures, ways of asking questions, etc. Hence, what is the reason why Rorty, a typical New York intellectual sparkling with irony, now an elderly white-haired man (born in 1931) who optimistically believes in liberal and tolerant society is so unnerving and provoking? Probably mainly because he considers philosophy viewed as academic discipline in the traditional sense to be a hollow and long ago outdated game. The philosophers should finally stop looking for the truth, as they have no special knowledge, methods or ways enabling them to get insight into the significant issues of human existence. Through his requirement to finish with the professionalization and academism of philosophy, for which he is still reproached and which was considered to be a betrayal, Rorty came with a new view of the very existence of philosophy in contemporary world.

Richard Rorty on Relativism

According to Rorty, what connects philosophers who seem so different from each other, such as Nietzsche, Derrida and Foucault on one hand and Dewey, Putnam or Davidson on the other hand, is their—anti-dualisms. They are authors who want to replace the image of the world constructed on the basis of binary oppositions (essence-phenomenon, subjective-objective, fact-value etc.), which was already incorporated into the fundamentals of the European cultural tradition by the ancient Greeks. There are many slogans and mottoes, Rorty points out, expressing this effort, this anti-essentialism. These slogans include e. g.—everything is a construct of the society or the awareness of anything is the matter of linguistics. Thus anti-dualism is present in e. g.—pragmatism, deconstruction, holism, postmodernism etc. [9]. Because of pure patriotism (great heroes in the plots of Rorty's stories are W. James and J. Dewey), Rorty preferred the term pragmatism to characterize his version of anti-dualism [10]. However, the two above mentioned ones as well as a number of other slogans want to express the same thing. Namely, that we cannot leave the language, that we do not have any direct description of reality which does not depend on the language. Rorty, inspired by Wilfrid Sellars characterizes this attitude as—psychological nominalism [11].

Anti-dualists persist on such description of sensory perception, thinking and language, which try to liberate from the difference between the essence and the phenomenon. I would like to point out that this opposition is based on the possibility to distinguish the things as they are as the opposite, when we are describing them in view of some purpose. The background of this idea is the predisposition that there is an inner essence X, a core of some kind, or the very character of X, which we can put in the opposition to the edge or the periphery X, which is constituted by the fact that X can be found in relation to other parts of the reality. Rorty calls the effort to escape from this dichotomy—anti-essentialism. Hence, Rorty (and not only in this passage), consistently takes an opinion that there is no description of what X really is, which would not be connected to human need, conscience and language.

Rorty proves what things would be like if we tried to describe them through anti-essentialism speech using the example of number seventeen. If you ask what is the essence of number 17 then, what is this number in this very essence, you are expected to be able to offer such description of number 17, that will be qualitatively different from the following descriptions. Smaller than 22, bigger than 8, the total of 6 plus 11, square root of 289, the difference between 1,678,922 and 1,678,905, square power of 4,123,105 etc. The basic characteristics of the above mentioned anti-essentialistic approach to the descriptions

of number 17 is the fact that none of them is not a more adequate representation of what is number seventeen in reality than the other descriptions. None of them captures something like "inner essence" of number 17. The choice between them is the matter of deciding, which of the descriptions is a better tool in view of the purpose we have in mind in the particular case.

It is really difficult to be an essentialist in case of number 17. However, Rorty suggests that it is equally difficult to be an essentialist in case of—tables, values, the truth, stars, electrons, human beings, academic disciplines, social institutions, etc. He states that there is nothing we could learn even in these cases (similarly like in the case of number seventeen), apart from the network of relationships of these objects of our interest towards other parts of the world. Thus all the statements about the objects are implicit or explicit expression of their relationship to one or more parts of the Universe. Therefore, Rorty's untraditional version of neo-pragmatism enables us to view all the theories created so far by human culture as a case with tools. That is e. g. to see physics as a literary genre or if you like, from another point of view, to see literature or philosophy as a way of doing research having the same basis as physics. Physics can be seen as a way to cope with some aspects of the Universe, philosophy or literature as ways that help us cope with other aspects of the Universe. One form of research results in statements, another in images, metaphors or stories.

What Rorty novel and inspiring response to the issue of relativism [12], offers, can be summarized as the following story. In the 1980s, the activists against the nuclear movement spread the following story: the Japanese monkeys belonging to *Makaka Fuscata* (*Macaca fuscata*) kind, living on the island of Kosima, were given sweet potatoes by research workers who studied them. However, the monkeys did not like the potatoes, because they were dirty. One of the females, whose name was Imo, learned to wash them in a nearby stream. Her mother as well as the monkeys she played with together with their families learned it from her. The cultural innovation was slowly beginning to spread. Between 1952 and 1958, 99 monkeys learned to wash their potatoes in the stream. One day in autumn of 1958, the hundredth monkey learned to wash the potatoes in the stream. And then something unexpected happened. The added value of the hundredth individual's awareness brought about the qualitative leap in the collective consciousness and the following day all the monkeys started to wash their potatoes. The research workers were surprised to find that the art of washing potatoes crossed the sea on the same day and spread also among the monkeys on other islands and on the mainland. The moral of this story can be summarized in the following way:

There is a certain threshold number of the individuals' awareness and when it is reached, a breakthrough in the collective consciousness occurs. Each of us can be the hundredth monkey. This story concerns a significant aspect of the postmodern public space—the importance attributed to the awareness of every individual by our educational and socializational institutions. The postmodern public space must be full of strong stories and all the individuals are trained to try hard to become the hundredth monkey, because it can be their awareness that can bring about the change of status quo. Anybody can be the hundredth monkey.

Conclusion

In public area of postmodern society we solve problems of two kinds. Firstly, there are problems that can be solved by further growth of specialized knowledge. Secondly, in public area we face problems that cannot be solved by further growth of specialized knowledge. Let

us use Lyotard's term for the second type of the questions appearing in public area, and let us call them the background questions. Antinomies highlighted by public area do not have a definite solution then, they can only be stabilized, i.e. be deprived of their potential destructiveness. Within the present paradigm, an attempt at their final solution would lead to unbearable cultural, political and social conflicts. Richard Rorty's untraditional version of neo-pragmatism enables us to view all the theories created so far by human culture as a case with tools. Physics and astronomy can be seen as a way to cope with some aspects of the Universe, philosophy, religion or literature as ways that help us cope with other aspects of the reality. One form of research results in statements, another in images, mathematical models or stories. The problem of relativism is a consequence of essentialism, the belief that the world, reality or universe, has some inner essence which cannot be grasped by a language. The contradictions of late industrial society cannot be overcome; nevertheless, the trust in positive results, their visualization in the public area of democratic societies is still the goal and the purpose of the Western cultural tradition and maybe the last legitimate source of the intellectuals' authority.

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