

## The Transcendentalist Culture after Rorty

László Márfa Molnár<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

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The term *transcendental*, the key word of my paper comes from Kant, who meant by that a methodological perspective, which is capable of grasping the totality of the (scientific) forms of cognition, which are known to us. Later Schelling applied the term transcendental to evaluate a future philosophy, which can entail formerly separated entities like subject and object, spirit and nature, etc. in the form of united knowledge. The American philosopher, Richard Rorty revived the expression to indicate the form of a potentially new culture. The essence of his idea is that agents of equal intellectual standing, who are in multiple and complex interaction with each other without a distinguished center, are creating a new form of culture, which we can call *transcendentalist culture after Rorty*. This means a continuous re-connection with the beginnings since because of the lack of a center the beginning is available at any time to anybody. Plato can be our inspiring conversation partner if we are willing to enter into a dialogue with him through his works. At the same time no one can feel peripheral because we speak of a space whose center is everywhere and whose perimeter is nowhere (Rorty, 1982). In my paper I will make an attempt to continue this experiment and I will address the question of what kind of speech modes and structures can constitute this culture, which could be in its spatiality the space of a new form of consciousness, that of *meta consciousness* of a similar transcendentalist nature.

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### Introduction

The term *transcendental*, the key word of my paper comes from Kant, who meant by that a methodological perspective, which is capable of grasping the totality of the (scientific) forms of cognition, which are known to us.

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<sup>1</sup>PhD, University of West Hungary, Institute of Applied Arts, Deák tér 32. 9400 Sopron, Hungary

If understanding in general be defined as the faculty of laws or rules, the faculty of judgement may be termed the faculty of subsumption under these rules; that is, of distinguishing whether this or that does or does not stand under a given rule (*casus datae legis*).

General logic contains no directions or precepts for the faculty of judgement, nor can it contain any such. For as it makes abstraction of all content of cognition, no duty is left for it, except that of exposing analytically the mere form of cognition in conceptions, judgements, and conclusions, and of thereby establishing formal rules for all exercise of the understanding. Now if this logic wished to give some general direction how we should subsume under these rules, that is, how we should distinguish whether this or that did or did not stand under them, this again could not be done otherwise than by means of a rule. But this rule, precisely because it is a rule, requires for itself direction from the faculty of judgement. Thus, it is evident that the understanding is capable of being instructed by rules, but that the judgement is a peculiar talent, which does not, and cannot require tuition, but only exercise. This faculty is therefore the specific quality of the so-called mother wit, the want of which no scholastic discipline can compensate." (Kant, I: Critique)

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Their effort is understandable if we take into account that the whole modern way of thinking starting from Descartes and Bacon is based on the principle of dichotomy. The confrontation of the cognitive subject with the object of cognition, the separation of the forms of existence constitutes both the strength and the weakness of modern thought. This created an early demand for the restoration of an integrated way of thinking for which the first great experiment can be found in the classical German philosophy. Almost all of the authors can be mentioned here together with Kant and Schelling, for example Fichte and Hegel.

Today the American philosopher, Richard Rorty revived the term transcendental. The essence of his idea is that agents of equal intellectual standing, who are in multiple and complex interaction with each other without a distinguished center, are creating a new form of culture, which we can call *transcendentalist culture* after Rorty.

This means a continuous re-connection with the beginnings since because of the lack of a center the beginning is available at any time to anybody. Plato can be our inspiring conversation partner if we are willing to enter into a dialogue with him through his works. At the same time no one can feel peripheral because we speak of a space, whose center is everywhere and whose perimeter is nowhere. (Rorty,1982)

In this paper I will make an attempt to continue this philosophical experiment and I will address the question of what kind of speech modes and structures can constitute this culture, which could be in its spatiality the space of a new form of consciousness, that of *meta consciousness* of a similar transcendentalist nature.

