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Contingency, Irony and Morality: A Critical Review of Rorty's Notion of the Liberal Utopia

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Abstract: This paper introduces Richard Rorty's notion of the liberal ironist and his vision of a liberal utopia and explores the implications of these for philosophical questions concerning morality, as well as morality in general. Rorty's assertions of the contingency of language, society and self are explored. Under the contingency of language, the figure of the ironist is defined, and Rorty's conception of vocabularies is discussed. Under the contingency of society, Rorty's definition of liberalism, his opposition of literary culture to materialist and metaphysical culture, and his notions concerning utopian politics are discussed. Under the contingency of self, Rorty's critique of Kantian and his appropriations of Deweyan and Freudian conceptions of morality are presented. Other key factors discussed are Rorty's theory of the separation of the private and public spheres of life and his ideas concerning cruelty and human solidarity. In this way, a critical analysis of Rorty's proposed balance between private, ironic doubt and public, liberal social hope is presented and assessed in terms of its merit as a system of thought suited to the needs of post-metaphysical, liberal societies.

Keywords: Richard Rorty; pragmatism; morality; liberalism; ironism

1. Introduction

Since Plato, one of the quintessential goals of philosophical deliberation has been the attempt to transcend the finitude and contingency of the human situation, via various approaches. Since the philosophy of GWF Hegel, however, the rise of historical consciousness and consequently historicist philosophy has undermined this tradition by continually asserting the historically situated nature of human existence. In the work of Richard Rorty, this stance is, in a sense taken, to its logical conclusion

in the philosopher's notion of 'ironism', wherein the essentially contingent nature of all human knowledge claims and intuitions is asserted. In his seminal work, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Rorty defines the role of the ironist in contemporary liberal society and outlines his vision of a liberal utopia as the milieu in which such a figure could thrive. In this paper, Rorty's notion of the liberal ironist and his vision of a liberal utopia will be examined, with the goal of extrapolating the implications of these concepts for the philosophical field of moral inquiry and morality, in general. Toward this end, Rorty's arguments for the contingency of language, society and self in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, combined with his arguments concerning morality in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, will be used as a structural framework for discussion and critical reflection.

2. Truth and Language

In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Rorty critiques the Platonic notion that contingency can be overcome by the search for truth, via demonstrating the apparently inescapable contingency of human language, human society and the human subject. The foundation of these is the first, language. Rorty initiates his argument for the contingency of language by attempting to repudiate the notion of language as a medium of correspondence, *i.e.*, as a system of reference, that can correspond either more or less accurately to reality. Language is, rather, according to Rorty, a human faculty of communication that can never be said to accurately depict reality, since, for Rorty, there is no "true" reality *apart from experience*, no intrinsic human nature or extrinsic ontological reality that we would be able to describe 'perfectly' if our language were 'perfect', *i.e.*, corresponding flawlessly to the actual and the objective nature of things. According to Rorty, language cannot relate to reality in the capacity of a predicate of "truth" in any sense, since the world does not of itself suggest a language by which to describe it [1]:

> We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that 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 time and space are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is 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 ([1], p. 5).

Truth then, if taken to be the degree to which a statement corresponds to reality, becomes a nonsensical term if language itself is not, in fact, a medium that could accurately describe reality. Rather, if language is taken simply as human communications about the world, then these communications (or statements; descriptions) can be said to be true or false if they are justified by our experience of the world—but, we can never say that they correspond to the "Truth" or "True Interpretation" of reality, since, according to Rorty, reality does not conform to our ideas of truth and falsehood in the same way as our linguistic practices do ([1], pp. 5–6).

As an alternative to the conception of language as a medium of correspondence, Rorty proposes adopting a view wherein the relationship of language to the world is a causal model instead of a representative or expressive model ([1], p. 15). On this view, languages do not progress (and converge) toward a more accurate description of reality, but rather 'evolve' into more complex sets of descriptions—a process driven by causes within language itself. "It makes perfectly good sense,"

argues Rorty, "to ask how we got… from speaking Neanderthal to speaking postmodern, if… [such questions] are construed as straightforward causal questions" ([1], p. 15). In this sense, languages are 'made' instead of 'found' (but not chosen, as shall be explained below) ([1], p. 7). These languages (differing sets of descriptions) are called 'vocabularies' by Rorty. Since these vocabularies are not taken as having differing levels of correspondence to reality, there seems to be no criteria whereby to distinguish a 'good' from a 'bad' vocabulary, and Rorty does not, in fact, believe that any such criteria exist, since the way in which vocabularies are adopted does not amount to a choice between qualitative alternatives, but is more akin to the acquisition of a new habit:

> …the notions of criteria and choice (including that of "arbitrary" choice) are no longer in point when it comes to changes from one language game to another. Europe did not *decide* to accept the idiom of Romantic poetry, or of socialist politics, or of Galilean mechanics. That sort of shift was no more and act of will than it was the result of argument. Rather, Europe gradually lost the habit of using certain words and gradually acquired the habit of using others ([1], p. 6).

