

On the Conspiracy Theories as Irony and Language Games (with Continual Reference to Richard Rorty's Philosophy)

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Using the ideas of early German Romantics and their modern interpretation in the thinking of the philosopher Richard Rorty, the article analyses conspiracy theories regarding them as irony and language games. Through the prism of these analogies, conspiracy theorists and their followers are treated as *workers of the imagination* (i.e. poets), even though they do not fit properly within the framework of the concept of a liberal or poetic society, developed by Rorty. The concept of poetic culture, initially proposed by the German romantic Friedrich Schlegel, describes a culture in which the poetic element prevails, strongly complemented by the mystery element. The mystery in conspiracy theories would correspond to a distrust of rationality that drew criticism from the Romantics as well. Rorty's emphasis on the contingency of language is a good argument to see that conspiracy theorists also do not rely on transcendence. In this way, the aspect of truth as creation rather than discovery is also expressed. Irony in the article appears as an appropriate way to understand history and reality.

Keywords: language games, mystery, irony, Romanticism, Rorty, imagination

INTRODUCTION

The authoritative encyclopedia of conspiracy theories informs us that the term 'conspiracy theory' first entered 'the supplement to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1997 <...>. However <...> it did not become familiar in academic writing until the 1950s (with the work of Karl Popper), and did not become common currency until the 1960s' (Knight 2003: 17). The emergence of this term has helped to focus, in a relatively short period, the attention of researchers on a phenomenon that is undoubtedly of great importance in the social sphere today. It is striking that, despite the variety of interpretations of conspiracy theories, there is a uniformly negative view of conspiracy theories in these interpretations.¹ Most scholars regard them as an unequivocally reprehensible form of deception and look for ways to expose that deception. While this approach is not entirely unjustified, it does not seem fair to regard it as universal. In this article, we will highlight the positive aspects of conspiracy theories. To this end, we

¹ See more in Butter, Knight 2020; Knight 2000; Livers 2020; Carver et al. 2020; Fenster 2008; Dentith 2014.

will use a variant of pragmatism developed by Richard Rorty (1931–2007), which is based on the concepts of language games² and irony. It is well known that Rorty's pragmatism was strongly influenced by the German Romantic tradition.³ Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829) connected Romantic irony with the traditional notion of irony as a mere rhetorical tool. Alongside he developed the considerations of the interwoven relation between being and chaos. Schlegel also proposed to understand irony as a notion of mere potentiality, the source of all possible forms. Talking in general, the irony for the Romantics was understood as a mood, 'poetic reflection', and some kind of 'immanent consciousness of subject', which could provide of ability to reflect poetic images accumulated in the senses and contexts of creativity. Considering that conspiracy theories appear as neverending creations of various explications of history and reality in general, such explications are on the same 'legitimate' level as scientific explications. Irony signals that the real reasons for some events remain hidden from us. Nevertheless, the hidden side tells us some important things, such as the opportunity for someone to feel free in interpretations of the world, history, or politics.

The approach taken in the article creates a possibility to look at conspiracy theories positively and, in this way, to reveal their connections with the imagination, and its creative power (for more insights on creativity and society see Kačerauskas 2023). The decline of imagination and the augmentation of rationality in modern culture are related to the rise of secularism. Transcendence disappears, and at the same time, very meaningful Christian symbolism and metaphors become insignificant and hardly understandable. Some authors have already noticed this transformation of transcendence into the other, secular direction (e.g. Alfredas Buiko demonstrated this transformation in his Ph. D. thesis, defended at Vilnius University in 2023). Other authors insist that conspiracy theories are unavoidable (Kačerauskas 2024), or even propose to treat them as a kind of defense mechanism against uncertainty (Tikniūtė 2024). As was said above, talking in general, the basic emphasis has negative connotations. This negative point of view can be only partially supported. Without any doubt, the sympathisers of conspiracies strongly deny liberal ideas in their classical sense. However, their position postulates a lack of trust in rationality, historically established concepts, ideas and rules. Such a view proposes the opportunity for everyone to decide how history develops, what agents act in it, etc., even if it seems unserious or invalid.

