



Redefining Solidarity: Humanism and the Role of Community in Richard Rorty's Pragmatist Vision

Abstract: This paper explores Richard Rorty's vision of humanism and community through the lens of his pragmatist philosophy. Rorty challenges the traditional foundations of ethics, rejecting fixed human nature and objective truth. Instead, he presents a humanism rooted in language, culture, and shared stories. Central to Rorty's thought is the idea of "sentimental education," where literature and narratives foster empathy and moral sensitivity. The paper argues that solidarity, rather than objectivity, serves as the foundation for building communities. Drawing from thinkers like Višňovský, Koopman, and Shusterman, the discussion shows how Rorty's ideas offer a flexible, inclusive, and hopeful path for democracy and ethical life. Critics such as McCarthy and White express concern about the limits of Rorty's framework, especially in confronting injustice and sustaining robust political action. However, the paper concludes that Rorty's emphasis on kindness, conversation, and hope remains a valuable resource for addressing moral and political challenges today. Rorty's post-philosophical vision allows communities to adapt, evolve, and work toward reducing cruelty through shared language and imagination, rather than through metaphysical or universal doctrines.

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1. Introduction

Richard Rorty changed how many people think about philosophy. Instead of focusing on truth or reality, he looked at how people live and talk together. Rorty believed that philosophy should help make life better by promoting kindness and understanding (Rorty, 1999, p. xvii). Rorty's version of humanism does not believe in a fixed human nature. He thought that humans are shaped by history, culture, and language. We do not discover who we are; we create who we are through conversation and experience (Rorty, 1989, p. 22). This makes his view different from older ideas of humanism, which were based on reason and universal

values. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty argued that no final truth exists. Instead of seeking fixed truths, people should build communities based on shared hopes and stories (Rorty, 1989, p. xv). Communities, for Rorty, are held together not by truth but by solidarity. He said we should care about others simply because they are like us—not because a theory tells us to (Rorty, 1989, p. 192).

One way we become more caring is through "sentimental education." This means learning to feel for others by reading novels, watching movies, or hearing their stories. Rorty believed this could make people more kind than reading moral rules ever could (Rorty, 1999, p. 94). For him, progress happens when more people recognize the suffering of others and act to reduce it. This makes Rorty's humanism deeply emotional. It is based on feelings rather than logic. His goal was a "liberal utopia" where cruelty is rare and people respect each other's differences (Rorty, 1989, p. xvi). In such a society, people are free but also care about justice and fairness.

Some thinkers say that liberalism focuses too much on the individual. Others say that community matters more. Rorty tried to find a middle path. He agreed that we need others to shape our identity. But he also said that communities must change over time. They should be flexible and open to new ideas (Višňovský, 2020, p. 3). Egon Višňovský (2020) points out that Rorty's humanism avoids big promises. It does not offer a grand theory. Instead, it offers practical ways to improve life.

Rorty's focus is on hope and conversation. These things help people come together and work through their problems (p. 5).

Richard Shusterman (2022) also supports this view. He writes that Rorty's humanism is useful for today's world because it avoids strict beliefs and focuses on action (p. 417). Rorty didn't think we could save the world with philosophy. But he did think we could make it better by talking and listening to each other. Rorty's humanism is not without critics. Some say it lacks strong values. Others say it's too soft to deal with real injustice. But Rorty would answer that no system can fix everything. What we can do is keep the conversation going and remain open to change (Rorty, 1999, p. 85). In the end, Rorty gave us a new way to think about community. We don't need to agree on deep truths. We just need to care about each other and try to live together. His ideas remind us that hope and kindness matter more than theory.

