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A Brief Analysis of Rortian Postmodern Epistemology *vis a vis* Fullerian Social Epistemology

Jonathan Ree once described Richard Rorty as 'the only post-modernist anyone can understand, or the poor-person's Derrida' (Ree 1990: 37)

Richard Rorty, an American philosopher, whose early works are mainly on the philosophy of mind, critiqued the theory of knowledge and subsequently questioned Philosophy as a discipline with his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979). Rorty's writings mostly influenced the theory about the death of epistemology.

The term 'epistemology' is derived from the two Greek words 'episteme' meaning 'knowledge' and 'logos' meaning 'logic'. So epistemology means the theory of knowledge. The questions which are mainly discussed in this branch of philosophy are: What is knowledge? What kinds of knowledge are there? What are the sources of knowledge? What is the structure of knowledge? What are the limits of knowledge? etc...Epistemology is concerned with sceptical arguments about our claims to knowledge and justified belief. In the history of epistemology there are two principal schools of thought: the rationalist school and the empiricist school. The former school holds that exercise of reason is the route to knowledge, for example in mathematics and logic, where necessary truths are arrived at by rational inference. The latter school holds that route to knowledge is perception. The model of this school is any natural sciences where observation and experiment are the chief tools of enquiry.

The mark of modern epistemology is that- science is the mode of knowing universal truths of the world irrespective of the individual status of the knower.The emergence of science during Renaissance gave rise to questions about claims to knowledge and to the search for a method, which would determine truth. Rene Descartes (1586-1650), the father of modern philosophy, aimed at attaining philosophical truth by the use of reason. As a mathematician himself, Descartes wanted to solve the problems of epistemology by systematizing knowledge in geometrical form. This involved starting from axioms whose truth was clear and distinct. According to Descartes, the ideal method involves (1) not to accept as true anything of which

we have not a clear and distinct idea, (2) to analyze the problem, (3) to start from simple and certain thoughts and proceed from them to the more complex, and (4) to review the field so thoroughly that no considerations are omitted. Descartes employs the method of doubt to determine that of which we have clear and distinct ideas. *"Cogito ergo sum"* (I think therefore I am)is the result of Descartes' enquiry which is indubitable. With this indubitable proposition, he analyses the nature of the finite self whose existence is affirmed. The self is the sovereign cogniser which is the center of being. The self isconscious self-knowable, autonomous and coherent and the authority of meaning and truth. (Basu 2010: 18)

The postmodern thought is not very old, though temporally nothing can be said about the origin of the concept. The term 'postmodern' means different things in different contexts. Most often it refers to a range of philosophical views that share a suspicion of those grand foundationalist theories that arose from the Enlightenment and which hold that reason is capable of discovering universal truths. The centrality of postmodern thought lies in the critique of Enlightenment reason. The enlightenment reason implies that man is a rational being while reason is instrumental yet universal. This reason helps man to attain scientific knowledge which is true and certain. The knower of this knowledge is the sovereign subject and as the only rational agent man becomes the centre of all social reality. (Basu 2010: 21)Jean Francois Lyotard holds that postmodernism is generally characterized by suspicion of the 'metanarratives', including such things as Marxism, Hegelianism and Kantianism., which attempt to yield universal truths about the human condition discovered by the use of objective reason (Lyotard 1997:37). Postmodernism not only rejects epistemological and moral foundations, it also abandons the idea that rational reflection, whether utilized philosophically or in scientific contexts can yield reliable and stable truths.

Postmodernism appears to be so open a theory that not even its advocates can agree upon how to define it. Instead, for the purpose of the present paper let us concentrate on one aspect of it that is of special interest to philosophers and is central to the entire postmodernist movement. This aspect is stated most clearly by Stanley Grenz as :[Postmodernism] affirms that whatever we accept as truth and even the way we envision truth are dependent on the community in which we participate . . . There is no absolute truth: rather truth is relative to the community in which we participate. (Grenz 1995: 8). The Post-Enlightenment reason makes possible the attainment of true, certain and scientific knowledge. But the postmodernist school stresses the plural, fragmentary and heterogenous character of reality

and denies human thought the ability to arrive at any objective account of that reality. Postmodernist thinkers make a critique of the concepts of causality, truth, structure. Foucault holds that truth and power are linked. He claims that truth is merely what counts as true within a discourse. Postmodernists criticize the conception of the rational, sovereign conscious self of the modernist epistemology. It is said that the human subject does not have a unified consciousness but is structure by language. The project of Enlightenment has to be deconstructed and the autonomous epistemological and moral subject has to be de-centred (Basu 2010: 26).