Let us continue our thought on the importance of Romanticism in order to understand the beginning of conspiracy ideas. In the past, German Romanticism was an influential literary-cultural movement directed against the cult of reason that arose during the French Revolution. One of the means of the struggle with enlightened sobriety was literature. However, literature appeared not as we usually used to think. Literature was understood as a kind of philosophy, and philosophy was turned into irony (the idea of Friedrich Schlegel). After the French Revolution, at the end of the 18th century, the fashion of conspiracy theories was started. One can speculate that one of the main reasons for this could be the transformations within historical consciousness. Nearly over the night all social and political categories and historical agents were replaced by other, completely new categories. Before the revolution, the structure of society was strictly hierarchical, each social group knew its place within a society and was aware of possibilities of the way to 'grow up' solid fundamentals of society. Of

² Of course, the concept of 'language games' was introduced by Wittgenstein, but in this article, we will focus on Rorty's use of the concept. See more in Rorty 2007 a.

³ Recently, many scholars have acknowledged the influence of Fr. Schlegel's concept of romantic irony on Rorty's philosophy and placed great importance on it (see more in De Castro 2011; Schulenberg 2015).

course, those ways were not easy and multiple. As Rüdiger Safranski, a famous contemporary German writer and author of many famous biographies, noted, '[t]heories of conspiracy by secret societies were and remain today the most popular form of the philosophy of history. People believe that they know how history functions, where those pulling its strings reside, and how it is brought to pass. The holders of such conspiracy theories then knew everything about the French Revolution – for example, that it was controlled from Ingolstadt, which was known to be the headquarters of the Illuminati, and so on' (Safranski 2014: 30).

It is worth mentioning that, since that time, the metaphor of the invisible hand, and mysterious threats overwhelmed a person's imagination and spread in various stories. Further Safranski writes that, 'The will to mystery was a driving force both for those who formed conspiratorial organizations and those who allowed themselves to be scared by them. Those who took part in this business, whichever side they were on, behaved in the lowlands as Novalis on the high plateau of Romantic speculation then encouraged them to do <...>' (Safranski 2014: 30). So, this context is important for following the analysis on Rorty's ideas and the basic theme of the article.

RICHARD RORTY: IRONY, LANGUAGE GAMES AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Being certain that Western philosophy needs self-criticism, Rorty started doing it himself, especially in the late period of his life, after developing a critical attitude to analytic philosophy. Rorty criticised a long-standing, since antiquity-established philosophical tradition, which, as a manifestation of rationality, was based on various dualisms and principles. He unmasks the epistemological tradition from Plato to contemporary analytic philosophy. According to Rorty, this tradition consists of various efforts to find a background for our knowledge or beliefs based on unchangeable principles, such as Platonic ideas, apriori categories of reason (I. Kant), in independent objects (realism), 'sensory data' (logical positivism) and in the characteristics of our language (analytical philosophy). Rorty forms a task for himself to overcome and deconstruct the traditional view of philosophy, which is an exact mirror of nature's objective world. By rejecting the theory of truth as correspondence and as 'realistic dogma' Rorty proposes to replace the old-fashioned doctrine with post-positivistic coherency conception. This conception is based on the idea that a proposition is a correspondence to the principles and obligations of a particular linguistic game, which functions in the particular historical society of individuals. Society is understood as a linguistic and for Rorty, it is the only justification for human knowledge, thinking, and behaviour norms or standards.