As such, the formation of new vocabularies is based upon the contingency of the situation, as well as the contingency of the existing vocabularies from which they are formed. The utility of this conception of language is described by Rorty according to its use in 'interesting philosophy', utopian politics and revolutionary science:

> The method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate new forms of nonlinguistic behavior, for example, the adoption of new scientific equipment or new social institutions ([1], p. 9).

In this way, the adoption of new vocabularies, albeit based in contingency, can give rise, via the appropriate employment of metaphors (in the sense of poetic redescriptions), to new and more useful vocabularies.

Rorty's arguments for the contingency of language and of the adoption of more useful vocabularies are attractive, but not without aporia. A pressing concern, even if we do provisionally accept the initial repudiation of language as correspondence, is how our linguistic endeavors can actually organize themselves at all, in a useful sense, if they are irreducibly contingent? Rorty's strategy of continual linguistic redescription and consequent 'appropriate' modifications of non-linguistic behaviors describes the mechanism, but not the advantage, since, certainly, we must admit that contingent redescriptions and their consequent behavioral modifications might just as well be regressive as progressive. For the answer to this concern, one would have to look further. For Rorty, at least, as we shall see, the answer to this problematic lies in the articulation of certain contemporary and unashamedly contingent liberal ideals, chief amongst these being the articulation and consequent prevention of suffering and cruelty.

3. Liberal Ironism

Having examined Rorty's conceptions of the contingency of language and vocabularies, we may now proceed to an examination of Rorty's notion of ironism. Rorty defines an ironist as:

…someone who fulfills three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself ([1], p. 73).

The concept of a "final vocabulary" in point 1 is essential to understanding the ironist stance. The vocabulary adopted by a person is 'final' in the sense that the cluster of ideas and relations of words within that vocabulary cannot be measured against any underlying or overarching standard, nor evaluated from the inside by employing the terms of the vocabulary itself. Rather, the only thing that a vocabulary can be contrasted with is another vocabulary. Rorty opposes the ironist's continual doubts about her final vocabulary (and consequent exploration of differing vocabularies) to the 'commonsensical' outlook of non-ironists: "To be commonsensical is to take for granted that statements formulated in… [the final vocabulary to which the non-ironist is habituated], suffice to describe and judge the beliefs, actions and lives of those who employ alternative final vocabularies" ([1], p. 74). More important than the distinction between ironism and common sense, however, is Rorty's opposition between ironism and metaphysics, metaphysics being what is employed once common sense can no longer respond to the challenges posed to it. Metaphysics does this, according to Rorty, by offering essentialist definitions of the terms employed by the commonsensical vocabulary, *i.e.*, by employing Socratic investigation to show that a term refers to some underlying and unchanging essence ([1], p. 74). Realizing the contingency of language, however, the ironist does not subscribe to the notion of essential, unchanging natures, which can be uncovered by rational deliberation within language games; the ironist is both nominalist and historicist ([1], p. 74). Consequently, the ironist does not agree with the metaphysician's contention that attempts at reaching a final vocabulary that corresponds accurately to reality will eventually converge to form the 'ultimate' final vocabulary, as Rorty explains:

> For the ironist, searches for a final vocabulary are not destined to converge. For her, sentences like "All men by nature desire to know" or "Truth is independent of the human mind" are simply platitudes used to inculcate the local final vocabulary… She is an ironist just insofar as her own final vocabulary does not contain such notions. Her description of what she is doing when she looks for a better final vocabulary than the one she is currently using is dominated by metaphors of making rather than finding, of diversification and novelty rather than convergence to the antecedently present. She thinks of final vocabularies as poetic achievements rather than as fruits of diligent inquiry according to antecedently formulated criteria ([1], pp. 76–77).

This view of final vocabularies as made rather than found highlights another key difference between the ironist and the metaphysician: their preferred style of argumentation. Whereas metaphysicians argue for conclusions from more 'universal', or 'uncontroversial', premises, ironists reject the notion of any premise being universally valid and substitute the notion that arguments proceed via a process of redescription, whereby the languages of contrasting vocabularies are gradually replaced by the language of a new vocabulary ([1], p. 78). Rorty refers to this as the "dialectical" nature of ironist argumentation and identifies it as the distinguishing feature of what is known as "literary criticism"

(defined as the experimentation with and comparisons between differing final vocabularies) ([1], pp. 79–80). To better understand why Rorty promotes the ironist stance, an examination of Rorty's conception of the liberal society (especially in terms of it being constituted by a predominantly literary culture) within which the ironist would thrive is necessitous. Toward this end, an outlining of Rorty's argument for the contingency of liberal culture, and its opposition to materialist or metaphysical culture, will serve as a valuable point of departure from which to examine his vision of the ironist's liberal utopia.

