

**„Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University – Iași
Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences**

**PhD Thesis
(abstract)**

*The edifying sense of philosophical discourse.
Richard Rorty*

**Scientific coordinator:
Professor Dr. Ștefan Afloroaei**

**PhD Candidate:
Mark Bucuci**

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Thesis structure

The thesis is made up of twelve chapters almost equal in length. The first chapter is ampler because, in our opinion, before proceeding to an analysis of the manner in which Rorty deals with *edification* it is necessary to identify some determinations of the context from which the author talks.

Chapter I Ambiguities in the interpreting of Rorty's ideas

This chapter talks about the ambiguities that underlie the interpretations provided by various specialists who have pondered on the "Rorty file". It is the ambiguity of Rorty's text that solicits a type of spectral communication, which we called antagonism of interpretations. The creation of this tension between ambiguities and antagonism allowed us to insert a third firm term in the already mentioned spectrum. This with the observation that each interpretative gesture which announces an extreme will not be annulled because their co-presence is needed in order to sketch the still uncertain profile of such an author as the one on whom we focus.

Rorty's project does not have a military, disciplinarian nature nor does it claim to be a definitive and infallible solution to the problems raised over and over again by our philosophical predecessors. It is "rather" – to use an adverb frequently seen in this author's texts – a proposition which creates and widens, precisely through the strategic determinations of its reactivity mainly to some data of the American cultural space – a place of debate in which nobody holds a monopoly over truth or expression any more.

In this chapter I also use an interpretative technique needed to shape the third term in the interpretation of Rorty's texts, namely, psychobiography, an interpretative practice that the American author identifies in Derrida's works. This technique allows us to overcome the standstill reached sooner or later by every critic of metaphysics, that is, the fact that, invariably, any critique of metaphysics eventually transforms into metaphysics. We used this technique in order to show that, besides the presupposition that guides the discourse of this American thinker (evolution), there is also an unconscious assumption which entwines with that presupposition. This unconscious assumption was highlighted by Thomas Nagel, who talks about a flaw in Rorty's texts: the lack of „the ambition for transcendence“.

Chapter II On the importance of public relations in philosophy

In this chapter I argue, starting from the manner in which Rorty describes

himself, that this author is one of the best specialists in Public Relations in the field of philosophy since Plato. Some interpreters noticed this concern in Rorty's writings but they interpreted it as the symptom of a deficit which cannot be overlooked even in situations in which the effects of such an attention would be useful. What we usually call a thinker's "rhetoric", an assembly of subtle meaning displacements so that s/he could persuade audiences more easily, is usually perceived as a necessary evil.

This necessary evil, which needed to be camouflaged as well as possible, becomes a virtue in Rorty's mind. Being no longer legitimized by the height of the place from which he speaks, the philosopher now measures his strength by the seduction of the vocabulary that he advances, by what an author called the *pursuit of persuasion over accusation*. In fact, as shown by the re-description of tradition made by the American writer, even this claim of a privileged voice present in the philosopher's discourse is itself a rhetorical move transformed into an argument by its vicinity with theological discourse and by repetition.

Chapter III On the importance of presuppositions

The timeframe in which we find ourselves seems to be oriented more by a discussion about presupposition in general and by the investigation of the manner in which philosophical presuppositions influence the world of life, and less by the firm assumption of such presuppositions.

Although such a displacement may seem to be an existential deficit, those who bring to the fore this discussion about presuppositions in general discovered a new ground that could be colonized by reason. Thus, for Collingwood, metaphysics becomes "the science of absolute presuppositions".

In order to clarify the manner in which Rorty used philosophical presuppositions we applied Umberto Eco's framework for reading presupposition phenomena. Within this framework, presupposition phenomena are modes of interpretative cooperation and, as a result, they are analysed at the level of their functions in discourse (the effects that texts produce on their receivers). Rather than to say *something*, Rorty uses presuppositions in order to create a new context, to produce an effect on his partners in conversation. The absolute presupposition that we identified in Rorty's texts is that of evolution, a presuppositions according to which we do not represent the world in a suitable manner, but simply try to cope with it.

Chapter IV Trans-discourse interpretation

The effects envisaged by Rorty are more important than the text itself, and this imposes a particular type of interpretation, one with a special focus on the fact of metaphor. When we attempt to interpret Rorty's metaphors we should pay attention to what he tries to change through what he says and not to what he actually says. The thinker who would rather launch metaphors than say *something*, Rorty notices, proposes an intertwining of sentences, which, according to positivists, can be interpreted neither as true nor as false. Consequently, in the face of such discourse phenomena, one cannot argue, at least until they become "familiar".

Rorty discusses three strategies for approaching metaphor: the strategy of the Platonist and of the positivist, the strategy of the romantic, and the strategy that Rorty deems to be suited for a reading of his own texts. These strategies are analysed in a contrastive manner.