Literature Review

Rorty's pragmatism rejects essentialism, favoring a humanism built on self-creation and contingency (Rorty, 1989; Višňovský, 2020). His ethical vision is shaped by cultural and historical experience rather than metaphysical truths (Rorty, 1979). As Višňovský (2020) puts it, Rorty's humanism relies on "possibilities of human self-creation" (p. 3), encouraging flexibility and creativity. The role of literature as "the principal vehicle of moral progress" (Rorty, 1989, p. 192) underscores his belief in emotional education. Koopman (2006) supports this, arguing Rorty urges hope over authority (p. 240). Shusterman (1994, 2022) builds on this, stating Rorty's vision affirms liberal pluralism without metaphysical backing. Schneiderhan (2013) connects this to community work, noting the practical value of Rorty's ethics. Yet, critics like McCarthy (1990) argue that such relativism weakens moral critique (p. 375), and White (2013) contends that Rorty underestimates the labor of building communities (p. 191). These debates reveal both the promise and limits of Rorty's humanist project, particularly its application in real-world politics. Despite criticism, his focus on solidarity, conversation, and empathy continues to influence humanist thought and public ethics.

Research Gap

While Rorty's pragmatism promotes solidarity through language and empathy, there remains limited analysis of how his ideas practically address structural injustice and power asymmetries. More research is needed on how Rorty's framework operates in digital, global, and post-secular contexts where pluralism and deep disagreements prevail.

Objectives:

1. To examine Rorty's redefinition of humanism and its shift from objectivity to solidarity.
2. To evaluate the potential and limits of Rorty's sentimental education for ethical and political community-building.
3. To explore the criticisms of Rorty's approach and its practical relevance in modern democratic societies.

Methodology:

This study uses qualitative textual analysis to examine Richard Rorty's key philosophical works alongside relevant secondary literature. Primary texts include *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, and *Philosophy and Social Hope*. Secondary sources such as Višňovský (2020), Koopman (2006), Shusterman (1994, 2022), and Schneiderhan (2013) provide interpretative insights and critiques. The analysis focuses on Rorty's concepts of humanism, solidarity, and "sentimental education," assessing their coherence and applicability. Attention is also given to critiques from McCarthy (1990), Jackson (1987), and White (2013) to provide a balanced evaluation.

Significance:

This research contributes to ongoing debates in ethics, political theory, and educational philosophy by re-examining Rorty's humanist pragmatism. In an era marked by polarization, inequality, and cultural fragmentation, Rorty's emphasis on empathy, narrative, and shared language offers a hopeful alternative to rigid ideological frameworks. By highlighting the practical power of "sentimental education" and moral imagination, the paper shows how Rorty's vision remains relevant for building inclusive and



flexible communities. The study also addresses gaps in current scholarship by considering how Rorty's ideas can engage with challenges of pluralism, injustice, and digital culture.

2. Humanism Without Foundations:

Rorty's Anti-Essentialist Ethics: Richard Rorty rejected the idea that human beings have a fixed nature. He did not believe that there is something deep and unchanging about who we are. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, he wrote, "There is no need to view the mind as something which stands between us and the world" (Rorty, 1979, p. 239). This shows how Rorty opposed old views that said truth or the self could be discovered by reason alone. Rorty believed that we should stop trying to find foundations for knowledge or ethics. He said, "The notion of 'foundations of knowledge' seems to be an illusion" (Rorty, 1979, p. 170). Instead of grounding ethics in something eternal or outside time, he thought we should build moral ideas from human experience. Ethics, for Rorty, grows out of culture and history—not nature. This idea led Rorty to reject traditional humanism. Many forms of humanism believe in a true self or soul that makes us human. Rorty disagreed. As Višňovský (2020) puts it, "Rorty's humanism is not based on the assumption of a permanent human essence but on the possibilities of human self-creation" (p. 3). So, being human is something we create, not something we discover.

Instead of seeing philosophy as a path to truth, Rorty saw it as a tool for conversation. He wanted to shift attention from metaphysics to language. He thought that how we speak about ourselves shapes who we are. There is no deep self behind the words—only the words themselves.

