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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Narrative as Ethical Praxis: Analyzing the Function of Narrative in Fostering Social Cohesion and Self-Creation within Richard Rorty's Pragmatism

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Abstract

This study investigates the foundational status of the concept of "narrative" within the intellectual framework of the neo-pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty and its applicability to contemporary global challenges. The central research question is: How does narrative in Rorty's thought constitute an ethical praxis, and what function does it serve in cultivating social solidarity and shaping individual identity, particularly within the complex milieu of the digital age and multicultural societies? Employing an analytical-descriptive methodology and drawing upon Rorty's primary texts, extensive contemporary international scholarship (post-2010), and an analysis of cultural-media data, the findings indicate that narrative in Rorty's intellectual constellation fulfills three fundamental and interrelated roles: first, as a substitute for metaphysical theories in explaining the world; second, as the basis for social solidarity founded on moral imagination and empathy, which can be re-evaluated in confronting challenges such as political polarization and disinformation; and third, as an instrument for self-creation in a radically contingent world, now manifesting in forms such as digital storytelling on social media. Within this framework, ethics is achieved not through an appeal to universal principles but through encounter with the narratives of others and the expansion of the circle of "we." Rorty's ideal liberal society is one in which free, interminable, and polyphonic narrative dialogue supplants the quest for absolute truth. The article concludes that narrative, in Rorty's thought, constitutes the cornerstone of a radical pragmatism which, by critically engaging with contemporary political philosophy and novel communicative realities, remains a vital source of inspiration for mitigating social fragmentation and reinforcing pluralistic tolerance.

Keywords: Richard Rorty, Narrative, Pragmatism, Social Solidarity, Self-Creation, Ethics, Digital Age

Introduction

Richard Rorty (1931–2007) stands among the most influential philosophers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, revitalizing pragmatism in a radical form through his critique of the Western metaphysical tradition. By moving beyond conceptions of philosophy grounded in metaphysical truth-seeking and objective representation, he redefines the discipline as an "endless conversation" (Rorty, 1979). Within this reconfigured intellectual space, the concept of "narrative" shifts from the periphery to the center, becoming a pivotal mechanism for constructing the self, realizing social solidarity, and envisioning a liberal society. Abandoning the search for "certain foundations," Rorty focuses instead on the "useful functions" of concepts, including narrative, within specific socio-historical contexts.

The principal research question of this inquiry is: How does narrative in Rorty's philosophy transform into an ethical act, and what role does it play in forging social solidarity and shaping individual identity, particularly in light of recent global developments such as the proliferation of cyberspace, the rise of populism, and the crisis of truth? The article's hypothesis posits that narrative in Rorty's thought is not merely a descriptive activity but a constitutive praxis that generates social reality and individual identity, grounding ethics in empathy and dialogue. The article's contribution lies in extending this hypothesis through engagement with current challenges and employing recent scholarly sources (post-2010) alongside evidence from digital culture. To address this question, the article is organized into nine sections: Rorty's intellectual context; the critique of metaphysics and the substitution of theory with narrative; the role of narrative in social solidarity; the function of narrative in self-creation with emphasis on its digital manifestations; the priority of literature over philosophy; critical dialogue with contemporary philosophy; practical applications in multicultural societies and cyberspace; and finally, an evaluation of critiques and his intellectual legacy.

Intellectual Context: Pragmatism, Analytic Philosophy, and Hermeneutics

Richard Rorty can be understood as a synthesizer of three major intellectual currents: American Pragmatism, late Analytic Philosophy, and Philosophical Hermeneutics. This unique configuration forms the foundation for his coherent theory of narrative.

- Pragmatist Legacy and its Evolution

Rorty positioned himself as an heir to American pragmatists, particularly John Dewey. From Dewey, he adopted the concept of the "warranted assertibility" of beliefs and an instrumentalist view of knowledge. For pragmatists, the truth of a belief resides not in its correspondence with an objective reality but in its utility for problem-solving and guiding action (Dewey, 1929). Rorty radicalized this idea, defining truth as "what is good for us to believe," a formulation inherently social and reliant on the consensus of conversational communities (Rorty, 1999). Contemporary pragmatist thinkers such as Robert B. Brandom (2000) and Jürgen Habermas (in his engagement with pragmatism) have further developed this line of thought, emphasizing concepts like "communicative rationality" and "inferentialism"—positions whose critiques of Rorty will be addressed subsequently (Brandom, 2000; Habermas, 2003).

