

# Rorty, Wittgenstein, and the 'dialogue among civilizations'

Karel Mom, Vrije University, The Netherlands

## 1. Introduction

Pursuing its proclamation (GA 1998) of the year 2001 as the United Nations Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations, the UN General Assembly, in its session of November 8-9, 2001, fixed the agenda for this dialogue (GA 2001). Article 5 of this agenda states that this dialogue shall be open to all, including among others, scholars, thinkers, intellectuals, and writers, who "play an instrumental role in (its) initiation and sustainment".

A part from the preliminary objection that the assumption of an instrumental role would compromise their independence, philosophers might more in particular object to such a role because the call for dialogue owes its urgency to the alarming prospect of, and—as it appears in the meeting records of the GA—the desire to avert a 'clash of civilizations'. Huntington (1993 22, 39) has announced such a clash as the 'battle lines of the future' and as the cause of the "next world war, if there is one (...)". For, if the dismissal of Huntington's analysis by many UN-delegations reflects a resolute optimism, a more austere way of challenging it would be to ask why other civilizations, that "have been around for centuries" are "posing a challenge only now" (Mahbubani 1993 14).

Mahbubani's (1993 14) assertion that a sincere attempt to answer this question would reveal an "inability to conceive that the West (has) developed structural weaknesses in its core value systems and institutions" supplies it with a somewhat polemic flavour. As it stands, though, this question could provoke a philosophical reluctance to participate in the dialogue, given the moral universalism, which is implicit in its objective to "develop a better understanding of common ethical standards and universal human values" (GA 2001 art. 2). The more so if such participation would involve one to subscribe to the strategy Huntington (1993 49) proposes, namely to "exploit differences and conflicts among Confucian and Islamic states" and "strengthen international institutions that reflect and legitimate Western interests and values".

The explicit inclusion of thinkers, attributing an instrumental role to them, touches on the self-understanding philosophers, in contrast with other reflective people, might have of their involvement in this dialogue. In this paper, which is intended as an exercise in empirical philosophy, I will give an account of such a self-understanding by comparing constructs of two different philosophical positions concerning the 'dialogue among civilizations' along Wittgensteinian and Rortian lines respectively (section 0). By 'philosophical' position I will understand: a position, which is coherent with relevant philosophical ideas of the philosopher to whom that position is ascribed. That Rorty (1989 15, 21-22; 44-45) develops his position in approval of Wittgenstein's ideas about the contingency of language and of community helps to articulate the differences between these constructs. The paper ends with some concluding remarks (section 0).

## 2. Philosophical positions in the 'dialogue among civilizations'

Rorty (1996) argues for it to be self-deceptive or hypocritical to speak of a universal moral community encompassing the human species, in the name of which the UN generally could act. By implication, a Rortian position would be critical at the UN's role to help to "unfold shared meaning and core values", as the dialogue among civilizations is intended to accomplish (GA 2001).

By calling his argument 'philosophical', Rorty suggests that he would envisage his role in the dialogue as not merely instrumental. However, a part from claiming that he is—unlike Huntington—neither "trying to make predictions", nor "offering recommendations for action", he does not clarify why this should be so, nor what he understands by a philosophical argument, other than by stipulating that his argument operates with premises that are connected with the philosophical tradition. This connection consists therein that the first premise "that the primordial philosophical question is not 'What are we?' but 'Who are we?'" is meant as a pragmatist revision of the Kantian "What is Man?".

Rorty calls the latter question scientific and metaphysical, the former, by contrast, political. This is because UN's ability to act in name of this community, which Rorty defines, in his second premise, as a community of reciprocal trust of the peoples that belong to it—as the phrase "We, the peoples of the united nations" in the UN Charter's preamble suggests—depends, according to its third premise, on its ability to help underprivileged peoples and thus "on an ability to believe—in a pragmatic, Peircian sense—that we can avoid economic triage". Rorty denies the UN this ability.

However, despite its connection with the philosophical tradition, Rorty's argument rather is an attempt to answer the political question "Who are we?" in a morally significant way, than that it can serve as a starting point to construct a philosophical position concerning the 'dialogue among cultures'. As such, his dealing with the UN-vocabulary fits his strategy of persuasion that consist in not to provide arguments, in order to avoid using this vocabulary himself (Rorty 1989 8), but to suggest redescriptions that make the vocabulary in which objections to his position are phrased "look bad" (44). This strategy goes along with his "abjuration of philosophical neutrality in the interest of political liberalism" (55). Thus, "We, the people..." is *quasi* redescribed as: "We liberals" (64), referring to the members of an utopian culture of liberalism in which "no trace of divinity remain(s)" (45). The chief virtue of these members is the recognition of the contingency of their own consciences and yet remain faithful to those consciences (46). Their "thoroughly Wittgensteinian (...) approach to language, would be to de-divinize the world" (21).