It is often cited that Richard Rorty is the most prominent philosophical defender of postmodernism. Rorty's philosophy has a strong pragmatic bias and post structuralism and postmodernism can be considered as ultra-pragmatic philosophical styles. Rorty argues against the charge of relativism against pragmatic philosophy by arguing that no one really thinks 'that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps on any topic, is as good as every other'(Rorty 1982: 166).The issue only arises if one insists, as non-pragmatist philosophers do, that the notion of truth has to be grounded in some universal theory.

The postmodernists like Foucault and Baudrillard attacks modern theory for its totalizing and essentializingcharacter. They argue that there are no universal criteria to ground objective truths or universal values. From this perspective, theoretical discourse not seen as 'correct' or 'true', but as 'efficacious' in producing positive effects.In accordance with this path, postmodernists have attacked theory per se. Rorty attacked both metatheory -- reflection on the status oftheory itself which often is concerned with epistemological and normative justification of claimsand values -- and theory, which he critiques in three related ways that emerge through his ownarticulation of the end of philosophy thesis. Rigorously trained in analytic philosophy, Rorty abandoned the professional dogma that philosophy was the queen of the sciences or the universal arbiter of values whose task was to provide foundations for truth and value claims. Philosophy has no special knowledge or truth claims because it, like any other cultural phenomenon, is a thoroughly linguistic phenomenon. Along with the rejection of the Cartesian self and its power of reason, postmodernism makes a fundamental shift in the understanding of language. The traditional view of linguistic philosophy (Gottleib Frege and Bertrand Russell) holds that meaning could be understood as a function of atomistic linguistic elements whose logical relations – syntax – form sentences which express truth-functional propositional content. Meaning is determined by the internal logical structure

of those linguistic elements and the relation between those elements and the world. The linguistics and structuralist philosophers holds that meaning should not be understood in one sentence at atime overlooking the relation of the entirety of the linguistic structure of which the sentence is just a part. Thus sentences and words gain semantic significance by virtue of their differential operation relative in tandem with social and political forces that structure the uses of language, communication and thought. He also holds that language only provides descriptions of the world which is historical and contingent in nature. The so-called universal truths are merely local and time bound perspectives and are marks for a 'real' that cannot be known.

Rorty argues that each person interprets reality in accordance with his own subjective condition. But he does not argue for an individualistic free-for-all notion of truth. He emphasizes the social influence upon the individual and his beliefs. Truth, for Rorty, is an intersubjective agreement among the members of a community. That intersubjective agreement permits the members of the community to speak a common language and establish a commonly accepted reality. Rorty holds that the end of any enquiry does not mean the discovery of absolute truth but the formulation of beliefs which makes the community much stronger. He argues that once the notion of objective truth is abandoned, one must choose between a self-defeating relativism and ethnocentrism, neither of which can be justified in a manner that is not circular. He responds that one 'should grasp the ethnocentric horn of the dilemma' and 'privilege our own group'. As far as any new beliefs that we are to consider, they must at least roughly cohere with those already held by the community, or, as Rorty puts the point, 'We want to be able . . . to justify ourselves to our earlier selves. This preference is not built into us by human nature. It is just the way we live now'.

Rorty is unclear concerning the nature of a community. It may include not only a group of existing people but also historical or fictional characters. He also speaks of 'the community of the liberal intellectuals of the secular modern West'. The ideal of that community is the promotion of unforced general agreement among its members with tolerance of disagreement. The solidarity of such a community would lie in both the liberal beliefs that its members generally hold in common and in its tolerant attitude.Thus Rorty first attacks on the idea that theory can provide objective foundations for knowledge and ethics. And the so called universal truths are merely local, time bound perspectives and are masked as real which cannot be known.

Secondly, if there are no universal truths, there are no neutral language to arbitrate competing claims or descriptions. As theory has no power to adjudicate competing descriptions, a theory transforms into meta-theory once the conditions of argumentations themselves become sufficiently problematic. Hence, Rorty denies that the theorist can properly criticize, argue, evaluate, or even 'deconstruct', since there is no fulcrum from which to push one claim as 'right', 'correct', or 'better' than another. We adopt values and ideologies on emotive rather than rational grounds. Every vocabulary is incommensurable with another and there is no final vocabulary with which one can arbitrate normative and epistemological claims. Thus, for Rorty: "The method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behaviour which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it ... This sort of philosophy does not work piece by piece, analyzing concept after concept, or testing thesis after thesis. Rather it works holistically and pragmatically. It says things like try thinking of it this way– or more specifically, try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possibly interesting questions. It does not pretend to have a better candidate for doing the same old things which we did when we spoke in the old way ... Conforming to my own precepts, I am not going to offer arguments against the vocabulary I want to replace. Instead, I am going to try to make the vocabulary I favour look more attractive by showing how itmay be used to describe a variety of topics"(Rorty 1989: 9).

