The Inseparability Of The Rortean Self And Public Interest

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What I will attempt to do in this paper grew out of the frustration in which I tried to defend some of my favorite philosophers against the claim that Richard Rorty makes in his book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*[1] that those favorites of mine are, as *public* philosophers, "at best useless and at worst dangerous" (68). Among these publicly useless philosophers Rorty most often names Nietzsche, Heidegger, the early Derrida, and Foucault when he is in his often dominant Nietzschean persona. Rorty refers to such philosophers most generally as "ironist theorists;" and what he sees as being the major offense they share in common is that they proliferate doubts that tend to undermine the religious and philosophical beliefs that people hold most dear –beliefs that serve as "social glue." What makes these doubts so insidiously undermining, according to Rorty, is that they cannot be integrated into any publicly useful socio-political philosophy that preserves the hopes and values of liberal democracy –freedom, equality, justice, and the minimization of cruelty. Rorty holds that "there is no way in which philosophy, or any other theoretical discipline, will ever let us ... hold self-creation and private perfection in a single vision together with justice and human solidarity" (xiv). So long as we do not attempt their theoretical unification, Rorty sees no need for conflict between public and private concerns.

After briefly summarizing Rorty's views on the proper role of ironist theory, I will dispute Rorty's claim that what he refers to as "private interests" and "public interests" cannot be integrated in a single theory. I will close with some critical remarks on Rorty's use of his admitted ethnocentrism as a means of providing some kind of justification for his claims.

Rorty labels himself a liberal ironist, where, by "liberal," he means

one who thinks "that cruelty is the worst thing we do," and by "ironist," he means one

> who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires –someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance (xv).

Although Rorty does not see any general public use in ironist philosophy, he believes that it is useful for the intellectual in the private and self-creating pursuit of autonomy and personal perfection, and that some ironist thinkers can serve as models in this respect. So ironist thinking cannot simply be disregarded; it has a useful role, at least for Rorty's intellectuals. But Rorty argues that ironist philosophy should be confined to one's private life, and that ironist texts should be "privatized" by being but into a more of less fictional, or literary, form that is clearly idiosyncratic and devoid of any theoretical claims that could be construed as prescriptions for individuals to behave in certain ways. Rorty's nonintellectuals would see themselves and their beliefs as being thoroughly contingent, and yet stable and commonsensical. Doubts about these beliefs would simply not normally arise. And, since Rorty would like to replace the pursuit of truth with the pursuit of freedom, he sees no justification for spreading doubts that are merely disabling, even if they might have some basis in truth.

The ironist, according to Rorty, threatens to rob one of one's ability to describe oneself in one's own terms, suggesting "that one's self and one's world are futile, obsolete, *powerless"* (90). While, for Rorty, it is desirable to have "a liberal culture whose public rhetoric is nominalist and historicist," he denies that there "could or ought to be a culture whose public rhetoric is *ironist*," and maintains that he "cannot imagine a culture which socialized its youth in such a way as to

make them continually dubious about their own process of socialization;" he sees irony as being "inherently a private matter" (87).

By suppressing ironist theory in the general population, and thus reducing its cruel doubt-producing effects to a manageable level, Rorty believes we can work more effectively to build human solidarity, with the possibility of a liberal utopia as an aim. "Solidarity ... is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people, ... [which] makes it more difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves ... " (xvi). Such increased sensitivity is promoted not by theory, but by ethnography, journalism, fiction, and movies.

Most of those Rorty refers to as ironist theorists share Rorty's views about the contingency of language and of the self. They see language as being continuous with reality, and not as something that can be completely separated from it for the purpose of then representing some part of reality. All such attempts carry with them unintended residual effects. Ironists also usually understand meaning and truth in terms of poetic and other psychological and social effects associated with language, rather than in terms of essences and other idealities. A third major characteristic of the ironist's view of language is the belief that linguistic meaning, or the effect that language is able to have, is based on meaningfulness, or significance, considered more generally. And meaningfulness is inherently experienced individually and privately, even though it is often created collectively. The contingency of selfhood for Rorty and the ironists lies in the self's being exhaustively constituted by historical and social factors.

The basis of my disagreement with Rorty about the impossibility of uniting the public and the private in a single theory lies in the fact that part of what makes the self contingent is its inseparability from other selves. The sources of this inseparability are in the non-privacy of language, the centrality of being-with-others to the individual experience of meaningfulness, and the fact that the roots of linguistic meaning lie in the individual experience of meaningfulness.

Before continuing, however, it is necessary to point out a rhetorical conflation in Rorty's argument. By "private" Rorty sometimes means "personal," in the sense that something personal is irrelevant to others or is just "nobody else's business;" and by "private" he sometimes means the "individual self." It is with respect to the latter, the individual self, more or less as a natural kind and not as something with an essence, that Rorty and the ironists speak of the self as contingent. It is the individual self that I will argue is not, or is only marginally, separable from other individual selves, and so is inherently involved in any theory that is publicly useful.