What would Wittgenstein hold of such de-divinization? Using Wittgensteinian idiom, one could say that the 'common objective elements' such as language, history, religion, customs and institutions, and the subjective self-identification of people, by which Huntington (1993 24) defines 'civilization' are internally

related in a world-picture. This I do not have because I am satisfied of its correctness; it rather contains no indication of its incorrectness (Wittgenstein 1969 93). Nor do I get it by satisfying myself of its correctness; it rather is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false (94); the substrate and the tacit groundwork of all research and assertions (162, 167). As a corollary to Wittgenstein's stipulating the facticity of a language game (559) he observes that "the propositions, describing a world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology". They have a practical function like rules of a game, which "can be learned purely practically" (95). If a 'we' asserts its certainty, this does not mean that every individual is certain of it, but that "we belong to a community which is bound together by science and education" (298).

Wittgenstein attributes Frazer's inability to understand religious practices to his lack of sensibility for the distance between unbelief and belief (Phillips 1996 202). Unlike Freud, who, seeking acceptable (cf. Wittgenstein 1967a 18) psychological explanations, calls approaches like Frazer's too rational, neglecting the emotional character [Gefühlscharakter] of the things that are to be explained (Freud 2000 395), Wittgenstein (1967 235) argues philosophically that religious customs of a people are not delusions. This is because, whereas the recognition of a delusion on which a non-religious custom is based is a sufficient reason for abandoning it, this is not the case for religious customs. Wittgenstein (1967 238) calls Frazer's explanations misleading as they neglect our ability to invent such customs. This indicates, in his view, that they answer to a more general principle, which is present in our soul, than Frazer realizes. Moreover, Frazer's explanations could not be acceptable if those customs would, eventually, not appeal to an inclination in ourselves.

In view of Wittgenstein's descriptive and imaginative approach of religious practices that are embedded in world-pictures, his criticism of Frazer's anthropological rendering of mythical and religious representations and customs as delusions (Wittgenstein 1967 234) is well understandable. As is his strong language in this context, reproaching Frazer to be, in his narrow mindedness, incapable to understand another life as the English life of his time (238). In the same spirit Phillips (1996 201ff.) argues that the tendency in Anglo-American philosophical culture to assess the distance between belief and unbelief in terms of a contradiction that can be settled by argument is an impediment to grasping the import of Wittgenstein's phrase, that "religion as madness is a madness springing from irreligiousness" (Wittgenstein 1980 13), which, in his view, refers to a lack of sensibility concerning the character of religious belief, and is not an admonition to become religious (Phillips 1996 215).

Rorty's project of a de-divinization of culture appears to be vulnerable to a similar criticism, when Arriaga (2005 468) calls Rorty's "distinctive stance as postmodernist" (...) "unashamedly ethnocentric, in a manner that most postmodernists would rather avoid". Such criticism prompts the question how we can interpret Rorty's discussion with the philosophical tradition and his approval of Wittgenstein's ideas about the contingency of community otherwise than as a way of saying how he wants us to see them (cf. Wittgenstein 1967a 27).

I would propose to answer this question by playing off Rorty's appreciation of this contingency against Wittgenstein's remark about a possible demonstrably historical falsity of the Gospels. In, what looks like a referral to Kant, Wittgenstein (1980 32) says that such

falsity would in no way impair belief, not because it has something to do with 'universal truths of reason', but because the certainty of the holding for true of the Gospels is "seized on by men believingly (i.e. lovingly)". The same would hold for other Holy Scriptures, which people believe. Kant (1795 367), conversely, denies a variety of religions, assuming the existence of one universal religion, while acknowledging the historical contingency of Holy Scriptures.

In keeping track with the philosophical antecedents of Rorty's position, we can say that Rorty (1989 192, 193) adopts his strategy to advance his project of "disengag(ing) 'human solidarity' (...) from what has often been thought of as its 'philosophical presuppositions'", of which Kant's universalistic 'rational respect' is a major one. Another such presupposition is Kant's (1795 367) assumption that the combination of universal religion and a variety of languages and Scriptures forms the cause for both war and, in a flourishing of culture, peace. This foreshadows the universalistic optimism about the progressive force of a dialogue among cultures, which is expressed in the relevant UN-documents.

Unlike Wittgenstein's detached analysis of religious practice, Rorty's assumption about a necessary connection of 'absolute validity' with Kantian dualisms amounts, despite his strategy of redescribing traditional dichotomies, to a 'residual Kantianism' (cf. Rorty 1989 35) in his assessment of the contingency of (religious) community. For, if recognizing this contingency entails, in Rorty's view, a rejection of the notion of 'absolute validity', this is because Rorty thinks that such notion presupposes a, let us say, Kantian division of a divine and an animal part of self (47), and an, again Kantian, distinction between reasons for belief and causes for belief which are not reasons (48). Rorty's elucidation of what he understands by contingency, is thus entrenched in a Kantian idiom.