From this step follows the Rorty's third attack on theory. The 'theorist' should abandon all attempts to radically criticize social institutions. First, as we have seen, 'critique' has no force for Rorty and, ultimately, one description is as good as any other. But 'theory' on this level also means for Rorty the attempt, classically inscribed in Plato's Republic, to merge public and private concerns, to unite the private quest for perfection with social justice. Here, Rorty is guided by the assumption that tradition and convention are far more powerful forces than reason in the social construction of life, in holding the 'social glue' together. Rorty holds that philosophical views on topics such as the nature of the self or the meaning of the good life are as irrelevant to politics as are arguments about the existence of God. He wants to revive liberal values without feeling the need to defend them on a philosophical level: "What is needed is a sort of intellectual analogue of civic virtue -- tolerance, irony, and a willingness to let spheres of culture flourish without worrying too much about their common ground, their Unification, the intrinsic ideals they suggest, or what picture of man they presuppose" (Rorty 1989: 168).

Since philosophy can provide no shared or viable foundation for a political concept of justice, it should be abandoned, replaced with historical narratives and poetic descriptions. Ultimately, Rorty's goal is to redescribe modern culture and the vocabulary of Enlightenment rationalism in strongly historicist and pragmatist terms. Rorty claims not only that philosophy provides no foundation for politics, it plays no political role whatsoever. He further holds that philosophy has no public or political role. Reviving the classic liberal distinction between the public and private, Rorty claims philosophy should be reserved for private life, where it can be ironic at best, while leaving political and moral traditions to govern public life.

Rorty believes that epistemology is the attempt to legitimate a philosophical domain which we no longer maintain. Rorty combines Sellars and Quine in order to challenge the notion that epistemology is at the core of philosophy. He argues that neither of the philosophers took their own arguments to the logical limit and so both of them attacked the same distinction: Quine from the position of anti-linguisticism (mental entities are replaced by notions of meaning or structure) and Sellars from the attack on the myth of the given. Rorty is not denying that there are any uses at all of notions like truth, knowledge or objectivity. His point is that these notions always demonstrate particular features of their varying contexts of application. When we abstract from these contexts, we are left with hypostatisations, which are incapable of providing us with any guide to action at all. Thus, we do not have a concept of objective reality that can be invoked to explain the success of some set of norms of warrant, or to justify some set of standards over another.

Rorty's argument that epistemology has no future, met with several replies defending the honour of epistemology using the same old arguments that are being used for the last hundred years or so. But defending epistemology as a discipline arguing that its glorious past is its future is actually accepting the death of the discipline. Almost at the same time when Rorty was denying the relevance of epistemology, Steve Fuller, tried to provide at least one aspect of the future ofepistemology. Steve Fuller's *Social Epistemology* (1988) gives a detailed argument for a social epistemology. Before discussing Fuller's version of the emerging field, let'sbriefly outline the contours of social epistemology.

Social epistemology is the study of the social dimensions of knowledge or information. There is little consensus, however, on what the term 'knowledge' comprehends, what is the scope of the "social", or what the style or purpose of the study should be.(Goldman 2006).

Social epistemology is the philosophical discipline exploring the ways and the extent to which knowledge and epistemic practices are social. As a term, social epistemology often

refers to a quite specific field of discourse which —dates from the 1980ies, is primarily a philosophical enterprise, and has its roots in Anglo-American epistemology, in feminist theory, as well as in the philosophy of science. And indeed the ways and the extent to which knowledge is social have been addressed within philosophy as well as within other disciplines in numerous ways. Throughout the history of philosophical thought philosophers have addressed different social dimensions of knowledge. In various articles and introductions to social epistemology reference is given to a diversity of predecessors. Plato's explorations of how laypersons can determine expertise in *Charmides* is often used as one of the earliest examples (Goldman 2006).