- Immanent Critique of Analytic Philosophy

Although trained within the analytic tradition, Rorty became one of its most stringent critics. Nevertheless, he appropriated key concepts from figures like the later Ludwig Wittgenstein— notions such as "language games" and the idea that meaning is determined by use. From Thomas Kuhn, he adopted the concept of "paradigm," demonstrating that even the natural sciences are grounded in consensual and historical interpretive frameworks (Kuhn, 1962). From W.V.O. Quine, he derived the insight that no firm epistemological distinction exists between analytic and synthetic propositions, and that human knowledge constitutes a holistic yet revisable web of belief (Quine, 1951). These resources equipped Rorty to mount a sustained assault on essentialism and foundationalism in philosophy.

- Engagement with Hermeneutics and Post-Structuralism

Rorty also engaged substantively with continental philosophy. From Hans-Georg Gadamer, he accepted the concept of the "historicity of understanding" and the constitutive role of prejudice in interpretation (Gadamer, 1960). From Jacques Derrida, he appropriated the critique of the metaphysics of presence and an attentiveness to the play of signification. From Michel Foucault, he borrowed an understanding of the inextricable linkage between knowledge and power. Later influences, particularly from Jacques Rancière and his concept of "the part of those who have no part," are also notable. Rancière (2004), akin to Rorty, emphasizes the role of redistributing the sensible through political and artistic narratives, albeit with a more radical grounding in the axiom of equality. These influences propelled Rorty toward a conception of language and narrative wherein meaning is not fixed but is perpetually produced within contexts of power and dialogue. This multifaceted synthesis enabled the formation of an anti-foundationalist philosophy that nonetheless retains a profound hopefulness for moral progress through instruments like imagination and narrative dialogue.

The End of Metaphysics: From Theory to Narrative

Rorty's elevation of narrative begins with a fundamental critique of the metaphysics and epistemology characterizing the Western tradition, culminating in his seminal work, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979).

- Critique of the Mirror Metaphor and its Implications

Rorty contends that the dominant metaphor in Western philosophy has conceived the mind as a "mirror of nature"—an entity tasked with the accurate, passive representation of external reality. Consequently, philosophy's mission has been to polish this mirror (via rationalism or empiricism) to achieve flawless and certain representations. Rorty deems this entire project a profound error. Drawing on Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey, he demonstrates that the mind is not a passive mirror but an active instrument for coping with the world. Language, similarly, is not a representational system but a tool for interaction and practice (Rorty, 1979). This perspective anticipates contemporary social constructivist theories that emphasize the discursive construction of reality. In the digital age, this idea is amplified by phenomena such as "filter bubbles" and personalized algorithms, which illustrate that individuals encounter not a singular "objective reality" but multiple, technologically mediated narratives of the world (Pariser, 2011).

- Truth as Social Agreement in the Post-Truth Condition

Rejecting the correspondence theory of truth, Rorty offers a pragmatist definition: "To call a statement 'true' is just to give it a rhetorical pat on the back" (Rorty, 1989, p. 8). In other words, truth is an attribute bestowed upon propositions that a given community agrees upon at a particular historical juncture. This view resonates strikingly with descriptions of the "post-truth" condition, wherein emotions and personal beliefs often exert greater influence than objective facts in shaping public opinion (Keyes, 2004). A crucial distinction, however, is that Rorty never advocated indifference to reality; rather, he emphasized the "usefulness" of beliefs. The contemporary challenge lies in how "agreement" can be forged amid a proliferation of competing and often contradictory narratives in a networked society. Data from the Pew Research Center (2020) indicates that American citizens, heavily influenced by partisan affiliation, adhere to divergent political facts—a phenomenon termed the "reality divide."

- The Emergence of the Narrative Paradigm and Contemporary Instantiations

Within this post-metaphysical constellation, the role of philosophy is transformed. The philosopher ceases to be a discoverer of eternal truths and becomes a participant in a broader cultural conversation. Rorty argues that the abstract, general language of Theory is inadequate to capture the richness of human experience. In contrast, the language of Narrative—whether historical, literary, biographical, or fictional—provides a more apt medium (Rorty, 1991). This idea finds expression in new narrative forms. For instance, long-form narrative podcasts (e.g., *Serial*) or interactive documentaries that present events from multiple perspectives serve as contemporary exemplars of "philosophy as storytelling." These formats compel audiences to engage actively in interpretation and judgment, precisely the role Rorty envisioned for citizens in a liberal society.

Narrative and the Foundation of Solidarity without Universal Grounds

Having dismantled the metaphysical foundations of ethics, Rorty's central challenge is this: In a world devoid of trans-historical moral truths, how can a society grounded in solidarity and justice be constituted? His answer, articulated in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), is that solidarity is built not through rational argument from universal first principles, but through moral imagination and empathy. The primary vehicle for cultivating this imagination and empathy is narrative.