The fact that contemporary liberal culture is a development of contingency and redescription follows naturally from Rorty's assertion that language, as a human construct, is contingent, and the vocabulary of the modern liberal state is no exception. In the same way that vocabularies within a person may shift without an express intent or even discernable cause, so the vocabulary of the West gradually shifted toward the current popularity of the liberal vocabulary—as well as the vocabulary of ironism. Rorty classifies what exactly he means by liberalism by using Judith Shklar's definition of liberals as "the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do" ([1], p. xv). The second defining characteristic of liberal societies, Rorty implies, is their fundamentally pacifist and dialectical nature:

> A liberal society is one whose ideals can be fulfilled by persuasion rather than force, by reform rather than revolution, by the free and open encounters of present linguistic and other practices with suggestions for new practices. But this is to say that an ideal liberal society is one which has no purpose except freedom, no goal except a willingness to see how encounters go and to abide by the outcome. It has no purpose except to make life easier for poets and revolutionaries while seeing to it that they make life harder for others only by words and not deeds ([1], p. 61).

The third significant characteristic of liberal societies that Rorty identifies is their characteristic of effecting a widespread and almost commonsensical acknowledgement of contingency, without simultaneously triggering degeneration into apathetic or nihilistic tendencies:

> …liberal societies… have produced more and more people who are able to recognize the contingency of the vocabulary in which they state their highest hopes – the contingency of their own consciences – and yet have remained faithful to those consciences ([1], p. 46).

This seems to imply that ironism, or at least a definitively nominalist and historicist attitude, has become an almost implicit feature and effect of liberal culture. At the very least, this notion seems to underwrite Rorty's portrayal of the 'liberal ironist' as the quintessential contemporary intellectual, a figure who thrives in a society whose "chief virtue" is the acknowledgement of "freedom as the recognition of contingency" ([1], p. 46). Why exactly Rorty believes such a conception of freedom is a virtue can be explained via reference to his endorsement of the notion that the dissolution of foundationalist accounts of human nature gives rise to a linguistic freedom of description, which opens up previously unimagined areas of inquiry and avenues of progress:

> What the Romantics expressed as the claim that the imagination, rather than reason, is the central human faculty was the realization that a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change. What political utopians since the French Revolution have sensed is not that an enduring, substratal human nature has been suppressed or repressed by "unnatural" or "irrational" social institutions but rather that changing languages and other social practices may produce human beings of a sort

that had never before existed. The German idealists, the French revolutionaries, and the Romantic poets had in common a dim sense that human beings whose language changed so that they no longer spoke of themselves as responsible to nonhuman powers would thereby become a new kind of human beings ([1], p. 7).

When speaking of nonhuman powers in the above quotation, it is fair to argue that Rorty is not referring only to the gods, spirits and spooks of theological philosophy, but also of the foundationalist claims of both scientific (or materialist) and philosophical (or idealist) metaphysics.

In contrast to the vocabularies of cultures versed in materialist and/or idealist metaphysics, Rorty favors the dialectical vocabulary of literary culture, a vocabulary underpinned by the recognition of contingency and the freedom this affords, as discussed above. Metaphysical culture, according to Rorty, resists this recognition of contingency (supplying, instead, appeals to and arguments from universal foundations), because it believes that "the general adoption of antimetaphysical, antiessentialist views about the nature of morality and rationality and human beings, would weaken and dissolve liberal societies" ([1], p. 85). Rorty rejoins by comparing the decline of metaphysical thinking to the decline of religious thinking—both of which make the attempt to buttress social conventions by appeals to nonhuman powers. As liberalism was not dissolved by the decline in the belief in theological nonhuman powers (but, in fact, strengthened), there is no reason, Rorty argues, to assume that it will be dissolved by a decline in the belief in metaphysical nonhuman powers. The crux of Rorty's argument here lies in his assertion that metaphysical foundations, whether religious or philosophical, are not in fact what hold liberal societies together. Rather, "[w]hat binds societies together are common vocabularies and common hopes", and in the case of liberal society specifically social hope, the hope that "life will eventually be freer, less cruel, more leisured, richer in goods and experiences, not just for our descendants but for everybody's descendants" ([1], p. 86). As for the claims of materialist metaphysics, Rorty is equally dubious about whether the foundations of science can be said to hold together liberal societies:

> The strong point of those who think that a proper respect for objective truth and, thus, for science, is important for sustaining a climate of tolerance and good will is that argument is essential to both science and democracy. Both when choosing between alternative scientific theories and when choosing between alternative pieces of legislation, we want people to base their decisions on arguments – arguments that start from premises which can be made plausible to anyone who cares to look into the matter… [but] although argumentation is essential for projects of social cooperation, redemption is an individual, private matter… [T]he only way in which science is relevant to politics is that the natural scientists provide a good example of social cooperation, of an expert culture in which argumentation flourishes… [I]t is certainly the case that some results of empirical enquiry have, in the past, made a difference to our self-image. Galileo and Darwin expelled various kinds of spooks by showing the sufficiency of a materialist account… [however, this process of] getting rid of spooks… has exhausted the utility of natural science for either redemptive or political purposes [2].