Rorty thinks that the conception identified with the conception of the 'existence' of an objective world should be thrown away as unnecessary. A philosopher (or a scientist, or a poet) cannot abstract himself from the social milieu in which he is thrown; ideal, trans-historical 'god's view', which can guarantee the objectivity of the researchers, is simply inaccessible for a human being. Knowledge is possible only from the perspective of an engaged subject, who is immersed in a sociocultural context; the subject is always limited by a situation, or to say more precisely, he/she is historically limited. Rorty's philosophical position can be described as anti-fundamentalism and anti-essentialism. He rejects the traditional notion of philosophy, which one can describe as the search for fundamental principles. The American philosopher thinks that truth is a linguistic construction, which does not have any metaphysical fundament. Truth is not discovered but rather created. So, Rorty does not accept any unambiguously described principles of being, any essence of things, or human nature. He also rejects the traditional criteria that truth is equivalent to things (these criteria are senseless because

of the contingent nature of language). Following this argument, he replaces the criteria of equivalent with the criteria of usefulness; by doing this Rorty stresses the role of contexts in the metaphorical explanation and evaluation of a particular phenomenon. From Antiquity, there is a prevailing belief that only philosophy has the exclusive ability to know reality. Rorty broadens this idea by questioning various descriptions of reality, including scientific, and insists that there is no argumentation for which of the descriptions is true. The philosopher wrote that '[t]here is no such thing as a nonrelational feature of X, any more than there is such a thing as the intrinsic nature, the essence, of X. So, there can be no such thing as a description which matches the way X is, apart from its relation to human needs or consciousness or language' (Rorty 2000: 50). Everything is mediated by consciousness or language, and it means that we are simply not able to determine the standards of 'correctness'.

Such Rorty's idea for someone could appear as a simple borrowing from Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical vocabulary (put simply, everything is only interpretation), but probably this step places Rorty's position close to Hans Blumenberg's metaphorology, then to Nietzsche.⁴ Metaphors and historical changes in the description of reality appear as a part of language games, which include all descriptions of reality (such as literature, philosophy and science). That means each historical period, and each area of arts and science needs a certain vocabulary. For Rorty, the perfect vocabulary is such that is never stable, never finished, and never based on something outside of it (e.g. transcendence). But if so, what we should expect from our different vocabularies? Is it possible to find a point of departure from the polyphony of various voices? Alan Malachowski, when commenting on Rorty's answer to the dilemma, writes the following:

'<...> one interpretation may be better than another because it more effectively satisfies certain desires or fulfills such and such a purpose' (Malachowski 2002: 5). Regarding what was said, one can suppose that sometimes the explanation of some events with the help of conspiracy may better satisfy one's social, political, or religious group tasks. So, let us explain this statement with a look at Schlegel and Rorty's thinking.

In Schlegel's thinking, as in Rorty's, philosophy appears as an irony. Such inversion means that there is no metaphysically based criterion of truth. In principle, each group of society or scientific community has the right to have its criterion of truth. Nevertheless, it does not imply that there is no truth at all: truth is a child of time. Rorty noted that 'Romantic idea that truth is made rather than found. What is true about this claim is just that languages are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences' (Rorty 1989: 7).

Conspiracies deny what is considered an unquestionable official truth; they freely construct a picture of truth and historical events. Probably it makes sense to name conspiracy followers as 'writers or poets'. Again, we can find some arguments for this statement in Rorty's philosophy. When explaining his ideas, Rorty proposed a figure of a liberal ironist, who reads books, facts and genres very creatively, without the usual academic requirement to read according to some rules, methods, etc. Like Rorty's ironist, conspiracy admirers do not take politics and history as a canon, which only particular professionals can comment on. In addition, one can say that conspiracy stresses the contingency of reality. According to Rorty, it is more correct to accept that all manifestations of reality are contingent. The philosopher also insists that the language is also contingent:

⁴ See more about H. Blumenberg in Vidauskytė 2022: 245–252.

‘There is no way to step outside the various vocabularies we have employed and find a meta vocabulary which somehow takes account of all possible vocabularies, all possible ways of judging and feeling’ (Rorty 1989: XVI). The vocabulary used by philosophers should not be seen as a ‘mirror of nature’, but rather as a ‘tool’, whose purpose is to create new language games (Rorty 1980: 212). Therefore, as was mentioned previously, truth is not *discovered*, but rather *created*, by constantly ‘rewriting’ existing vocabularies. Again, Rorty based his ideas on the German romantics and wrote:

‘What the Romantics expressed as the claim that imagination, rather than the reason, is the central human faculty was the realization that talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change’ (Rorty 1989: 7). No one can find a final truth, simply our decisions are based on usefulness (Rorty 1989: 8). It means that ‘we can only compare languages or metaphors with one another, not with something beyond language called “fact”’ (Rorty 1989: 20). So, how can we say that some theories are closer to reality than others? We can also apply such questions to conspiracy theories.

