

The Approach to Global Ethic of Richard Rorty and its Critique

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Introduction

First of all, let me state my concern regarding global ethics: I think that global poverty should be eliminated. However, based on my understanding there are two differences between what I think and what the major proponents of global justice do concerning this issue.

First, there is a difference of stance concerning evaluation or description. We can give two different negative evaluations or descriptions of people doing what is morally wrong. First, such persons are irrational. Second, such persons are heartless. I regard the former as a blame for their lack of understanding of the universal order of reason (i.e., the principle of justice) and the latter as a blame for their lack of sympathy for others' pain. I assume that major proponents of global justice prefer the former (or at least, that they would not prefer the latter). I, however, prefer the latter. The reason is that the latter is probably more effective than the former in changing our moral behavior.

Second, there is a difference in methodology relative to the fulfillment of global ethics. I do not necessarily adopt a causal approach to moral responsibility for world poverty as Thomas Pogge does. [1] In this paper, I try to show that we adequately have a moral motivation to help suffering people regardless of our moral responsibility.

These opinions did not evolve as my original perspectives. I have been influenced by Richard Rorty, a noted contemporary American philosopher. I think that his insistence is consistent with our ordinary intuition.

Rorty says that human solidarity as the ethical practice has the purpose of avoiding cruelty. [2] This idea is based on the fact of we generally prefer avoiding cruelty to seeking pleasure. He also asserts we can find human solidarity in the face of a *Summum Malum* as we unite against it. We live with others that have multiple bodies, values, and beliefs. That plurality of our society is the cognitive starting point of normative ethical theory. The purpose of this theory is to inquire into the way various people can coexist. We can interpret what Rorty says as, avoiding cruelty as the

Summum Malum is our common moral value or the useful way of coexist.

Rorty claims that cruelty includes not only physical pain but also mental pain or humiliation as he calls it. He mainly takes interest in humiliation [3], but physical pains caused by poverty are more important from a global ethics standpoint. There are two reasons for the above claim. First, physical pains caused by poverty are basic pains in the sense that they are unbearable to people endowed with normal physiological traits. Second, whether that pain can be reduced or not depends on our effort towards global solidarity. Moreover I strongly believe we should seriously face a problem for global ethic that was raised by Rorty. The problem, in short, is that of “distance”, i.e., the moral problem based on a distinction between proximate others and unknown others.

In this paper, I first attempt to clarify Rorty’s arguments on global ethics. Then, I suggest an approach to solving the problem of “distance.”

Rorty’s Provocation for Global Justice: What is the Problem?

According to Rorty, human solidarity has the purpose of avoiding cruelty. By the way, how is that achieved? Rorty says:

In my utopia, human solidarity would be seen not as a fact to be recognized by clearing away “prejudice” or burrowing down to previously hidden depths, but, rather, as a goal to be achieved. It is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people. [4]

It is clear, from above citation, that Rorty insists human solidarity (avoiding cruelty) come from sympathy to the pain of others. That is, his cognition is based upon the fact that many of us have sympathized with people’s suffering. For Rorty the sympathy for the pain of others is not a-priori moral principle based on human nature. Pragmatist Rorty refuses moral universalism that insists the existence of a-historical truth. The sympathy for the pain of others is not the universal fact but an empirical (or sociological) one. [5]

Therefore, our challenge, according to Rorty, is how we should enlarge our capacity to sympathize with the pain of others through what he calls “sentimental education.” Here, we should focus on the point that Rorty’s insistence that sympathy with proximate others is useful for solving this challenge. This is also clear from the following citation:

If one follows Baier's advice, one will see it as the moral educator's task not to answer the rational egoist's question "Why should I be moral?" but rather to answer much more frequently posed question "Why should I care about a stranger, a person who is no kin to me, a person whose habits I find disgusting?" The traditional answer to the latter question is "Because kinship and custom are morally irrelevant, irrelevant to the obligations imposed by the recognition of membership in same spices." This has never been very convincing, since it begs the question at issue: whether mere spices membership *is* in fact, a sufficient surrogate for closer kinship. ... A better sort of answer is the sort of long, sad, sentimental story that begins, – "Because she might become your daughter-in-law," or "Because her mother grieve for her." [6]

However, his suggestion is not merely a useful tool. It is also a provocation for theories of global justice.