The label under which the social nature of knowledge has been primarily discussed within Western philosophy is testimony. Testimony refers to the assertion of a declarative sentence by a speaker to a hearer or to an audience (Adler 2006) and it is considered to be the fourth route to knowledge besides memory, perception and inference. One of the main epistemological questions around testimony concerns the status of knowledge acquired through testimony: Does knowledge received through the words of others have a different quality than knowledge obtained via one's own cognitive resources, i.e. perception, memory or inference? Given that many philosophers nowadays acknowledge that we acquire far more knowledge through testimony than through our own resources, indeed that some of them even state that (almost) everything we know depends on interaction with others, it might come as a surprise that knowledge obtained from testimony has long been considered to be of secondary status. Knowledge received from testimony was considered to be less valuable, less reliable than knowledge obtained from memory, perception or inference. Indeed, sometimes knowledge obtained via testimony was denied the status of knowledge altogether. The reason for this depreciation of testimony is often seen in the epistemic individualism, i.e. in an individualistic bias within Western philosophy.

Beyond classical epistemology other predecessors of social epistemology exist within philosophy. Martin Kusch has argued that if one understands social epistemology broadly as —[...] all systematic reflection on the social dimension or nature of cognitive achievements such as knowledge, true belief, justified belief, understanding, or wisdom, then any contributions from Marxism, Critical Theory or Hermeneutics also qualify as socio-epistemological.

Considerable overlap exists between social epistemology and many feminist epistemologies. Indeed, according to Grasswick —the significant body of work of feminist social epistemologists has provided key theoretical resources for understanding the social

dimensions of knowing (Grasswick 2006: 1). She argues that feminist epistemologists have been particularly important in revealing and criticizing the individualism of contemporary (analytic) philosophy and in developing alternative models of knowers as social beings that are situated in different contexts (Code 1991, Code 2001, Harding 1991), that are in interaction with each other (Alcoff 2001, Scheman 2001) and that depend on the communities they are part of (Longino 2002, Nelson 1993). Moreover, several feminist epistemologists have developed social models of knowledge and objectivity (Haraway 1996, Harding 2003, Longino 2002, and stressed the relationship between epistemology and ethics (Fricker 1998, Fricker 2007).

Many social epistemologists have also acknowledged the relevance of different sociological and historical approaches for understanding the ways in which knowledge is social. Within sociology, particular emphasis has been placed on the sociology of knowledge (Mannheim 1936), the sociology of science (Merton 1973), the sociology of scientific knowledge (Barnes and Bloor 1982), as well as different approaches within the field of Science and Technology Studies, such as the works of Bruno Latour (Latour and Woolgar 1986). Among the historical approaches, some of the most received works are Thomas Kuhn's ―The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Kuhn 1962/1970); Michel Foucault's analyses on the relationship between knowledge and power (Foucault 1970, Foucault 1971, Foucault 1980), and finally the works that fall under the label of historical epistemology, most notably the works of Ian Hacking (Hacking 1992, Hacking 2004).

Finally, different social epistemologists have proposed directions into which social epistemology should be heading. For example, Alvin Goldman, one of the most central figures in social epistemology, proposed a new perspective for the future of social epistemology in his *Knowledge in a Social World*(2009) which he labels systems-oriented social epistemology understood as a flexible form of epistemological consequentialism that evaluates social epistemic systems in terms of their impact on epistemic outcomes.

Steve Fuller's Social Epistemology:

Fuller holds"The fundamental question of the field of study I call social epistemology is: How should the pursuit of knowledge be organized, given that under normal circumstances knowledge is pursued by many human beings, each working on a more or less well defined body of knowledge and each equipped with roughly the same imperfect cognitive capacities, albeit with varying degrees of access to one another's activities? Without knowing anything else about the nature of social epistemology, you can already tell that it has a normative interest, namely, in arriving at a kind of optimal division of cognitive labour. In other words,

in words that only a Marxist or a positivist could truly love, the social epistemologist would like to be able to show how the products of our cognitive pursuits are affected by changing the social relations in which the knowledge producers stand to one another. As a result, the social epistemologist would be the ideal epistemic policy maker: if a certain kind of knowledge product is desired, then he could design a scheme for dividing up the labour that would likely (or efficiently) bring it about; or, if the society is already committed to a certain scheme for dividing up the cognitive labour, the social epistemologist could then indicate the knowledge products that are likely to flow from that scheme. I thus follow the lead of Plato's Republic and Francis Bacon's New Atlantis in conceiving of the 'epistemology' in social epistemology as having an interest in describing our cognitive pursuits primarily as a means of prescribing for them." (Fuller 1988: 3)

In his article in the 1987 'Synthese' special issue on social epistemology (Fuller 1987), Steve Fuller introduces the term, social epistemology, as the label for his account of the sociality of knowledge and science. In 1987 Fuller also founded a journal and a year later published a book *Social Epistemology* (Fuller 1988), in which he depicts his approach in greater length. From a theoretical and a less institutional or rather institutionalizing point of view an important contribution of Fuller consist in the identification of certain blind spots or shortcomings of many accounts of science within philosophy of science and epistemology as well as in the social studies of science (Fuller 2004, Fuller 2006, Fuller 1994). In particular, he has emphasized the neglect of the political, institutional and organizational, economic contexts of philosophical accounts of science and the lack of normative concerns in their sociological counterparts. Fuller further insists that, both the philosophers and the sociologists should take a more critical stance towards science instead of assuming that science has to be measured by its own standards and that it is in principle working just fine.