Rorty realises that accepting the universal contingency of reality requires a different style of thinking. He identifies this style as ‘irony’. Rorty stresses that he uses this term in a similar way to the Romantic thinkers, i.e. as a paradoxical unity of engagement and distance.

Rorty admits that it was the Romantics who first brought to the fore the values that he sees as the ethical basis of liberal society. According to him, it should be a society consisting of individuals who are aware of their contingency and who live in solidarity without relying on any trans-linguistic reality. In addition, conspiracies can be also regarded as ironic. Such irony is directed to philosophers’ belief that they can grasp real or eternal fundamentals. Rorty paraphrases J. Dewey and his agreement with Fr. G. Hegel about the weakness of philosophical discourse as follows: ‘Philosophers were never going to be able to see things under the aspect of eternity; they should instead try to contribute to humanity’s ongoing conversation about what to do with itself. The progress of this conversation has engendered new social practices, and changes in the vocabularies deployed in moral and political deliberation’ (Rorty 2007: ix). This thought could be another supportive argument for the positive view of conspiracy theories. The morality of conspiracy theories lies in the possibility of understanding history in a different way than the official explanation.

Rorty continues this idea by claiming that ‘Many contemporary moral philosophers still take seriously the idea that moral and political decisions are made by pondering practical syllogisms whose major premises are luminously clear principles and whose minor premises are plain empirical facts. These philosophers like to describe people whose views they disapprove of – racists and homophobes, for example – as “irrational”. Irrationality, thought of as a blamable failure to exercise an innate faculty, has thus become the secular equivalent of sin. Both are thought of as a deliberate turning away from the light’ (Rorty 2007: 58). Today many philosophers used to name conspiracy supporters as ‘not very clever people’, ‘marginals’, etc. When one can take an ironic position proposed by Rorty, then such supporters appear as normal (whatever we can understand by the word ‘normal’).

Considering the role of aesthetics, it is worth mentioning that Rorty especially emphasises the power of imagination, and this idea was proposed and elaborated by the Romantics. Imagination is much stronger than reason, and it is more important not only to an individual but also on a social level; imagination transcends the limits of reason, language, or culture. According to Rorty, imagination has been an agent since the 18th century for cultural changes (this idea was already postulated by Schlegel). For the Romantics, imagination was connected

to the remnant of transcendence: Rorty writes that it was 'a link with something, not ourselves, a proof that we were here as from another world. It was a faculty of expression' (Rorty 1989: 36).

The function of imagination was not to find a sense but to create it. In the sphere of language, this function appears as a capability to modify a vocabulary by finding metaphors. The Romantics were convinced that the essence of reality resists experiments to express it in one meaningful concept. It means that talking about reality is meaningful when using metaphorical language. According to Rorty, Romanticism for the first time declared liberal values, and the philosopher wanted to see those values in nowadays liberal society. It means that individuals clearly understand their contingency and live without any support from reality outside of the language borders. They are used to explain the world according to the rules of language games.

The Romantics tried to replace science and philosophy with creativity. Even criticism of works of art, and science as well, had to turn into artistic creation. It is found that such creation is expressed through the change of language and vocabulary. This is how language games are constructed. According to the Romantics, everything must become a game and play. Considering what is said, conspiracies are also a part of language games, and the games of explanation of history and reality. Each follower of conspiracy can freely play creative games around interpretation: choose one or other elements of history and follow his/her imagination, education, preferences, or mood, to create an ironic view of events.