What is Rorty's provocation? Let us start by referring to his question on moral dilemma in the following citation:

All of us would expect help if, pursued by the police, we asked our family to hide us. Most of us would extend such help even when we know our child or our parent to be guilty of a sordid crime. Many of us would be willing to perjure ourselves in order to supply such a child or parent with a false alibi. But if an innocent person is wrongly convicted as a result of our perjury, most of us will be torn by a conflict between loyalty and justice. ... Such a conflict will be felt, however, only to the extent to which we can identify with the innocent person whom we have harmed. If the person is a neighbor, the conflict will probably be intense. If a stranger, especially one of a different race class, or nation, it may be considerably weaker. [7]

What is the point of Rorty's question? The moral dilemma is not a question of justice concerning universal obligation or right, but that of "conflicting loyalties" between proximate others/groups and unknown others/groups. According to Rorty, the moral dilemma shows that "there has to be *some* sense in which he or she is "one of us," before we start to be tormented by the question of whether or not we did the right thing when we committed perjury." [8] And this "sense" becomes radical especially in some extreme case.

Our loyalty to such larger group will, however, weaken, or vanish altogether, when things get really tough. Then people whom we once thought of as like ourselves will be excluded. Sharing food with impoverished people down the street is natural and right normal times, but perhaps not in a famine, when doing so amounts to disloyalty to one's family. The tougher things get, the more ties of loyalty to those

near at hand tighten, and the more those to everyone else slacken. [9]

This insight certainly seems to fit our actual feeling. However, does it have theoretical validity? Rorty tries to argue against this doubt by means of inquiring into certain philosophical questions. First, Rorty asks if anything would be lost as a result of replacing the notion of justice with that of loyalty to a certain large group. “Moral philosophers who remain loyal to Kant are likely to think that a *lot* would be lost.” [10] Rorty however criticizes Kantian and agrees with Michael Walzer or Annette Baier. Kantian maintains that “justice springs from reason, and loyalty from sentiment,” and that “only reason can impose universal and unconditional moral obligations, and our obligation to be just is of this sort.” [11] On the other hand, Walzer “is wary of terms like “reason” and “universal moral obligation”.” [12] He criticizes Kantian’s intuition of morality that referring to the concepts of thin and thick morals, he says “morality is thick from the beginning ... it reveals itself thinly only on special occasions, when moral language is turned to special purposes.” [13] Concerning this point, Baier also maintains that “morality starts out not as obligation but as a relation of reciprocal trust among a closely knit group ... Obligations, as opposed to trust, enters the picture only when your loyalty to smaller group conflicts with your loyalty to a larger group.” [14]

Furthermore, for Rorty the requirement for conceptually turning from justice to larger loyalty also means turning question from “What are we?” to “Who are we?” According to Rorty, the moral universalism’s question of “What are we?” is synonymous with Kant’s question of “What is Man?”—These questions are “scientific or metaphysical.” [15] That is, “universalism presupposes that the discovery of traits shared by all human beings suffices to why, and perhaps how, all human beings should organize themselves into a cosmopolis.” [16] However, Rorty says that such question and idea are outdated in recent Western philosophy. “Ever since Darwin, philosophers have become increasingly suspicious of very idea of naturalness.” [17]

Therefore, Rorty insists, today’s valid question is “Who are we?”—The question is “political.” It is asked by people who want to create a community united by reciprocal trust; it consequently argues that “answers to the “who” questions are attempts to forge, or reforge, a moral identity.” [18]

The “Who are we?” question will probably appear as the question itself for rich liberals. For example, William James will respond to this question: “we are the inhabitants of a global cooperative commonwealth.” [19] Rorty, however, is skeptical of such moral universalism as James’s. Rorty says that James’s idea “could only have occurred to people who were lucky enough to have more material goods than they really needed.”: “Moral universalism is an invention of rich.” [20] Therefore, they (Liberals) can be said to have the material condition necessary for global redistribution. Yet it does not mean that they have the necessary moral capability. What does this mean?

Rorty says “if you cannot render assistance to people in need, your claim that they

form part of your moral community is empty.” [21] The implication is as follows: you will have sympathy with people in poverty. However, if you only do and that suffices, it does not mean there exist substantial solidarity between these people and you. Substantial solidarity can only be accomplished when you actually aid or do something for people in poverty.