It is in the before mentioned special issue of the journal 'Synthese' where Steve Fuller offers a first sketch of his social epistemology. He considers its major question to be the following:
—How should the pursuit of knowledge be organized, given that under normal circumstances knowledge is pursued by many human beings, each working on a more or less well defined body of knowledge and each equipped with roughly the same imperfect cognitive capacities, albeit with varying degrees of access to one another's activities?(Fuller 1987: 145)

Fuller's social epistemology is normative and naturalist social epistemology and conceptualizes the social epistemologist as an —ideal epistemic policy maker (Fuller 1987: 145). His social epistemology is normative in that it aims at arriving at an optimal distribution of cognitive labor, an interest that he shares with many other social epistemologists, such as

Miriam Solomon (Solomon 2001), Philip Kitcher (Kitcher 1993) and Alvin Goldman (Goldman 2003). Moreover, the theory is also normative in the sense of changing the content of science by changing the social structure of science. Fuller asserts to be a naturalist by focusing on the normal contexts in which knowledge is produced. And since these contexts are mostly social contexts and not the Cartesian lonesome thinker, he concludes that his epistemology has to account for this sociality.

Fuller argues that while philosophers and sociologists of science might differ in whether it is methodology or interests that steer science, both camps seem to take for granted that science runs quite well either way (Fuller 1992: 392). That is not the case, Fuller announces and argues that there is a —[...] big difference between claiming that science works well enough to sustain itself and claiming that it works optimally toward a desired outcome (Fuller 1992: 394). Two interpretations of this quote are possible. Fuller may refer to the prospect of improving the efficiency of science. The other reading concerns the dependence of this evaluation on the desired outcomes. Let's start with how to improve efficiency. How could we ensure that science lives up to its full potential, that is does not merely function well enough, but well? In principle, Fuller argues that the best way to improve science is by applying scientific reasoning to the evaluation and subsequent improvement of scientific practice itself. More specifically, Fuller argues for an experimental analysis and correction of scientific practice in the spirit of Taylor's Scientific Management (Fuller 1992: 413). He argues that —[...] there is a pressing need to examine not merely how science works but whether science is working as well as it could, especially given the ever-changing and ever-more-important roles that science plays in society (Fuller 1992: 395). The first step in improving science according to Fuller has to consist in a decomposition of the different scientific tasks and sub-tasks instead of treating science as an —organic skill over which only the scientists themselves have complete authority (Fuller 1992: 414). The social epistemologist would be the external observer of science, who due to having analyzed scientific practices is in the best position to improve science by improving the conduction of individual subtasks and their distribution over multiple people. Since the social epistemologist has analyzed the minute tasks, he is in a better position than the scientists themselves to make science more efficient. Therefore, the social epistemologist revokes the scientists' authority of how science should best be conducted.

The second change that Fuller's social epistemology imposes on science does not refer to its practices, but to its goals. In contrast to many philosophers of science, Fuller argues for a science in which —[...] the —ends of science [...] are not given by science itself but by

something else to which science is held accountable (Fuller 1992: 395). Science should be more accountable to the public, which implies that science and the public need to get back into a dialogue. This means that on the one hand, the public needs to be made more scientifically literate (Fuller 1992: 396) and on the other hand, scientists need to be made more publicly accountable. While the former seems to evoke some form of science education, similar to the ―public understanding of scienceprogramme, the latter seems to refer to some 'personnel development measure' in which scientists are taught ―how to deal with people (Fuller 1992: 397).

After discussing Fullerian Social Epistemology which can be considered as a positive response in maintaining the honour of Epistemology, it can be concluded that Social epistemology as a new branch of epistemology is emerging. Various new issues are opening up which needs to be addressed. And as the field of Social Epistemology is relatively recent its problems and theories are still fresh and in rapid movement. A number of questions can be raised, whose answers and analysis can make a remarkable contribution for shaping the future of Social Epistemology.

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