In the predominance of language games, as Rorty has already noted, truth is created, but not discovered. German Romanticism offered what we now consider to be an irrefutable quality of individuality – the power of imagination, an individual language, and a poetic vision of the world.

Therefore, conspiracy enthusiasts do not rely on metaphysical reasons, but on pure contingency.

Returning to the concept of poetic culture, it is worth noting an essential aspect that dates back to the times of Romanticism. The poetic relationship with the world is aesthetic. However, the Romantics believed that aesthetic education is at the same time ethical, i.e. he makes us better. Rorty is inspired by this idea and in his philosophical position, such interchangeability – aesthetics turns into ethics, and ethics turns into aesthetics – is one of the most important. The tool that should be used for aesthetic-ethical education is literature, i.e. poetry, and prose (primarily novel). It is understood that such an educational tool is primarily linguistic.

Rorty suggests that reading the work of literature is like using a tool of moral education. The work of literature teaches us to be better. It is obvious that conspiracy narratives do not make us better in a strict sense, but maybe they allow us to look at everything a little more freely, and less seriously.

Belief in conspiracies postulates a moment of mystery and thus questions rationalism, which sometimes can be too overwhelming.

CONCLUSIONS

1. From the perspective of the German romantics and Richard Rorty, conspiracy theories can be interpreted as irony (in the philosophical sense) and language games. Thus, the positive side of these theories is revealed.

2. Many conspiracy theories have outlived their time and still excite the imagination. This element of imagination is a positive aspect because it provides a counterweight to the rationalism that has dominated since the Enlightenment and which the Romantics once criticised. Conspiracy theories also critique facts and historical interpretations.

3. Although conspiracy theories do not fall into the classical semantic field of a liberal society, their connection with the imagination (the metaphor of the invisible hand, the universality of collusion) will allow the follower of such a theory to independently construct a picture of the development of events, history and surrounding reality. The most important criterion for such linguistic games is the utility aspect.

4. Conspiracy theories should not be seen as just constant interpretations without any facts. They are based on vocabulary modification and creation and thus fall under the category of language games.

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Apie sąmokslų teorijas kaip ironiją ir kalbos žaidimus (nuolatos atsižvelgiant į Richardo Rorty filosofiją)

Santrauka

Straipsnyje analizuojamos sąmokslų teorijos kaip ironija ir kalbiniai žaidimai, pasitelkiant ankstyvojo vokiečių Romantizmo idėjas ir jų šiuolaikinę interpretaciją filosofo Richardo Rorty mąstyme. Konspiracijos teorijų (sykiu ir vaizduotės) bumus Europoje užgimė po Prancūzijos revoliucijos, kai sugriuvo visos iki tol egzistavusios socialinės-višuomeninės normos. Kiekvienas dabar galėjo laisvai rinktis savo kelią, lygiai kaip ir laisvai interpretuoti istorijos vyksmą, tikrovės įvykius. Analogijos su kalbiniais žaidimais ir ironija leidžia sąmokslų teorijų šalininkus traktuoti kaip vaizduotės darbininkus (t. y. poetus), nors ir nepatenka į R. Rorty plėtotą liberalios arba poetinės visuomenės rėmus. Poetinės kultūros sąvoka, kurią pasiūlė vokiečių romantikas Friedrichas Schlegelis, apibūdina tokią kultūrą, kurioje vyrauja poetinis elementas, gausiai papildytas paslapties komponentu. Paslaptis sąmokslų teorijose atitiktų nepasitikėjimą racionalumu, kuris sulaukė kritikos ir iš romantikų. R. Rorty pabrėžtas kalbos ir kultūros kontingentiškumas nurodo į tai, kad sąmokslų teorijų šalininkai nesiremia transcendencija. Tokiu būdu reiškiasi ir tiesos kaip sukūrimo, o ne atradimo aspektas. Ironija straipsnyje pristatoma kaip tinkamas būdas suprasti istoriją ir tikrovę.

Raktažodžiai: kalbos žaidimai, ironija, paslaptis, Romantizmas, vaizduotė