Why can't we fulfill the demand for universal solidarity? According to Rorty, the reason is that the demand for moral universalism “is less *natural* than the demand to feed my children.” [22] Fulfilling the demand entails giving the priority to loyalty to unknown others compared with that to proximate others, that is, according to Rorty, the pressure of “*some sense*” which exists before moral judgment. According to Rorty, the sufficient condition of global ethic is to overcome the problem of “distance”. In the next section I consider how we can overcome its problem using David Hume's thoughts.

Return to Hume: How to overcome the Problem of “the distance”

In my idea, the reason Rorty finds the chance of solidarity in human feeling or the capacity for sympathy is because he found that David Hume's insight has affinity with pragmatism. Hume pointed out the partiality of our sympathy in the following way.

“The sentiments of others have little influence, when far remov'd [removed] from us, and require the relation of contiguity, to make them communicate themselves entirely. The relations of blood, being a species of causation, may sometimes contribute to the same effect; as also acquaintance, which operates in the same manner with education and custom.” [23]

Since Rorty also took the partiality of our sympathy for granted, he says: “... our sense of solidarity is strongest when those with whom solidarity is expressed are thought of as “one of us,” where “us” means something smaller and more local than human race.” [24] Furthermore, he emphasized the importance of a “detailed description” of the other's life as the most useful measure, and I assume that he probably tried to fulfill the idea of “justice as extended loyalty” through extension of “our” range. However, Hume regarded the drawback from the partiality of our sympathy more seriously than Rorty does.

How did Hume try to overcome the drawback? He suggests we use our “reason” which is “a general calm determination of the passion.”[25] In other words, we should “fix on some *steady* and *general* points of view; and always, in our thoughts, place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation.” [26] Thus, according to Hume, “the problem of distance” could be solved by “our calm judgments concerning

the characters of man.” [27] The moral sentiment is changed into a calm passion, namely, “reflexion” by reference to judgment. And “correcting the appearance by reflexion, [we can] arrive at a more constant and establish’d [established] judgment.” [28] In other words, “tho’ [though] sympathy be much fainter than our concern for ourselves, and a sympathy with persons remote from us much fainter than that with persons near and contiguous,” we can “neglect all these differences in our calm judgments.” [29]

However, as Christopher Voparil precisely points out, Hume’s suggestion weakens motivation to action. The reason is that it has “the effect of mitigating the force of moral passion, thereby curtailing its power to motivate action.” [30] Voparil says the following double-bind will occur.

If left uncorrected, our capacity for sympathy, though powerful, will remain partial to those closest to us, and apply largely to those most like us, either by resemblance or relation. To extend sympathy farther, it must be corrected through reflection and the adoption of a common viewpoint of humanity. But in moving from the particular to the general level to correct its biases, the moral sentiment loses its ability to “produce or prevent actions.” [31]

Furthermore, according to Voparil, Rorty’s way of extending sympathy cannot overcome that dilemma for two reasons. First, Rorty’s anti-essentialism cannot accept the idea of a common viewpoint on humanity, that is, human nature. Second, in order to overcome that dilemma, it is not sufficient just to “extend the moral identities of “the rich and lucky billion,” as Rorty calls us.” [32] Let me provide you with a little more explanation concerning the second point. Voparil certainly agrees with Rorty’s saying, “the construction of identities occurs within the space of politics, they are not fixed but alterable, and they have implications which bear directly on political projects.” [33] However, Voparil also points out a limitation of the politics of sentiment suggested by Rorty. “To the extent that the expansion of sympathetic concern for distant and different others”, says Voparil, “merely reaffirms the existing identities of fortunate in North Atlantic democracies, it remains a severely limited endeavor.” [34]

Here, we should keep in our mind that the above point mentioned by Voparil is not only a criticism against Rorty, but also leads to a positive suggestion to overcome the dilemma.

My contention is that there is a better way to theorize the politics of sentiment than via the concept of identity. Rather than an ability to see distant others as “one of us” as operative element in making us more likely to come (to?) their assistance, my suggestion is that an ability to grant full reality to their suffering is the more powerful force and a better ground on which to build a politics of sentiment. [35]

In this way, Voparil maintains, “if our concern is what motivates people to act to end the suffering of others, perceiving the reality of their suffering is a more potent compulsion, and one more readily achievable, than coming to see them as “one of us”.” [36] In order to supplement his insistences, he focuses on Hume again. That is, “the power of reality to move us to action finds support in Hume’s thought as well.” [37] Hume says:

Suppose I am now in safety at land and wou’d willingly reap some pleasure from this consideration: I must think on the miserable condition of those who are at sea in a storm, and must endeavour to render this idea as strong and lively as possible, in order to make me more sensible of my own happiness. But whatever pains I may take, the comparison will never have an equal efficacy, if I were really on the shore, and saw a ship at distance, tost by a tempest, and in danger every moment of perishing on a rock or sand-bank. But suppose this idea to become still more lively. Suppose the ship to be driven so near me, that I can perceive distinctly horror, painted on the countenance of the seamen and passengers hear their lamentable cries, see the dearest friends give their last adieu, or embrace with a resolution to perish in each others arms: No man has so savage a heart as to reap any pleasure from such a spectacle, or withstand the motions of the tenderest compassion and sympathy. [38]

According to Hume and Vopalil, the best way to enhance our motivation to reduce the pains of others is undergoing their pains ourselves. But that is impossible for the case of distant others and our imagination is insufficient to create the motivation on its own. However, Vopalil says that Hume give us good suggestion. That is, “Hume suggested that it is “the business of poetry” to accomplish this task, “to bring every affection near to us by lively imaginary and representation.” [39] According to Hume, “poetry can make every affection look like truth and reality.” [40]

Conclusion

What is the conclusion that can be reached from Voparil’s criticism? It is that we should be more watchful and careful not of “the distance” with others but of what they suffer. In other words, we should avoid cruelty by concentrating our sympathetic capacity on others’ suffering. In Rorty’s word, it means that a “sentimental education” should be thoroughly implemented. I assume that Rorty himself probably noticed this requirement. Still, he stuck to “the problem of distance” excessively and even tried to use the reduction of distance as a “measure” for avoiding cruelty. I believe that this is Rorty’s mistake. Rather, the important thing is that we should focus on alternative

“partiality” which is sensitive to the severe suffering of others.

Surely there will still remain a problem in some extreme states. In cases where proximate others and distant others suffer to the same extent, we might support the former. However, “in reality,” such cases do not occur so often. Rather, the “reality” in this world is that there exist the gap of quantity/quality of human suffering and that our sympathetic capability has a “lucky” partiality. If so, I think we must agree with Peter Singer.

No principle of obligations is going to be widely accepted unless it recognizes that parents will and should love their own children more than the children of strangers, and, for that reason, will meet the basic needs of their children before they meet the needs of strangers. But this doesn't mean parents are justified in providing luxuries for their children ahead of the basic needs of others. [41]

Notes

[1] See Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).

[2] See Rorty Richard, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[3] See Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, ch.7, 8.

[4] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, x vi.

[5] See Chantal Mouffe ed., *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, (NY: Routledge, 1996), 42.

[6] Rorty Richard, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers volume 3* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 184-5.

[7] Rorty Richard, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers volume 4* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 42.

[8] Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 42.

[9] Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 42.

[10] Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 44.

[11] Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 44.

[12] Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 44.

[13] Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 44-5.

[14] Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 45.

[15] Rorty Richard, “Who are We?: Moral Universalism and Economic Triage,” *Diogenes* 173 (Spring 1996): 5.

[16] Rorty, “Who are We?,” 5.

[17] Rorty, “Who are We?,” 6.

[18] Rorty, “Who are We?,” 5.

- [19] Rorty, "Who are We?," 8.
- [20] Rorty, "Who are We?," 9.
- [21] Rorty, "Who are We?," 13.
- [22] Rorty Richard, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (NY: Penguin Books, 1999), 79.
- [23] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 318.
- [24] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 191.
- [25] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 583.
- [26] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 581-582.
- [27] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 603.
- [28] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 603.
- [29] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 603.
- [30] Christopher Voparil, *Richard Rorty: Politics and Vision* (Oxford: Roman & Littlefield, 2006), 99.
- [31] Voparil, *Richard Rorty*, 100.
- [32] Voparil, *Richard Rorty*, 102.
- [33] Voparil, *Richard Rorty*, 102.
- [34] Voparil, *Richard Rorty*, 102.
- [35] Voparil, *Richard Rorty*, 102.
- [36] Voparil, *Richard Rorty*, 103.
- [37] Voparil, *Richard Rorty*, 104.
- [38] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 594
- [39] Voparil, *Richard Rorty*, 105.
- [40] Voparil, *Richard Rorty*, 105.
- [41] Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty* (NY: Random House, 2009), 139.