- Solidarity as Sentiment, Not Knowledge

Rorty draws a crucial distinction between knowledge and empathy. We cannot incorporate others into our moral universe solely through appeals to pure reason and general principles. Rather, inclusion becomes possible through the capacity to imagine ourselves in the place of others and to apprehend their suffering. Recent research in neuroscience and psychology, including the work of Elaine Arps (2018) on "cognitive empathy," corroborates Rorty's position. This research demonstrates that processing narratives activates neural networks associated with theory of mind and emotional simulation, as if the individual were experiencing the narrated events firsthand.

- The Mechanism of Narrative in Expanding the "We" in the Era of New Media

Narratives constitute an ideal mechanism for this affective encounter. Rorty references the classic example of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In the contemporary world, television series perform an analogous function. Series such as *This Is Us* or *Ramy*, which explore the experiences of immigrants and Muslims in the West, or films from Iranian cinema depicting the lives of marginalized classes, can operate as "empathy laboratories." A study in *Media and Communication* (2021) indicated that viewing series with complex characterizations of minority groups significantly enhances viewers' positive attitudes toward those groups.

- Addressing Relativism in a Multipolar World

Critics inquire: if no absolute truth exists, how can one defend the superiority of the liberal-democratic narrative over fascist or totalitarian narratives? Rorty's response is pragmatist: We prefer our narrative not because it corresponds to "human nature," but because it offers a superior promise for reducing cruelty and suffering. In the contemporary world, this defense necessitates a comparative assessment of the consequences borne by differing narratives. For instance, one might cite data from international indices such as the Global Peace Index or the Human Development Index (HDI), which indicate that societies underpinned by more open and democratic political narratives, on average, exhibit higher levels of welfare, health, and security. Defending the liberal democratic narrative thus entails defending its tangible outcomes in mitigating human suffering.

Narratives of the Self and the Project of Self-Creation in the Digital Age

If social solidarity constitutes one facet of Rortian ethics, the other is individual self-creation. Rorty conceives the "self" not as a substance but as a thoroughly contingent construct. In the digital age, this project of self-creation has assumed novel and complex forms.

- Final Vocabularies in the Guise of Digital Profiles

Every individual operates with a set of beliefs, desires, and self-understandings that Rorty terms one's "final vocabulary" (Rorty, 1989). Today, social media profiles (on Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn) have become primary arenas for representing and re-fashioning these final vocabularies. Through the curation of photos, biographies, likes, and tweets, users engage in continuous "self-narration." This process can embody creative self-creation (analogous to an artist presenting their work) but may also engender "digital narcissism" and conformity to imposed stereotypes of beauty and success (Turkle, 2011).

- Contemporary Liberal Ironists

Rorty identifies figures like Nietzsche and Proust as liberal ironists. In our time, one might point to certain bloggers, critical podcasters, or public intellectuals who, through the personal narration of experiences (e.g., grappling with illness, migration, or discrimination), disclose novel possibilities of being while simultaneously eliciting public empathy. These individuals, conscious of the contingency of their own final vocabularies (irony), participate in the public project of diminishing suffering (liberalism).

- The Constructive Tension in Cyberspace: Self-Fashioning versus Solidarity

The tension between private self-creation and public solidarity is exacerbated in cyberspace. On one hand, social media platforms are arenas for individual self-presentation. On the other, these same spaces facilitate collective mobilization around social causes (e.g., the #MeToo or #BlackLivesMatter movements). Rorty acknowledged this tension and sought to manage it by maintaining a distinction between private and public spheres. In digital space, however, these boundaries are profoundly blurred. The salient question becomes: Can the online community simultaneously serve as a platform for unbounded self-creation and a space for profound empathy and solidarity? This represents a significant challenge for a narrative-based ethics in the contemporary era.

Literature as Practical Philosophy: The Primacy of Narrative over Argument

Given the central role of narrative in solidarity and self-creation, Rorty redefines the relationship between philosophy and literature. In the post-metaphysical age, he contends, literature effectively assumes the mantle once worn by traditional philosophy.

- Blurring Boundaries and the Efficacy of New Genres

Rorty dissolves the rigid demarcation between philosophy and literature. Today, this convergence extends beyond the classic novel. The graphic novel—exemplified by Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* or Art Spiegelman's *Maus*—combines text and image to deliver powerful narratives of migration, war, and identity. Creative non-fiction and literary journalism likewise explore ethical issues with fidelity to fact while utilizing compelling narrative techniques. These genres embed philosophical inquiry within the fabric of everyday life.