In my view the decisive element is that philosophy should be understood and practiced in a radical way, as a completely free activity and not as a professional discipline since if it is understood in this way, it will be nothing else but its own parody. This recognition is important for yet another reason: if we understand that we have to bear the blows of fortune – or accept our fate if we think of the tragedies of antiquity – again and again in our own individual, irreproducible life, we also have to recognize that we can get rid of our fear from destiny only if we get engaged in a spiritual activity. In other words it is only this sphere of existence, which is free from the control of fate. Nevertheless, if it is just the desire to get rid of the excessive power of fate that drives one to pursue philosophy, only the doubtful experiment of self-salvation can be registered. Such an experiment will be of no interest to anybody else; it will be a mere attempt to address oneself while the real essence of this activity lies precisely in addressing *the other* and being addressed by *the others*. The way of thinking, which one imagines in this form, without firm boundaries is radical, that is to say, comprehensive, free, therefore it fears nothing and nobody, and it is able to address other people.

### **Re-Connection with the Beginnings**

A re-start always entails a re-connection with the beginnings. The expression *methexis*, which Plato uses in *Phaidon* and *Timaeus*, is one of the key terms of his philosophy. We cannot, however, forget that Plato never gives a full conceptual explanation of his most important terms in his works and he hides their semantic range in myths, partly in metaphorical figures, intentionally obscuring some references.

In *Timaeus* we in fact find two myths in one of which the eponymous character tells about his Atlantis to which Socrates adds his own cosmological myth. He also tells about *methexis* here, which is embedded in the myth. The term, which is usually translated as *share* into, accordingly entails the share of the forms of the tangible world in the more original spiritual reality, in the forms and qualities of an eternal and unchanging existence. All features and even the mere existence of the former can be attributed to their share in the higher world.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Plato offers no strict conceptual elaboration of what this process means and how it happens; (Plato: *Timaeus* 53a-56e) instead, we can share his grandiose vision of metaphorical figures and geometrical forms.

Here and in other works Plato applies the term *anamnesis* (recollection) to the process and explanation of human cognition as the indirect evidence of the immortality of the soul. But neither can we forget that if before its birth and after its death the soul (or spirit because in the works of Plato there is no such sharp distinction between the two as in later philosophies) was a direct observer of a more original, non-physical reality, it had to have a share in this higher reality. During our earthly existence we – like other beings - are endowed with physical characteristics through this sharing. Thus, human beings – although they recall the spiritual world through *anamnesis* – become cognitive realities, creatures, who have won a conscious existence through *methexis* in a double way: through their consciousness-souls and their bodies. *Methexis* therefore becomes the creator and maintainer of a human constellation, which is individual and irreproducible. It is also evident that if we follow Plato, such a *methexis* presupposes the active participation of a human being, not only as a soul, who recalls a higher world but also as an active agent, who participates in the process of sharing through his or her own spiritual efforts.

In our experience the task of the present age is to realize an active spiritual existence, and achieve a higher level of consciousness. This is possible only if the spirit has no desire to rule or possess anything since it exists and is active through sharing, and its eventual goal is to maintain this process, which is impossible if a spirit is driven by a thirst for power. Thus, we can fulfill the condition that *theother* has to be addressed and we can develop a way of thinking and consciousness in a constant dialogue, similarly to the works of Plato.

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.aboutscotland.com/harmony/lamda.html>

The one whom I address preferably replies to me, and the interaction leads to understanding, as it is shown by Gadamer, Ricoeur, Vattimo and others, who represent hermeneutics, but also by other twentieth-century philosophies like personalist philosophy, the dialogue philosophy of Martin Buber, the interactionist theory of G. H. Mead and the art and language theory of Bahtin. They were also radical in the sense that they dared to break with the highly intellectual concepts and ideas of their age, which were based on the modern abstract individual. The task is, of course, not to imitate them but to follow and maintain their radicalism in the realm of the spirit or consciousness since the two are in fact one.