Rorty also talked about the idea of the "liberal ironist." This person is someone who does not believe in ultimate truth but still tries to reduce cruelty. He writes, "A liberal is someone who thinks that cruelty is the worst thing we do. An ironist is someone who faces up to the contingency of his own most central beliefs" (Rorty, 1989, p. xv). This shows how ethics, for Rorty, does not depend on truth, but on our emotional response to others.

This is why Rorty spoke of "sentimental education." He believed that reading novels and

hearing other people's stories could help us become better people. He wrote, "Literature is the principal vehicle of moral progress" (Rorty, 1989, p. 192). By learning about the lives and struggles of others, we become more sensitive. That sensitivity is what helps us act kindly—not some fixed truth.

Rorty's view of humanism is about empathy and imagination. He didn't think we need a theory to explain why we should help others. We just need to see them as similar to us. When we do that, we are more likely to care. As Višňovský (2020) notes, "Rorty urges us to see morality in terms of enlarging the sense of 'we'" (p. 4). This means we make progress when we include more people in our circle of concern. Richard Bernstein (2008) also explained this well. He wrote, "What Rorty is seeking is a form of deep humanism without metaphysical foundations" (p. 40). This "deep humanism" is not about fixed values. It's about constant effort to reduce suffering and support others in practical ways.

Rorty also criticized the idea that philosophy should be the judge of culture or politics. He thought this was arrogant. Instead, he wanted a "post-philosophical" culture—one where people solve problems through shared conversation, not by appealing to truth. Ramberg and Dieleman (2020) explain, "Rorty's post-philosophical culture is one in which philosophy ceases to be a tribunal of reason" (p. 12). So, Rorty's ethics do not come from above. They are built from below, by people working together.

This also connects to Rorty's anti-authoritarianism. He believed that many problems come from people who think they have final answers. He said, "The idea that one should believe only what can be justified to all human beings is a version of the authoritarian attitude" (Rorty, 1989, p. 198). For him, freedom comes when we accept that different people live in different ways—and that's okay.

It is found that Rorty gave us a new way to think about ethics and humanism. He said we don't need deep truths to live good lives. What we need is empathy, imagination, and hope. We become better not by following rules, but by listening to others and learning from their stories.



3.Solidarity Over Objectivity:

The Pragmatist Conception of Community Richard Rorty did not believe that communities are built on truth. He believed they are formed through shared language and values. In his book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty wrote, “The world does not speak. Only we do” (Rorty, 1989, p. 22). This shows his view that meaning does not come from nature. It comes from how people describe the world together.

Rorty rejected the idea that communities need fixed foundations. He thought values and beliefs come from our shared history. He wrote, “A talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change” (Rorty, 1989, p. 7). This means that change happens not through proving others wrong, but through creating new ways of speaking and thinking.

His idea of community is based on solidarity, not objectivity. Solidarity, for Rorty, is about caring for others. He explained, “Solidarity has to be constructed out of little pieces, rather than found already waiting” (Rorty, 1989, p. 94). This means that unity must be built over time. It grows from shared stories, not shared truths.

Rorty thought that we should try to understand and include others, even if we do not agree with them. He said, “The liberal ironist thinks that the only point of being human is to be kind to other humans” (Rorty, 1989, p. 198). So, his idea of community was moral, not metaphysical. It focused on reducing cruelty and increasing care.

Colin Koopman (2006) supported this view. He wrote, “Rorty wants us to put our faith in the future rather than the past, in possibility rather than authority, in hope rather than truth” (p. 240). Koopman showed that Rorty’s idea of community is forward-looking. It is based on shared goals, not old truths.

Rorty’s community also welcomes difference. Koopman noted that “Rorty’s vision of democracy is one that emphasizes continual re-description and re-imagination” (Koopman, 2006, p. 246). This means people should always be ready to change. They should not try to make everyone the same.