Chapter V "The modernizing" of philosophical modernity

In this chapter we exemplify an effect targeted by Rorty through his textual strategies. In spite of its modernity, philosophical modernity is more conservative than aesthetic or political modernity. By this we mean that modern philosophies, although they bring other dimensions to the fore (such as, for instance, the noetic one), still keep some reflexes of the philosophical tradition that they contest in their approaches. Although it discusses finitude, the philosophical modernity either sees it as a necessary evil that needs to be assumed as such and yet should also be overcome, or transforms it into another absolute. This modernizing is put to work in the formulation of the public-private distinction, a distinction which no longer accepts synthesis, but only accommodation, a game of free negotiation. In this context, the possibility of the system, the metaphor of that unification, is set aside.

Chapter VI Method, methodological pluralism, discourse strategies

In this chapter, which focuses on Derrida's influence on the discourse practices used by Rorty, we refer to a text that was less explored by his interpreters. In order to delimit deconstruction from a "mere progressive demystification in the Enlightened manner" – a demystification delegitimized by their long and sometimes monstrous association with the well-established structures of authority – Derrida launched the idea that the deconstructivist strategy has an analogue in the hybrid discourse of the so-called "nuclear critique". Just as the "nuclear war", an unconceivable event, becomes an acme of classical reason, deconstruction questions the so-called finite rationality but which supposed "the possibility of infinite progress governed according to an Idea of Reason" (Jacques Derrida, *Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy*) – according to a *focus imaginarius*. At

this point of Derrida's argumentation it becomes obvious that deconstruction is not a variation of critique but thinking up the limit of critique itself. And this reasoning on the limits of critique, through the metaphor of "nuclear critique", is thought as an experiment, as simulation and estimation of effects. Rorty carries out such a "thought experiment" in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, where the unconscious assumption is articulated as a question: What happens with us when even the absence of an absolute instance is no longer thought of? The answer to this question could turn into a radical mutation of philosophical activity.

Chapter VII A radical mutation of our time?

This chapter is interested in Rorty's approximation of an intellectual history of the western world. Following in Blumenberg's footsteps, the American author identifies three intervals. In all of them dwells a silent yet efficient absolute presupposition – if we are to use Collingwood's terms – that of a central instance to whom there is only one way to relate: worship. Unlike these intervals, our time distances itself from that presupposition.

Chapter VIII Preparation of the concept of *edification*

Rorty starts from Gadamer's *Bildung*, from which he distances himself later on, and offers an incipient approximation of the term "edification", labelling it as the name which accounts for „this project of finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking“ (Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, ed. cit., p. 360). Edification can be made operational through a hermeneutic activity such as symbolic trade with other cultures, historical periods, or with disciplines which seem to carry out their approaches by assuming aims and vocabularies that are immeasurable compared to those that belong to our familiar grounds. Yet, he stresses that "edification" can be set into motion by a double-ended movement: "the «poetic» activity of thinking up such new aims, new words, or new disciplines", accompanied by an inverted hermeneutic activity, namely, "the attempt to reinterpret our familiar surroundings in the unfamiliar terms of our new inventions" (Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, ed. cit., p. 360).

Chapter IX Edifying without constructing

In order to nuance the way in which he conceives the issue of edification, Rorty introduced two distinctions. They have different functions. The first – normal philosophies versus revolutionary philosophies – is meant to change the self-image of philosophy. Thus, alongside the philosophy's self-image as a continuum, untroubled by contingencies, of cooperation and unstoppable progress, as a unitary, coherent, and systematic discipline, stems out, slowly but surely, the philosophy's self-image as a quasi-discipline, full of polemics and inconsistencies, of unfamiliar topics – all of them being faces of discontinuity.

The second distinction – between systematic and edifying philosophers – deepens the contrast between the two self-images of philosophy, because it only applies to revolutionary philosophers. The criterion of differentiation, Rorty says, is given by the revolutionary philosophers' stand with respect to the "unfamiliar" aspects of their own vocabularies. If systematic philosophers "are constructive and offer arguments", edifying philosophers "are reactive and offer satires, parodies, aphorisms". While systematic philosophers "like great scientists, build for eternity", edifying thinkers „are intentionally peripheral“, because „they know their work loses its point when the period they were reacting against is over“, because they "destroy for the sake of their own generation"(Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 369).

Chapter X The "Relativist's" dialogue with himself

At this point we show that what Rorty offers as a suggestion – namely that "edifying philosophy aims at continuing a conversation rather than at discovering truth" – can be amplified by adapting its variable geometry to the figure of response to the usual charge of "relativism". The conclusion of this chapter is that a reconstruction of philosophy – maybe even of metaphysics – could start from the philosopher's "fall" into finitude, from his giving up the obsession of *affiliation* to something higher or wider than us. And here, the humble figure of conversation could be a good starting point.

Chapter XI The strategy of *focus imaginarius*

In this chapter, following in Rorty's footsteps, we argue that the *formal and complete concept of metaphysics* is not actually complete, but can be completed through a rhetorical supplement that would encompass the usual strategies of metaphysics (substantialization, de-contextualization, reification, and hypostatization). This is the strategy of *focus imaginarius*. It translates the philosophy's intent to transcend itself and its own instruments, to put aside everything that is conditioned as the only legitimate way to understand everything that is conditioned.

Chapter XII Irony and freedom

In this chapter we offer an illustration of the manner in which Rorty forgets to speak the language of onto-theology, thus offering a blueprint for edification without ontological presuppositions.