### **Get the Professionals out or Transcendentalist Culture after Rorty**

In his reflection to the essay of Santayana written at the beginning of the century Richard Rorty notes that “the dialectical drama, which begins with Plato, continues” adding that “if it is not carried on by the ones, who make their living by teaching Plato, others will replace them”. (Rorty,1982) This fits in the relationship, which I have outlined above because according to the argument of Rorty professionalized philosophy, which has become a discipline, should be replaced with a decentralized, open way of thinking, which recognizes both the historical nature of philosophy and the value of thinking primarily for itself. According to this interpretation the meaning of thinking is not to reveal such essentialist concepts as beauty, goodness, truth but a kind of free movement in a spiritual space, which has been created and continuously maintained by our predecessors, contemporaries and others, and hopefully our spiritual successors will continue this work, even if they will call it differently or they will think in relations, which are unknown to us. The renouncement of the principle of substance can pave the way for the free movement of thoughts, namely a space which we can call transcendentalist culture after Rorty – instead of a convulsive professionalism, which entails the essentialist closing of the discipline.

The term *transcendental* in the Kantian sense used to refer to a critical method, which sought to explore the possibilities and boundaries of knowledge. It is, however, by far not the first case in the history of philosophy when a new author has given a different, extended meaning to the original concept in a new context. *Connotation*, the process originally described by Barthes, works in philosophy the same way as in other fields of linguistics.

“Barthes makes a distinction between *denotation* and *connotation*. Denotation can be described, for the sake of convenience, as the literal meaning. Connotation, on the other hand, is the second-order parasitical meaning. The first-order sign is the realm of denotation; the second-order sign the realm of connotation and, therefore, of myth. To put it crudely then, the important ‘lesson’ of ‘Le Mythe aujourd’hui’ is that objects and events always signify more than themselves, they are always caught up in systems of representation which add meaning to them.”<sup>3</sup> Having separated from their authors, the strictly defined concepts start their own life, which entails not only the meaning, which is confined to their semantic domain, attributed to them by the later readers, but a concept creates its own history. During this process it is in a constant motion in the space of the philosophical and other forms of speech: a motion, which is unpredictable and requires no controlling subject and during which the concept interacts with other words, revealing new and new meanings.

### **If we Follow this Road, we will be Elevated Into it**

It is a different question that the space, which Rorty envisaged, the new space of *transcendentalist culture* exists only if there are people who maintain it. In this sense this idea is not at all without antecedents since such spiritual activities of human beings as play or festival represent a similar form of existence. Both of them exist only if there are people who maintain and transmit them. On the other hand – as it has been observed by many great authors in the history of thought like Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Gadamer – the characteristic features of play and festival are very similar, we can even say that they are identical. Both of them are characteristically autotelic, their meaning lies in their own existence and the fact that they have a nature of an event, while they elevate and integrate those, who bring them into existence with their playing or celebrating activities. By taking into account these obvious agreements, we can easily imagine a future culture, where free thinking coincides with play and festival. We can imagine this culture within the framework of a new anthropology, as a form of existence, which many thinkers have envisaged in various forms in the course of history, for instance the name of Nietzsche can be mentioned here.

“To create new values—that, even the lion cannot yet accomplish: but to create itself freedom for new creating—that can the might of the lion do.

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<sup>3</sup><http://seacoast.sunderland.ac.uk/~os0tmc/culture/myth3.htm>

To create itself freedom, and give a holy Nay even unto duty: for that, my brethren, there is need of the lion.

To assume the ride to new values—that is the most formidable assumption for a load-bearing and reverent spirit. Verily, unto such a spirit it is preying, and the work of a beast of prey.

As its holiest, it once loved "Thou shalt": now is it forced to find illusion and arbitrariness even in the holiest things, that it may capture freedom from its love: the lion is needed for this capture.

But tell me, my brethren, what the child can do, which even the lion could not do? Why hath the preying lion still to become a child?

Innocence is the child, and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a game, a self-rolling wheel, a first movement, a holy Yea.

Aye, for the game of creating, my brethren, there is needed a holy Yea unto life: its own will, willeth now the spirit; his own world winneth the world's outcast.

Three metamorphoses of the spirit have I designated to you: how the spirit became a camel, the camel a lion, and the lion at last a child.—„ (Nietzsche)

At the same time we should not forget that if we examine this phenomenon in a historical context, we will get a reading of culture, which helps to give a more concrete form to the above vision with respect to the present and the near future. Suffice is to refer here to two twentieth-century authors: Huizinga and Bahtin. In his work entitled *Homo ludens* Huizinga deduced culture and the whole of creating power from play while Bahtin identified this free, spontaneous activity with the independent world of a popular educational culture together with all of its necessary components. It is well known how productive Bahtin's ideas have been until today. The work of Huizinga can be considered one of the wittiest books of the cultural history of the interwar period. *Homo ludens* has been, however, later criticized because the Dutch author understands play, which creates culture only in one quality: as *agon*, competition and struggle.