Rorty’s thinking is close to John Dewey’s model of democracy. Dewey believed that democracy is not just about voting. It is a way of life. People learn from each other, work together, and grow. Rorty shared this view but focused more on the role of language and imagination.

Erik Schneiderhan (2013) explored this in action. He compared Rorty’s ideas to Jane Addams’ community work. Schneiderhan wrote, “Rorty’s work reminds us that building communities depends on listening to others, telling stories, and having hope” (p. 429). This shows that Rorty’s ideas are not just theory. They can help build real communities.

Rorty believed that literature and art can help us understand others better. He said, “Literature is the principal vehicle of moral progress” (Rorty, 1989, p. 192). By reading or listening to others’ experiences, we become more open. This builds solidarity. Richard Shusterman (1994) also supported Rorty’s view. He explained, “Rorty’s pragmatism affirms liberalism’s commitment to freedom and pluralism without depending on metaphysical justifications” (p. 398). So, Rorty’s community is strong not because it is based on truth, but because it includes many voices.

Shusterman also pointed out a danger. He wrote, “Rorty’s liberal utopia may lack the political bite or resistance needed to confront real injustices” (Shusterman, 1994, p. 402). This means that while Rorty’s vision is hopeful, it may be too gentle for some of the world’s hard problems.

Even so, Rorty’s idea remains powerful. He showed that people do not need to agree on truth to live together. They only need to agree to care. In his words, “We do not need to worship something beyond the human community” (Rorty, 1989, p. 198). This is a humanist message. It places trust in people, not in higher truths.

It can be said that Rorty’s idea of community is based on solidarity, not objectivity. It values shared language, imagination, and empathy. It is not about finding the one right answer. It is about listening, including, and building a better world together. His ideas offer a hopeful way to think about democracy, especially in times of division.



4.The Role of Hope in Rorty's Political Humanism:

Richard Rorty did not base his political thought on truth or human nature. Instead, he focused on hope. He believed that progress comes when people act with the belief that things can get better. In *Philosophy and Social Hope*, he wrote, “My principal motive for offering suggestions about the way things ought to be is to keep hope alive” (Rorty, 1999, p. xiii). For Rorty, hope is not about a final goal. It is about continuing the struggle for a more just and kind society.

Rorty rejected deep theories about what it means to be human. He saw these as limiting. He argued that we do not need a definition of human nature to act morally. In his view, “We should stop trying to get behind appearances and instead learn to describe things better” (Rorty, 1999, p. 27). This shows that, for Rorty, moral progress happens through conversation and imagination, not theory.

Hope plays a central role in Rorty’s humanism. He did not view humanism as a doctrine. Instead, he saw it as a practical effort to reduce suffering. His humanism is a tool, not a truth. He explained, “The social hope which liberal societies depend on is not bound up with the hope of knowing the truth” (Rorty, 1999, p. 199). So, the goal is not to discover what is right for all time, but to build a world where people are treated with kindness.

Crispin Sartwell once criticized this kind of humanism as shallow. But Rorty responded that he never aimed to give a final answer. He only hoped to keep the conversation going. He believed that society improves not by discovering truth, but by “telling more helpful stories” (Rorty, 1999, p. 60).

Colin Koopman (2006) agrees with this idea. He writes, “Rorty wants us to put our faith in the future rather than the past, in possibility rather than authority, in hope rather than truth” (p. 240). Koopman shows that Rorty’s political vision is based on change. It is always open to improvement and redescription.

Koopman also links Rorty to American thinkers like Emerson and Dewey. He writes, “Rorty’s romantic liberalism, in short, is the voice of Emerson updated for the postmodern world” (Koopman, 2006, p. 243). Like Emerson, Rorty

trusted individual imagination. Like Dewey, he valued community work and education. But he added a strong emphasis on hope as a political tool.