In this manner, Rorty demonstrates that neither idealist nor materialist metaphysics provide any solid 'foundation' for liberal culture and politics; nor need they, since liberal culture can proceed to confront its dilemmas and goals perfectly well without the aid of such foundations. This is not to say that metaphysical discussions have no place in liberal culture, but rather that they will play the role of subsequent accoutrements to the processes of liberal culture, as opposed to the antecedent principles

that guide or are formulated to guide liberal culture. Moreover, metaphysics of any sort cannot, according to Rorty, provide either frameworks for political discourse or blueprints for personal redemption. In liberal, literary society, the former occurs via the process of free (unforced) encounters and the subsequent abiding by the outcomes of these encounters and the latter by an individual's doubts concerning, comparisons between and redescriptions of the various differing vocabularies that she has encountered. Concerning the former point of free encounters or discussion, Rorty points out that free in this context does not mean "free from ideology", but rather points to:

> …simply the sort [of discussion] that goes on when the press, the judiciary, the elections, and the universities are free, social mobility is frequent and rapid, literacy is universal, higher education is common, and peace and wealth have made possible the leisure necessary to listen to lots of different people and think about what they say ([1], p. 24).

As such, liberal democracies perpetuate their own efficacy via the reflexive process of free encounters, giving rise to more free institutions and *vice versa*.

4. The Liberal Utopia

As may be surmised from the above, Rorty's ideal political society is the "liberal utopia". To better understand this ideal, a brief examination of Rorty's conception of utopian politics and the role of literary culture and literary criticism therein is necessary. Having abandoned both materialist and idealist conceptions of foundations as necessitous to liberal societies, Rorty describes the way in which literary culture may provide a suitable framework for political deliberation in the form of utopian politics, *i.e.*, "the search for a single utopian form of political life—the Good Global Society" ([2], p. 104). How a literary culture achieves this, according to Rorty, is by making the predominant vocabulary of liberal society one of redescription rather than argumentation, *i.e.*, one of 'poetry' rather than 'reason':

> We need a redescription of liberalism as the hope that culture as a whole can be "poeticized" rather than as the Enlightenment hope that it can be "rationalized" or "scientized". That is, we need to substitute the hope that chances for fulfillment of idiosyncratic fantasies will be equalized for the hope that everyone will replace "passion" or fantasy with "reason" ([1], p. 53).

The way to achieve this liberal utopia, *i.e.*, a society in which "chances for fulfillment of idiosyncratic fantasies will be equalized", is through the clear separation of the spheres of public and private life. This is the crux of Rorty's conception of the liberal utopia; the attempt to reconcile the need for private redemption with the need for public consensus by drawing out the consequences of a predominantly literary (and ironist) culture. To make the utility of this approach clear, Rorty provides replies to Michel Foucault's doubts concerning liberalism (as applied to the private sphere) and Jurgen Habermas' doubts concerning ironism (as applied to the public sphere). Briefly, Foucault's charges against liberal societies amount to pointing out the ways in which they have subjugated certain classes of society to an overarching and normative liberal ideology and, thus, lessened the opportunities for those in question to pursue personal goals of redemption and self-creation. Moreover, Foucault is, according to Rorty, "not… willing to see these constraints as compensated for by a decrease in pain" ([1], p. 63). On the other hand, Habermas critiques Rorty's ironist stance by insisting that the "world-disclosure" (poetic redescriptions) brought about by Romantics and ironists always "be checked for "validity"

against intramundane practice" ([1], p. 66). This, for Rorty, implies an unfortunate concession to the foundationalist metaphysics of Enlightenment rationalism—a metaphysics that cannot hold its own if Rorty's conception of contingency is accepted:

> [Habermas] still insists on seeing the process of undistorted communication as convergent and seeing that convergence as a guarantee of the "rationality" of such communication. The residual difference I have with Habermas is that his universalism makes him substitute such convergence for ahistorical grounding, whereas my insistence on the contingency of language makes me suspicious of the very idea of the "universal validity" which such convergence is supposed to underwrite ([1], p. 67).