- The Novelist as Ethical Vanguard in a Globalized World

Rorty claims that novelists serve as the vanguard of moral sensibility. In contemporary global literature, writers such as Elena Ferrante (Italy), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigeria), or Yan Lianke (China), by narrating the lives of characters within specific socio-political contexts, not only evoke the empathy of a global readership but also offer nuanced critiques of local and global power structures. The polyphony inherent in their novels provides training for inhabiting a multicultural and tolerant society.

- Philosophy as a Literary Genre and the Role of the Critic

Consequently, philosophy must also comprehend itself as a "literary genre." Its task is not to furnish foundations but to facilitate dialogue among narratives. In this sense, the contemporary "cultural critic" or "media theorist" inherits the philosopher's role from a Rortian perspective. An analyst who deconstructs dominant narratives in cinema, popular music, or video games, revealing how these narratives construct our values and identities, is effectively practicing "philosophy as storytelling."

Critical Dialogue: Rorty and Contemporary Political Philosophy

Rorty's thought, particularly his moral-political narrativism, engages in dialogue and contention with contemporary intellectual currents, yielding new sources for critique and evaluation.

- Critique from Virtue Ethics and Communitarian Perspectives

Alasdair MacIntyre, in his later work *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* (2016), offers a direct critique of Rorty. MacIntyre argues that ethics is rooted in "the narratives of living traditions," not in individual imagination or endless conversation. From his vantage point, Rorty's emphasis on "contingency" and self-creation severs the individual from the enriching resources of ethical traditions, thereby fostering relativism. In response, Rorty might contend that in modern, multicultural societies, no single tradition can provide a foundation for consensus; the only viable path is dialogue among the narratives of diverse traditions.

- Critique from the Perspective of Radical Democracy and the Political

Chantal Mouffe, a theorist of radical democracy, critiques Rorty from a different angle. Mouffe (2005) argues that by focusing on "empathy" and "dialogue," Rorty neglects the inherently "antagonistic" dimension of the political. For Mouffe, society is perpetually a site of confrontation between "us" and "them," and politics precisely involves the drawing of these boundaries. Competing narratives are always engaged in a struggle for hegemony. Thus, Rorty's approach risks fostering a naive liberalism that fails to apprehend structural inequalities and the constitutive relation between power and resistance.

- Critique from the Perspective of New Socio-Political Pragmatism

Some contemporary pragmatists, such as Nancy Fraser (2009), contend that Rorty overemphasizes "distribution" (of wealth, opportunity) and neglects the politics of "recognition" for marginalized groups. From this standpoint, storytelling is essential not only for generating empathy but also for demanding epistemic justice and the acknowledgment of subaltern voices. This perspective imbues the narrative function with a more potent political dimension.

Practical Applications: Narrative in Multicultural Societies and the Combat Against Disinformation

Rorty's narrative-centric theory can provide a valuable framework for addressing two major contemporary challenges: coexistence in multicultural societies and countering disinformation (fake news).

- Forging National Cohesion through Shared Multicultural Narratives

In societies characterized by significant ethnic and religious diversity, such as Canada, India, or many European nations, cultivating a sense of national "we" is complex. Rorty's approach suggests that rather than emphasizing a monolithic identity or fixed national myths, space should be created for multiple, parallel narratives of belonging. The "national story" should thus constitute not a singular narrative but a framework within which the narratives of various groups (Indigenous peoples, immigrants, minorities) find voice and place. Multicultural curricula that incorporate the literature and history of different groups exemplify this application (Banks, 2015).

- Narrative as a Counter to Disinformation and Populism

In the post-truth era, populists and purveyors of disinformation deploy simple yet potent emotional narratives (e.g., "immigrants are stealing your jobs," "elites conspire against ordinary people"). A Rortian response to this phenomenon is not to deny the power of narrative but to offer compelling, tangible counter-narratives. For instance, instead of reiterating dry economic statistics, the narrative of a migrant worker's life—highlighting their labor and contributions to the community—may prove more impactful. Independent media and fact-checking platforms can contest false narratives through "evidence-based storytelling." Initiatives like Global Voices, which publish grassroots narratives of global events, embody this endeavor.

Critiques, Evaluation, and Intellectual Legacy

Rorty's thought remains a subject of vigorous debate. A balanced evaluation requires attention to both enduring critiques and shifting global conditions.