Dewey believed that democracy was a moral ideal. Rorty agreed but wanted to add a more poetic view. He believed that people come together not through reason alone, but through shared hopes and fears. That is why he valued novels, television, and conversation more than philosophy books. As he put it, “The novels and the newspapers are better for moral progress than the metaphysical treatises” (Rorty, 1999, p. 122).

Erik Schneiderhan (2013) connects Rorty’s ideas to the work of Jane Addams. She believed in solving problems locally, through community efforts. Schneiderhan writes, “Rorty’s work reminds us that building communities depends on listening to others, telling stories, and having hope” (p. 429). This shows how hope is not abstract for Rorty. It is something people use in real life to bring about change.

Rorty’s focus on hope also shaped his political goals. He supported a democratic society where cruelty is reduced. He believed that this could happen through social cooperation, not through perfect theories. As Pouryousefi and Freeman (2021) note, “Rorty’s political view is devoid of traditional philosophical and metaphysical commitments” (p. 107). This means Rorty’s hope is not about truth. It is about practice.

Richard Bernstein (2008) also points out that Rorty’s humanism is deep without needing foundations. He writes, “What Rorty is seeking is a form of deep humanism without metaphysical foundations” (p. 40). This shows that Rorty’s view can be serious and ethical without needing ultimate truths.

We can say that Rorty’s political humanism is based on hope, not truth. It does not ask people to believe in a fixed human nature. It asks them to care, imagine better futures, and work together. His hope is practical, not perfect. It aims to reduce cruelty and increase kindness—one story, one act, and one community at a time.



5. Critiques and Challenges:

Can Pragmatic Humanism Sustain a Robust Community? Richard Rorty's idea of humanism has received much attention. His focus on hope and solidarity appeals to many. But several thinkers question if his approach is strong enough. They ask if his ideas can support a real and lasting sense of community.

One main critique is about the lack of moral grounding. Rorty does not offer universal rules or moral laws. He does not believe in a fixed human nature. In *Achieving Our Country*, he says, "The idea that liberal society is bound together by philosophical beliefs seems to me to be the idea that needs to be dropped" (Rorty, 1998, p. 44). This shows that Rorty does not think we need shared truths to build a good society. But critics argue that some kind of shared belief is necessary to guide action and stop injustice.

Thomas McCarthy (1990) warns that this can lead to relativism. He writes, "Rorty's public-private distinction threatens to undercut the force of moral criticism" (p. 375). McCarthy worries that if everything is based on changing stories, we may lose the ability to speak strongly against wrongs.

Another concern is that Rorty's politics may be too passive. In *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty writes, "My principal enemy is the Leftist intellectual who refuses to be a citizen of the United States, who refuses to work for the survival of democracy" (Rorty, 1998, p. 32). He wants the left to act practically, not just complain. But some say his own work is too soft. It tells us to be hopeful, but not how to fight injustice.

Rorty admits that he avoids grand theories. He prefers to work with small changes and daily language. But this leads critics like Nancy Fraser to worry about results. Though Fraser is not quoted directly in the selected sources, her ideas are echoed by Shusterman (2022). He writes, "Rorty's vague and familiar gospel of humanist love may lack the political bite or resistance needed to confront real injustices" (Shusterman, 2022, p. 417). So, the concern is that Rorty's ethics are kind but may not be strong enough for action.

This view is supported by White (2013). He studies Rorty's idea of community and sees problems. He says, "The neo-pragmatist presumption of community as something already achieved... underestimates the labor of community-building" (White, 2013, p. 191). This means that just assuming we are already a community is not enough. We must work to include people and address conflict.

Another challenge comes from religion and post-secular thinkers. They argue that Rorty's humanism leaves out deep sources of meaning. If everything is based on language, where is the space for spiritual belief? Rorty responds that this is not needed. He writes, "We do not need to worship something beyond the human community" (Rorty, 1998, p. 37). But critics argue that for many, hope comes from faith or tradition, not just conversation.