For Rorty, the parameters of the self in relation to others are nonproblematic. I am distinctly who I am, you are distinctly who you are, and collectively we are a society with a common heritage. But the simplicity of Rorty's individuation of the self exhausts itself at the level of the unity of the physical body, while the interests of the individual, including what Rorty sees as being the individual's desire to be self-creating, go far beyond a mere interest in keeping one's physical body intact. A part of the contingency of the self that Rorty chooses not to address is its continuity with other selves. This continuity is decisively broken only at the point where solipsism becomes an issue; and, again, this is something Rorty chooses not to address. Evidence of some degree of continuity between selves is provided by Wittgenstein's "private language argument," the coherence of Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl's "transcendental subjectivity" as a kind of intersubjectivity, Heidegger's intentionally ambiguous term–Dasein–for human being, and the descriptions of the human condition offered by most of those Rorty considers to be ironist theorists. Insofar as we consider human concerns beyond the scope of the unity of the physical body, and short of solipsism, the private/public, or self/other, distinction runs transversal to any means we yet have of sufficiently representing this distinction to the satisfaction of most interested parties. The two are polar opposites only superficially. Viewed from a wider angle of considerations, they are, for the most

part, inseparable, and are internal to each individual. In a sense, everything is public and everything is private, subject to matters of degree. One thing that this means is that there is no clear inverse relationship between what is more private and what is more public. Theoretically, either can be augmented without detriment to the other.

In his effort to support a strict separation between the public and the private, Rorty says that Wittgenstein's private language argument is an "argument that you cannot give meaning to a word ... by confronting it with a nonlinguistic meaning" (41). There are two kinds of misconception, or misplaced emphasis, in Rorty's reading of Wittgenstein's argument. First, we do not normally give meaning to words at all. It is through a set of circumstances involving both linguistic and nonlinguistic elements within which meaningfulness is embodied that segments of language acquire meaning. Second, when we do give meaning to words it is by way of arranging circumstances so as to evoke understanding or some more viscerally cathected involvement of meaningfulness in the ones for whom meaning is created. That these circumstances may be partly or largely verbal is incidental to the fact that the source of meaning is in the psychological cathexis of the individuals for whom verbal meaning is created.

Although meaningfulness is ultimately private and often beyond the reach of the effect of words, there is sufficient overlap across different individuals in the kinds of things and events that are meaningful, and there is enough desire among different individuals to interact in regard to these things and events, to invite the use of language as we know it. By trying consistently to separate the public from the private, Rorty is forced to disconnect the source of meaningfulness in the lives of individuals from linguistic meaning, which is authorized by a collectivity or critical mass of what is meaningful for individuals. The verbal manifestation of this meaningfulness, especially in a democracy where freedom of speech is valued, is ongoingly negotiated not simply publicly, but as a public-private interface, where the individual negotiates not only with others, but also

with himself in his awareness of his relation to others. By participating openly and honestly in shared meaning-giving activity, we come as close as we can to insuring a happy negotiation. Even the privacy in which the artist works is not given simply to privatization, in Rorty's sense. The artist does not try to be merely idiosyncratic, but tries to connect with others, just as the politician in a democracy tries to do.

As a result of the ultimate inseparability of the self and the other, language, including poetry and fiction, cannot be privatized, but only trivialized or made irrelevant beyond a certain sphere of those privy to some abstruse or personalized references. Thus the distinction Rorty draws between publicly and privately relevant writing has little to do with the public and the private. The most widely relevant theoretical writing can be, and likely usually is, carried out as an act of self-creation, while the most intimately personal poetic writing, assuming it passes the scrutiny of the guardians of the printed word, will find its use in the hearts and minds of an audience that cannot be considered to be merely private.

Rorty has sometimes been criticized as a cultural relativist. He tries to avoid this label by dogmatically proclaiming his ethnocentrism, implying that he is compelled to claim the exclusive rightness of his own beliefs on the basis of their having been instilled in him by his culture, which is also our culture. But it is Rorty who speaks, and not our culture. It is not cultures, but individuals with different views and values, who speak. That their differences are not so great as to preclude communication and the hope of agreement between individuals does not mean that their antagonisms are illusory or should be ignored or silenced.

There is a gap in Rorty's rhetoric between his espousal of liberal democratic solidarity above truth and all else, and the inescapably and purely subjective experience of truth and all else that leads individuals sometimes to criticize aspects of their own culture. With his strict separation of private and public, Rorty radically acknowledges this gap with a politically committed courage that even Nietzsche

would have to admire. But the fact that Rorty feels completely at home in, and consonant with the beliefs and values of, what he feels free to call his culture does not mean that all, or even most, members of his culture agree with his assessment of its beliefs and values.

The term "culture" refers to a rather vaguely delimited collectivity of individuals that we can see as being located on a continuum between the single subject and all of mankind. It is unclear at what point along this continuum one normally becomes as if condemned to a set of beliefs common to a group. Nor is it clear that at any particular point one must or should conform simply for the sake of conformity, because one cannot foreclose on the possibility of some overriding value.

Notes

1. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989). All parenthetical documentation refers to page numbers in this book.