- Contemporary Epistemological and Practical Critiques

- **The Hollowing Out of Truth and its Political Repercussions:** Critics like John Searle (2015) argue that reducing truth to utility or agreement, in practice, undermines trust in scientific and democratic institutions. The denial of scientific consensus during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that the relativization of truth can have severe, even fatal, consequences.
- **Inadequacy in Confronting Systemic Evil:** Sole reliance on "empathy" appears insufficient against ideological systems backed by potent demagogic narratives (e.g., contemporary ethno-nationalism). Combating such forces requires an active defense of democratic institutions and procedures as the necessary framework for dialogue.
- **Neglect of the Cognitive-Rational Dimension:** Critics, including Habermas, note that Rorty marginalizes "communicative rationality." Ethics, they argue, depends not solely on empathetic feeling but also on reasoned argument, critique, and the public justification of norms.

- Political-Social Critiques in Light of Contemporary Inequalities

- **Individualism in the Neoliberal Era:** Rorty's emphasis on private self-creation may inadvertently align with neoliberal ideology, which individualizes social responsibility. Amidst rising inequality, the project of self-creation becomes an inaccessible luxury for many.
- **Neglect of the Material Infrastructure of Dialogue:** Rorty pays insufficient attention to the fact that free dialogue presupposes relative equality in access to resources, education, and media platforms. The dominance of technology corporations over the digital public sphere jeopardizes this condition.

- Defenses and Rorty's Enduring Legacy in the 21st Century

Despite these critiques, Rorty's intellectual legacy remains significant:

- **Opening Interdisciplinary Dialogue:** Rorty demonstrated that philosophy can fruitfully engage with literature, political science, cultural studies, and communication theory.

- **Emphasis on Moral Imagination and Pedagogy:** His perspective has inspired pedagogical approaches utilizing narrative and empathy mapping in public policy and social service design.
- **Anticipating the Post-Truth Condition:** Although not a proponent of relativism, Rorty's analysis of a society based on "hope" and "dialogue" rather than "certainty" provides a framework for understanding the current conjuncture. His solution involves not a return to metaphysics but the fortification of institutions and cultures that enable free and responsible narrative dialogue.
- **Theoretical Groundwork for Tolerance in Pluralist Societies:** Accepting the "contingency" of one's own beliefs constitutes the bedrock of genuine tolerance. Recognizing that one's convictions are products of specific historical and geographical contingencies removes any warrant for imposing them on others as absolute truth.

Conclusion

This examination of Richard Rorty's thought reveals that the concept of "narrative" occupies a central position in his transition from metaphysical philosophy to post-metaphysical pragmatism, serving as a cornerstone for constructing ethics, society, and the self. By extending Rorty's framework and employing contemporary sources and examples, this article has demonstrated that narrative functions as an ethical praxis within his constellation from three interconnected perspectives:

First, in the social sphere, narrative operates as the primary mechanism for fostering empathy and expanding solidarity. In the absence of metaphysical principles, it is the affective, tangible narratives of the "other" that redraw the boundaries of the moral "we." However, in the age of disinformation, this function necessitates "responsible storytelling" and the reinforcement of institutional infrastructures conducive to robust dialogue.

Second, in the individual sphere, narrative serves as the fundamental instrument for self-creation and identity formation. In a radically contingent world, the individual fashions themselves through the continual revision and re-narration of their personal story. The emergence of the "digital self" on social media has both democratized this project and exposed it to the risks of consumerism and narcissism. Navigating the tension between creative self-fashioning and social commitment remains a pressing challenge.

Third, in the cultural-epistemic sphere, narrative emerges as a substitute for metaphysical theory, elevating literature (in both traditional and new media forms) to the status of practical philosophy. Rorty's ideal liberal society is one wherein free, polyphonic, and interminable narrative dialogue supplants the search for absolute truth.

While significant critiques from realist, communitarian, and radical democratic perspectives persist, Rorty's contribution to illuminating new horizons for philosophy, ethics, and politics in a complex, pluralistic world is undeniable. Ultimately, narrative in Rorty's thought extends an invitation: to the courage of self-re-creation, the courage of listening to the other, and the preservation of a groundless yet indispensable hope for a more humane world—

a world built not through the discovery of final truths, but through the cultivation of institutions and cultures that sustain and guide an endless, productive dialogue about life's possible stories.

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- **Saeed Eslami:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing, expansion of contemporary critique sections and conclusion.
- **Kamal Pouladi:** Methodology, Formal Analysis, Writing – Review & Editing, expansion of intellectual context and epistemological sections with emphasis on recent scholarship.
- **Hamid Simyari:** Investigation, Writing – Original Draft, expansion of sections related to social solidarity, digital self-creation, and practical applications using recent sources and digital culture data.

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