Jackson (1987) offers a more religious critique. He says,

"The practice of discomfort may suggest that we have responsibilities to others that go deeper than utility" (Jackson, 1987, p. 101). He means that sometimes, moral duty comes from places Rorty's framework cannot explain. Ethics, for Jackson, needs more than just hope and talk.

McCarthy (1990) also warns that Rorty's idea of justification as "what our peers let us get away with" is risky. He writes, "In societies where power is unevenly distributed, such a standard will likely favor the powerful" (p. 376). This means that if truth depends only on agreement, strong voices may silence weak ones. Community might then serve only those already in control.

Still, Rorty believed in slow progress. He trusted that kindness and imagination can lead to better futures. He wrote, "The most we can hope for is a poeticized culture" (Rorty, 1998, p. 93). But critics ask—can poetry fight injustice?

In summary, Rorty's humanism offers warmth, hope, and openness. But critics raise fair doubts. Can this hope stand firm when injustice strikes? Can stories replace structure? Is his community too soft to protect the vulnerable?

These questions show that Rorty's work is not the end, but the start of a discussion. A hopeful politics must also be critical. A caring



community must also be strong. Rorty gives us one piece of the puzzle. The rest must come from those who keep pushing the work forward.

6. Conclusion:

Rorty's Legacy and the Future of Humanist Pragmatism Richard Rorty changed how we think about philosophy. He moved it away from truth and certainty. He focused instead on hope, conversation, and solidarity. He wrote, "The social hope which liberal societies depend on is not bound up with the hope of knowing the truth" (Rorty, 1999, p. 199). This idea became central to his humanist pragmatism.

Rorty rejected the idea that people must agree on deep truths to live together. Instead, he believed that people should try to understand each other. They should reduce cruelty and expand care. He said, "We do not need to worship something beyond the human community" (Rorty, 1989, p. 198). This view sees ethics not as rules, but as a shared human effort.

His legacy still matters today. We live in a time of division and distrust. People often talk past each other. In this world, Rorty's idea of conversation and empathy is helpful. He reminded us that "Solidarity has to be constructed out of little pieces" (Rorty, 1989, p. 94). This means that unity is built slowly, with patience and care.

Shusterman (2022) affirms this point. He says, "Rorty's vague and familiar gospel of humanist love may lack the political bite... but it still has value" (p. 417). Rorty's ideas may not offer strong theories, but they give us tools to live better together.

Egon Višňovský also highlights Rorty's focus on human potential. He writes, "Rorty's humanism is not based on the assumption of a permanent human essence but on the possibilities of human self-creation" (Višňovský, 2020, p. 3). This shows that Rorty believed in change. He trusted that people could improve their lives and their communities through imagination and hope.

Rorty's ideas also matter in education. He believed that schools should not only teach facts. They should also help students care about others. He supported what he called "sentimental education." In his view, "Literature is the principal vehicle of moral progress" (Rorty,

1989, p. 192). This suggests that stories can shape how we feel, and how we treat others.

In the age of global problems, Rorty's humanism can also help with pluralism. He showed that we do not need one truth to live together. We can accept many beliefs, as long as we respect each other. Višňovský explains, "Rorty urges us to see morality in terms of enlarging the sense of 'we'" (Višňovský, 2020, p. 4). This helps us build larger, more open communities—across cultures and nations.

His views also speak to today's digital world. Online spaces are filled with conflict and misinformation. Rorty's focus on conversation, shared vocabularies, and reducing cruelty offers a better path. We need new ways to build digital solidarity. Future research could ask: How can Rorty's ideas shape online communities? How can we apply sentimental education in digital learning?

Pouryousefi and Freeman (2021) suggest this is possible. They write, "Rorty's pragmatism has an important role to play in the transition toward a humanist society" (p. 107). This shows that his ideas still offer hope for our changing world.

In closing, Rorty's humanist pragmatism gives us a way to care, without needing final answers. It teaches us to keep talking, keep listening, and keep building better futures—together.

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