Contrarily, Wittgenstein's (1980 86 in: Phillips 1996 206) recognition of the 'absolute validity' of religious belief in the sense of its immunity for contra-evidence coincides with his insight that "life can force this concept (of God) on us". It does so without involving a fissure between the public and the private aspects of religious belief, which is characteristic of Rorty's (1989 xv) liberal ironist. For the mythological and practical aspects of a world-picture correspond with the elements of absoluteness (cf. Wittgenstein's (1965 12) mentioning the desire to say something about the absolute good) and unreflectiveness that Thomas (2001 4ff.) distinguishes in religious belief. Unreflectiveness is connected with the perspective element, i.e. that it provides a perspective on the whole of life.

For this reason, a Wittgensteinian position can be construed that is more radically distant from Kant's, than Rorty's and, consequently, from religious and moral universalism, than a construction of a Rortian position would allow us to do.

### 3. Concluding remarks

In Armstrong's (2000 370-371) analysis, religious fundamentalism, which often has evolved in a "dialectical relationship with an aggressive secularism which showed scant respect for religion and its adherents", is a form of self-identification with a pre-modern conservative world; an attempt to re-sacralize society in order to "fill the void at the heart of a society based on scientific rationalism". Following this analysis, the 'dialogue among civilizations' is

likely to benefit more from an imaginative Wittgensteinian, than from a de-divinizing Rortian position.

However, if religious communities set out to give reasons for their beliefs, for instance in a tendency to bring the meaning of the Qur'an into harmony with the modern discoveries of the natural sciences (Abû Zayd 2004 54) or conversely, to bring Darwinism into harmony with the Bible (cf. Kitzmiller vs. Dover), they enter in the seemingly ludicrous (Wittgenstein 1967a 58) game of seeking evidence. Since "this would in fact destroy the whole business" (56), they could then no longer be met by the imaginative sensibility of a Wittgensteinian position.

## Literature

Armstrong, Karen 2000 *The Battle for God. Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, London: HarperCollins.

Arriaga, Manuel 2005 "Richard Rorty's Anti-Foundationalism and Traditional Philosophy's Claim for Social relevance", *Int. Phil. Quarterly* 45/4, 467-483.

GA resolution A/Res/53/22, 16 November 1998.

GA resolution A/Res/56/6, 9 November 2001.

Freud, Sigmund 2000 (1912-13) *Totem und Tabu. Einige Übereinstimmungen im Seelenleben der Wilden und der Neurotiker* (Sigmund Freud Studienausgabe, vol. 9), Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 287-445.

Huntington, Samuel 1993 "The clash of Civilizations?", *Foreign Affairs* 72/3, 22-49.

Kant, Immanuel 1795 "Zum ewigen Frieden" [On Perpetual Peace], in: *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, Berlin: Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, vol. 8, 341-386.

Mahbubani, Kishore 1993 "The Dangers of Decadence. What the Rest can Teach the West", *Foreign Affairs* 72/4, 10-14.

Nasr Abû Zayd 2004 *Rethinking the Qur'an: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics*, Amsterdam: SWP Publishers.

Phillips, D.Z. 1996 "Wittgenstein, Religion, and Anglo-American Philosophical Culture", in: K.S. Johannessen, T. Nordenstam (eds.), *Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Culture*, Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Temsky, 201-217.

Rorty, Richard 1996 *Moral Universalism and Economic Triage* (opening address of the 2<sup>nd</sup> UNESCO Philosophy Forum, Paris 27-30 March 1996), <http://www.unesco.org/phiweb/uk/2rpu/2emrpu.html>.

Rorty, Richard 1989 *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, Cambridge: CUP.

Thomas, Emyr Vaughan 2001 *Wittgensteinian values: philosophy, religious belief and descriptive methodology*, Burlington USA: Ashgate Publishing Company.

US District Court for the middle district of Pennsylvania, Case 4:04-cv-02688-JEJ, Document 342 Filed 12/20/2005 (Kitzmiller vs. Dover).

Wittgenstein, L. 1965 "A Lecture on Ethics", *Philosophical Review* 74, 3-12.

Wittgenstein, L. 1967 "Bemerkungen über Frazer's The Golden Bough", *Rush Rhees* (ed.), *Synthese* 17, 233-253.

Wittgenstein, L. 1967a *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology & Religious Belief*, Cyril Barrett (ed.), Oxford: Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, L. 1969 *On certainty*, G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (eds.), Oxford: Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, L. 1980 *Culture and Value*, G.H. von Wright (ed.), Oxford: Blackwell.