Rorty's response to both Foucault's criticism of liberalism and Habermas' criticism of ironism can be succinctly described via reference to his insistence on the separation of public (liberal) hopes from private (ironist) aspirations. For Rorty, private dilemmas of vocabulary, and the resulting internal revolutions of self-creation, should remain just that—private. In opposition to Foucault, Rorty does not believe that institutions could ever embody the "sort of autonomy which self-creating ironists like Nietzsche, Derrida, or Foucault seek" ([1], p. 65). The answer then, for Rorty, is to "*[p]rivatize* the Nietzschean-Sartrean-Foucauldian attempt at authenticity and purity, in order to prevent yourself from slipping into a political attitude which will lead you to think that there is some social goal more important than avoiding cruelty" ([1], p. 65). This, in turn, also provides an initial answer to Habermas' critique that ironism cannot be reconciled to the need for public consensus: it doesn't need to be. Public consensus, being the agreements arising out of free and open encounters, should not take the same shape as internal self-creation, since such an approach would have undesirable political consequences. The balance, then, is achieved by the liberal utopia wherein public deliberation operates in such a way that private chances for self-creation are maximized without derailing the procedures of whatever communally agreed upon institutions may arise from free and open discourse. To Rorty, such a liberal utopia would be the quintessence of Joseph Schumpeter's conception of civilization: "To realize the relative validity of one's convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian" ([1], p. 46). For Rorty, the paragon of such civilization is the liberal ironist, and the contingent environment best suited to her is the liberal utopia.

There are several key concerns in assessing Rorty's ideal of the liberal utopia, two of which I shall mention here. The first is the question of how exactly the maximization of private self-creation is kept from becoming a privation itself, that is to say, a self-inflicted or privately inflicted cruelty. In answer to this problematic, the liberal ironist might assert that in such instances (under which examples, such as domestic abuse and suicide, would fall), it is the imperative of liberal institutions to circumscribe and, as far as possible, prevent the possibility or propagation of such private inflictions of cruelty, since the basic imperative of liberal society is exactly the lessening of suffering, and there is no reason to assert that the private sphere is wholly exempt from this prohibition.

The second key concern, in many ways related to the first, is that of how exactly attempts at self-creation in the private sphere can be kept from derailing legitimate liberal institutions to which they are in opposition. It would seem that liberal institutions are tasked with their own safeguarding (from the private) as a characteristic of Rorty's definition of those institutions as arising from the agreements made through free and open discourse. What exactly this implies in a political sense is, however, unclear, and Rorty unfortunately neglects elaboration on whether this suggests, for example,

a strong role for the liberal state in protecting its own structures and interests from the threat of contradictory inclinations. It is clear, however, from an interview conducted in 2007, that Rorty was aware of the seriousness of this problematic, especially in the wake of threats of mass terrorism:

> I feared that 9/11 would make it possible for what President Eisenhower called "the military-industrial complex" to extend its power over the US government in unprecedented ways. I predicted that if the terrorists were to explode even one suitcase-sized nuclear weapon in a Western city, democratic institutions might not survive. The security agencies in the Western democracies would be granted, or would simply seize, powers comparable to those of Gestapo and the KGB.

> The Bush administration has now been repudiated by US public opinion, and the Iraq debacle will make future European governments hesitant about following America's lead. But I still think that the end of democracy is a likely consequence of nuclear terrorism, and I do not know how to guard against this danger. Sooner or later some terrorist group will repeat 9/11 on a much grander scale. I doubt that democratic institutions will be resilient enough to stand the strain [3].

5. Implications for Morality

Having examined Rorty's notion of the liberal ironist in the context of a liberal utopia, the remainder of this paper will discuss the implications of these notions for morality. As a point of departure, Rorty's assertion of the contingency of self and his appropriation of the Freudian conception of the self will serve as a basis for a discussion of Kantian *versus* Deweyan morality, moral deliberation and, finally, Rorty's notions concerning cruelty and human solidarity.

Rorty's assertion of the contingency of language and consequent refutation of the concept of 'truth' as correspondence between language and reality leads to a view of selfhood equally based on contingency, in the sense of the final vocabulary adopted by the self being inescapably contingent. Moreover, as with the contingency of society, vocabularies are made rather than found, which significantly means that an individual's sense of self is a 'poetic' creation rather than a 'rational' discovery. Rorty credits Nietzsche with having first suggested the idea of dropping the correspondence theory of truth, rather referring to it as a 'mobile army of metaphors'. This assertion leads to a conception of self, wherein self-discovery (or self-knowledge) becomes self-creation ([1], p. 27). This is a crucial aspect of Rorty's conception of self, since the internal opposition and redescription of vocabularies is to Rorty a characteristically human activity and crucial, in a personal sense, for the process of becoming free (in the sense of recognizing one's own contingency) and achieving identity (in the sense of having a unique final vocabulary):

> The process of coming to know oneself, confronting one's contingency… is identical with the process of inventing a new language… [f]or any *literal* description of one's individuality, which is to say any use of an inherited language-game for this purpose, will necessarily fail. One will not have traced the idiosyncrasy home but will merely have managed to see it as not idiosyncratic after all, as a specimen reiterating a type, a copy or replica of something which has already been identified. To fail as a poet – and thus, for Nietzsche, to fail as a human being – is to accept somebody else's description of oneself, to execute a previously prepared program, to write, at most, elegant variations on previously written poems. So the only way to trace home the causes of one's being as one is would be to tell a story about one's causes in a new language ([1], p. 28).

This view of individuality as (1) the recognition of contingency and (2) the ability to redescribe oneself and one's origins in a novel and unique way lies at the heart of Rorty's conception of self and, by extension, his theorizing concerning morality.

