ABSTRACT. Richard McKay Rorty passed away on June 8, 2007 at age 75. His philosophical approach can be very relevant to reflection in the field of mathematics education.


Richard Rorty conceived knowledge as a matter of “conversation” (see in particular: Rorty, 1979) and, in particular, as a matter of social practice, rather than as the ancient attempt to mirror nature “out there”. His philosophical approach was explicitly against the supposed presence of general underlying structures: in fact, Rorty refused the traditional western conception of philosophy as a discipline trying to obtain absolute truths about the world, according to a misguided reliance on Platonic metaphysics. So any attempt to obtain some kind of transcendent, unmediated knowledge is wrong and meaningless.

More precisely, according to Rorty, «we need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there, and the claim that the truth is out there. To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences, there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations. Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind – because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own – unaided by the describing activities of human beings – cannot» (Rorty, 1989, p. 11).

As a consequence, «philosophy makes progress not by becoming more rigorous but by becoming more imaginative», once again in Rorty’s own words (Introduction to Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers III: Rorty, 1998), and this statement can be very interesting for mathematics educators. As a matter of fact, a Platonic approach cannot be stated uncritically in educational practice: didactics of mathematics must take into account that a major point is related to the frequent attempt to model knowledge on perception and to treat “knowledge of” by grounding “knowledge that” (see Philosophy and the mirror of nature: Rorty, 1979, p. 316). The connection between knowledge and social practice is really a crucial issue from the educational point of view, and several issues ought to be considered: for instance, what do we mean by “pupils’ minds”? More generally, can we still consider our pupils’ mind as a “mirror of nature”, and make reference to their “inner representations” uncritically?

Richard Rorty strongly underlined the crucial importance of the community as source of epistemic authority (Rorty, 1979, p. 380), and stated: «We need to turn outward rather than inward, toward the social context of justification rather than to the relations between inner representations» (Rorty, 1979, p. 424). These ideas are very important for researchers in mathematics education and surely deserve deep, careful reflection.

REFERENCES


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