Therefore Roger Caillois systematized play as a creating activity in a more differentiated way. (Caillois, 1958.) Wolfgang Iser used this concept when he created his literary anthropology. (Iser, 1993)

If we use the classification of Caillois, he introduces *mimicry*, imitation or acting, *alea*, chance or fortune, and *ilinx*, intoxication or ecstasy as creative forms besides *agon*. All of these are not essences, eternal laws but they are dynamic structures, which fill in the human sphere of existence, linguistic domains, which - like every festival and play - can only be created through human activity, which is driven by human desire.

As Caillois notes: "It should be recalled that these distinctive attitudes are four in number: the to desire to win by one's in regulated competition (*agon*); the submission of one's will in favor of anxious and passive anticipation of where the wheel stop (*alea*); the desire to assume a strange personality (*mimicry*); and finally, the pursuit of vertigo (*ilinx*). In *agon* the player relies only upon in himself and his utmost efforts; in *alea* he counts of everthing except himself: submitting the powers, that elude him; in *mimicry* he imagines that he is someone else and he ivents in imaginary universe; and in *ilinx* he grafities the desire to temporarily destroy his bodily equilibrium, escape the tyranny of his ordinary perception and provoke the abdication of conscience." (Caillois, 1958. 259.)

These types of human behavior and desire can also appear in themselves as the basic forms of culture but their combination can create ever more complex and richer variants of human civilization and culture. In this sense for instance all four basic types can be found in the carnival, which Bahtin also chose as the focus of his study, and which – as an event - elevates and integrates all of the participants. It creates competition amongst the actors; it entails acting, that is to say, mimicry; one of its important elements is fortune; and intoxication, the ecstatic form of existence likewise plays a decisive role in the carnival.

Transcendentalist culture is therefore based on the principle of play, in its complex and higher sense, where the pleasure principle will be decisive, and which can be conceived as an aesthetical activity according to our present concepts. More cannot be said of this culture, which entails the promise of an open future.

The example of the carnival, which Bahtin so frequently uses also reminds us that the more a culture and consciousness combines the four basic types of play, the more productive and richer it becomes and the greater perspective it can offer. This also means that the cultural space of this new consciousness cannot be described in advance since its creativity implies its openness: in fact, one of its most important values is the ability to create something new.

One can argue that the whole thesis is bound to age and time, and it presupposes the modern concept of aesthetics and culture; thus, it is not suitable for the conclusions of philosophical anthropology. However, Jacques Maquet notes in his book, which interprets aesthetics from an anthropological point of view: "Even in societies, which have not yet created a concept for art, there is an aesthetical *locus*, which we need to define in order to describe the aesthetical segment as if the members of these societies had agreed to limit their interest in visual composition and the strength of expression to the forms of certain groups of objects. (...) If the members of the group pay attention to the non-instrumental forms of certain objects, these forms dominate the surface or figures of the objects, and the "planners" or "designers" enjoy a higher status than the ordinary artisans, these refer to an aesthetical *locus*." (Maquet, 1986)

As C. G. Jung notes, the new forms of the aesthetical experience presupposes the forms of human existence, which become general later. „That is the secret of great art, and of its effect upon us. The creative process, so far as we are able to follow it at all, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life. Therein lies the social significance of art: it is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking. The unsatisfied yearning of the artist reaches back to the primordial image in the unconscious which is best fitted to compensate the inadequacy and one-sidedness of the present. The artist seizes on this image, and in raising it from deepest unconsciousness he brings it into relation with conscious values, thereby transforming it until it can be accepted by the minds of his contemporaries according to their powers". (Jung, 1978)

If we apply this thesis to our argument, we can conclude that the carnival projects *not* the cultural experience of the past but the specific transcendentalist culture of the future or – to conclude with a paradox what we started with the need for radicalism – this is how someone from the future sends a message to us.

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