According to Rorty, it is through an appropriation of Freud's conceptions of self and morality that we can learn to "accept, and put to work" the above described Nietzschean conception of what it means to be "a full-fledged human being" ([1], p. 30). Rorty identifies Freud as the "moralist who helped de-divinize the self by tracking conscience home to its origin in the contingencies of our upbringing" ([1], p. 30). Significantly for Rorty, to "see Freud this way is to see him against the background of Kant" ([1], p. 30). Consequently, if we are to fully appreciate Rorty's appropriation of Freud, we must first examine his critique of Kant's moral philosophy and, by extension, his endorsement of John Dewey's critique of the same.

Unlike Kant, who claimed that "morality was like nothing else in the world—that it was utterly distinctive", Rorty maintains that our intuitions about morality have the same contingent basis as all our other values and beliefs ([2], p. 186). As such, Rorty dismisses outright the notion of universal 'moral principles' that trump contingency. Rather:

> …all a moral principle can possibly do is to abbreviate a range of moral intuitions. Principles are handy for summing up a range of moral reactions, but they do not have independent force that can correct such reactions. They draw all their force from our intuitions concerning the consequences of acting on them ([2], pp. 186–87).

Kant's conception of distinct and discoverable moral principles and, by extension, the conception of morality as being based upon a rational and universal human faculty for resolving moral dilemmas by referring to such principles is, for Rorty, simply a metaphysical permutation of the extrapolation of moral laws and principles from religious teachings. This metaphysical turn is not satisfactory to Rorty, who agrees with contemporary moral philosopher, Annette Baier, in asserting that:

> …the Kantian notion of unconditional obligation is borrowed from an authoritarian, patriarchal, religious tradition that should have been abandoned rather than reconstructed. Had we followed Hume's advice, we should have stopped talking about unconditional obligations when we stopped being afraid of postmortem tortures. When we ceased to agree with Dostoevsky that if God did not exist, everything would be permitted, we should have put aside the morality-prudence distinction. We should not have substituted "Reason" for "God" as the name of a law-giver ([2], p. 187).

According to Rorty's 'philosophical hero', the American proto-pragmatic philosopher, John Dewey, this Kantian morality-prudence distinction and the Kantian notion of moral autonomy (being autonomy "in the sense of obedience to reason's unconditional command") are irreconcilable with the Darwinian account of the origin of the human species ([2], p. 188). Rorty cites Dewey to assert that, as opposed to the Kantian veneration of the field of moral inquiry as an absolutely distinct discipline, it can be no different from any other area of inquiry in a post-Darwinian view:

> All inquiry – in ethics as well as physics, in politics as well as logic – is a matter of reweaving our webs of beliefs and desires in such a way as to give ourselves more happiness and richer and freer lives. All our judgments are experimental and fallible. Unconditionality and absolutes are not things we should strive for... Darwinians cannot be at ease with the Kantian idea of a distinctively moral motivation, or of a faculty called

"reason" that issues commands. For them, rationality can only be the search for intersubjective agreement about how to carry out cooperative projects… To say that moral principles have no inherent nature is to imply that they have no distinctive source. They emerge from our encounters with our surroundings in the same way that hypotheses about planetary motion, codes of etiquette, epic poems, and all our other patterns of linguistic behavior emerge. Like these other emergents, they are good insofar as they lead to good consequences, not because they stand in some special relation either to the universe or to the human mind ([2], pp. 188–90).

This Deweyan or post-Darwinian view of morality fits well with Rorty's conception of the contingency of the individual and the individual's intuitions, as well as his pragmatic, liberal approach to social institutions. For Rorty, an exemplar of this tradition of moral theorizing is Freud, whom Rorty cites as the thinker who reconciled (or rather dissolved) the tension between poetic (Nietzschean or Romantic) self-creation and rational (Enlightenment or Kantian) obligation, by portraying our moral intuitions "as idiosyncratic as the poet's inventions" and, thus, equally contingent ([1], p. 30). Moreover, what is particularly remarkable about Freud's work, for Rorty, is the way in which Freud supplied very specific examples of how emotions, such as pity, compassion, rage, jealousy, *etc.*, can arise from the contingent incidents of childhood, the recollection and acknowledgement of which do not generally enter into an individual's understanding of their own processes of moral deliberation ([1], p. 31). The utility of this view of moral intuitions, according to Rorty, is its applicability to projects of self-creation. By adopting a personal vocabulary of very particular causes leading to intuitions, one can realize the contingency of one's own situation and, thus, become free in a liberal-ironist sense. Toward this end, Rorty condones Freud's suggestion that:

> …we praise ourselves by weaving idiosyncratic narratives – case histories, as it were – of our success in self-creation, our ability to break free from an idiosyncratic past. He suggests that we condemn ourselves for failure to break free of that past rather than for failure to live up to universal standards ([1], p. 33).

Consequently, moral deliberation is an essentially self-reflexive endeavor. Even more valuable for Rorty is Freud's distinction between a "private ethic of self-creation and a public ethic of mutual accommodation", as well as Freud's "account of unconscious fantasy [which] shows us how to see every human life as a poem" ([1], p. 35). Together, these notions support Rorty's own emphasis on truth (and self-knowledge) as being made rather than found and his insistence on the need for a proper separation between private and public spheres of deliberation. A critique that may be leveled against such a Freudian conception of self would be that it provides individuals with a vocabulary that enables them to rationalize and justify any morally abhorrent act they may wish to commit by referring to childhood incidents and assuming a role of victimhood, *i.e.*, describing themselves as a victim of their upbringing and circumstances. To this, a liberal ironist could reply that such rationalizations are completely fine if they only affect private and personal matters of self-creation. However, should the individual act out in a morally reprehensible way, infringing on the freedom of others or causing them pain and humiliation, the liberal institutions of society would move to neutralize the threat to their common vocabulary of social hope and their common goal of human solidarity (these topics will be discussed further below). As mentioned previously in the section on Rorty's liberal utopia, the exact mechanic of this neutralization is a problematic that Rorty cannot adequately address, beyond the

claim that it would be the prerogative of the institutions arising from free and open encounters in a liberal society.

Freud's almost Romantic portrayal of the human subconscious, wherein the mind, as Lionel Trilling puts it, is "in the greater part of its tendency, exactly a poetry-making faculty" (quoted in [1], p. 36), lends gravity to Rorty's account of moral deliberation as carrying out its most profitable operations within the realms of fiction and, specifically, within the contemporary field of comparing and evaluating differing vocabularies (*i.e.*, literary criticism). For Rorty, it is the literary critic who, having surveyed a larger landscape of 'moral' (albeit fictional) situations than most, is an excellent source and interpreter of moral intuitions, since she is less inclined to exclude any given class in her considerations of the consequences of her actions ([1], p. 80). This is an especially beneficial ability when applied to the liberal project of recognizing and avoiding cruelty.

Having deconstructed foundationalist accounts of language, society, self and, finally, morality, it would seem that Rorty has nothing wherewith to support the liberal claim that 'cruelty is the worst thing we do'. This doubt, in turn, puts Rorty's claim that literary critics (or, more generally, ironists), by virtue of their greater aptitude for recognizing cruelty, are good candidates for moral advisors. If there is no support for the claim that cruelty is bad, why would one care to notice it or listen to people who do? For Rorty, however, there can be no foundation with which to anchor these claims: they are contingent products of contemporary liberal society. More significantly though, Rorty does not believe that such foundations are necessary. Whether religious or metaphysical, Rorty believes that foundations are merely rhetoric, a human strategy devised to attempt to come to terms with the, in actuality, inescapable contingency of the human condition. The alternative Rorty suggests is three-fold. Firstly, Rorty asserts the recognition of contingency as a strategy toward achieving more personal and institutional freedom, as discussed above. Secondly, Rorty maintains that liberal culture is perfectly capable of standing for its ideals of freedom and non-cruelty, whilst simultaneously acknowledging the contingency of these ideals. Finally, Rorty suggests that a literary culture not only maximizes opportunities for recognizing contingency, but also for recognizing human cruelty, suffering and pain (thus providing the impetus to the achievement of liberal ideals of non-cruelty). Rorty elaborates on this final point, the recognition of pain, to stress its significance in situations where redescription can offer neither solace nor solution and its importance in the context of a post-metaphysical society:

> Faced with the nonhuman, the nonlinguistic, we no longer have an ability to overcome contingency and pain by appropriation and transformation, but only the ability to *recognize* contingency and pain. The final victory of poetry in its ancient quarrel with philosophy – the final victory of metaphors of self-creation over metaphors of discovery – would consist in our becoming reconciled to the thought that this is the only sort of power over the world which we can hope to have. For that would be the final abjuration of the notion that truth… is to be found "out there" ([1], p. 40).

Having abandoned both the Enlightenment doctrine of truth being 'out there' as well as the Romantic notion that truth is somewhere 'deep down' for a Nietzschean-Freudian conception of freedom as the recognition of contingency (coupled with a conception of 'truth' as poetic creation), Rorty cites the principle of 'social hope' as being the central motivation and the principle of 'solidarity' as being the central goal of liberal societies. Liberal social hope, in a broad sense, is the already abovementioned hope that "life will eventually be freer, less cruel, more leisured, richer in

goods and experiences, not just for our descendants but for everybody's descendants" ([1], p. 86). Solidarity, as the goal of liberal societies, plays a more complex role in Rorty's conception of a liberal utopia. Rorty maintains that solidarity, in the sense of solidarity with all other human beings *qua* human beings is too broad a conception to serve as a useful goal for any person or society. Furthermore, relating certain concrete examples, Rorty concludes that solidarity is always felt strongest between members of specifically outlined groups, e.g., 'Americans', 'liberals', 'New Yorkers', *etc.* ([1], p. 191). From these two assertions, Rorty proceeds to argue that ideals of human solidarity that are based upon conceptions of essential human nature or shared statuses as rational beings or any foundationalist metaphysical conception of human solidarity are insufficient for the goal of diminishing cruelty. As an alternative, Rorty suggests that the already present identities of groups of individuals should be enlarged by expanding redescriptions of what kind of people fall into the category of any given group with which people may identify:

> My position entails that feelings of solidarity are necessarily a matter of which similarities and dissimilarities strike us as salient, and that such salience is a function of a historically contingent final vocabulary… The view I am offering says that there is such a thing as moral progress, and that this progress is indeed in the direction of greater human solidarity. But the solidarity is not thought of as recognition of a core self, the human essence, in all human beings. Rather, it is thought of as the ability to see more and more traditional differences… as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation – the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of "us". That is why I said… that detailed descriptions of particular varieties of pain and humiliation (in, e.g., novels or ethnographies), rather than philosophical or religious treatises, were the modern intellectual's principle contributions to moral progress ([1], p. 192).

As such, Rorty's 'modern intellectual' (or any creative in the liberal utopia, for that matter) may find themselves at the juncture between the private and the public, that is to say, at once pursuing private self-creation and expanding public solidarity, since engendering such expansion happens to be a salient feature of their own endeavors towards authentic self-creation. This juncture does not pose a problem for Rorty's separation of private and public, since, as explained previously, the issue is only that the *model* of private self-creation not be *institutionalized*; *i.e.*, that public consensus should not take the same form or aim at the same typically idiosyncratic goals that private self-creation does. As such, there is no reason to assume that acts of private self-creation should be barred from interacting in any way with public consensus-making; consensus, the agreements arising out of the free and open exchange of opinions in liberal society, will necessarily often be affected by opinions touched by the stamp of attempts at self-creation, especially those that also aim at the expansion of solidarity.

Significantly for Rorty, the redescriptions via which citizens in the liberal utopia expand conceptions of solidarity are not rational discoveries, but rather poetic creations and, therefore, not susceptible to attack via metaphysical undercutting:

> The right way to take the slogan "We have obligations to human beings simply as such" is as a means of reminding ourselves to keep trying to expand our sense of "us" as far as we can… The right way to construe the slogan is as urging us to *create* a more expansive sense of solidarity than we presently have. The wrong way is to think of it as urging us to *recognize* such a solidarity, as something that exists antecedently to our recognition of it. For then we leave ourselves open to the pointlessly skeptical question "Is this solidarity

real?" We leave ourselves open to Nietzsche's insinuation that the end of religion and metaphysics should mean the end of our attempts not to be cruel ([1], p. 196).

Thus, for Rorty, moral progress proceeds via the mechanism of describing specific cases of 'new' (*i.e.*, created) solidarity or, otherwise stated, via "reweaving our vocabulary of moral deliberation in order to accommodate new beliefs (e.g., that women and blacks are capable of more than white males had thought, that property is not sacred, that sexual matters are of merely private concern)" ([1], p. 196). Such beliefs are brought about by the free and open exchange of opinions in liberal society, coupled with the ongoing recognition and description of unexpressed forms of pain and cruelty. In turn, such beliefs are (or should be, in Rorty's liberal utopia) disseminated and internalized via the open-ended process of creating and expressing (via whatever means available) ever-larger conceptions of group identity and, consequently, human solidarity.

6. Conclusions

Widespread social hope and the creation of ever-expanding human solidarity are, to Rorty, natural and desirable consequences of the ascendency of liberal institutions, the recognition of contingency and the substitution of literary criticism and ironist self-creation for religious dogma and metaphysical foundationalism. By separating the private and public spheres of human life and, consequently, disjoining inquiries into differences of final vocabulary (in the private sphere) from inquiries about diminishing cruelty and suffering (in the public sphere), Rorty achieves a remarkable balance between ironic doubt and liberal hope. Moreover, by disavowing metaphysical foundations of morality (and, especially, the Kantian morality-prudence distinction), Rorty enables the predominantly literary cultures of liberal societies to see themselves as the vanguards of moral progress. Significantly, in this regard, and despite Rorty's misgivings concerning religion and philosophy, this leaves room for both treatises and sermons to remain as valuable assets to those who favor them as literary genres worthy of literary criticism and, consequently, as acceptable candidates for private issues of moral deliberation. I believe that the strength of Rorty's notion of a liberal utopia lies in exactly this kind of flexibility—that whilst metaphysical foundationalism and religious dogma have exhausted their political utility, they and, indeed, any art-form or discursive arena, can still serve as valuable materials that individuals and cultures can utilize to fuel their comparisons of vocabularies, poetic processes of self-creation, liberating recognitions of contingency and expanding senses and contexts of solidarity.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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