

RICHARD RORTY: A SOPHIST WITHOUT A SOAP-BOX An Essay on Ethnocentrism, Liberalism, and Cruelty

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Resumen

En este artículo voy a desafiar la utopía liberal de Richard Rorty, tal y como él define su empresa ética y política en *Contingencia, Ironía y Solidaridad*. Me centraré en dos nociones cruciales presentadas en relación con esto: etnocentrismo e ironía liberal. La primera describe la versión refinada del relativismo cultural, a saber, su creencia de que todas las formas de justificación racional son inherentemente circulares y relativas al *ethnos* en el que se originan. La segunda indica el núcleo de la filosofía política y moral de Rorty, a saber, una égida de contingencia radical y solidaridad social. Con respecto a la primera, mostraré cuán poco clara e inaplicable es la noción de Rorty de *ethnos*: argumentaré que apenas se puede aplicar este concepto a ninguna comunidad social existente. Con respecto a la segunda, ilustraré cuán imposible y autorrebajadora es al mismo tiempo su defensa tanto de la ironía liberal como de la solidaridad social: en verdad, son políticamente irreconciliables. En conclusión, esbozaré cómo el liberalismo de Rorty en realidad conlleva una justificación no-circular no declarada, en la cual se fundamenta todo su proyecto.

Palabras clave: Rorty, etnocentrismo, ironía liberal, etnos, solidaridad social, liberalismo.

Abstract

In this paper I am going to challenge Richard Rorty's *liberal utopia*, as he defines his ethical and political enterprise in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. I shall focus my attention on two crucial notions thereby presented: *ethnocentrism* and *liberal irony*. The former describes Rorty's refined version of cultural relativism, namely his belief that all forms of rational justification are inherently circular and relative to the *ethnos* in which they originate. The latter indicates the core of Rorty's moral and political philosophy, namely an aegis of radical contingency and social solidarity. With regard to the former, I shall show how unclear and inapplicable Rorty's notion of *ethnos* is: I shall argue that hardly any existing social community can be addressed thorough this concept. With regard to the latter, I shall illustrate how hopeless and self-

undercutting his defense of both liberal irony and social solidarity at the same time is: in truth, they are politically irreconcilable. In conclusion, I shall sketch how Rorty's liberalism actually entails an undeclared non-circular justification, on which his entire project relies.

Keywords: Rorty, ethnocentrism, liberal irony, *ethnos*, social solidarity, liberalism.

Preliminary Note – Narrative vs. Theory

In this paper I am going to challenge Richard Rorty's "liberal utopia," as he so defines his ethical and political reflections in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.¹ It is in this last book in philosophy, published in 1989, that more manifestly takes place Rorty's controversial dismissal of philosophy as an instrument to achieve any ethically or politically relevant goal. "Narrative," and not "theory," is the right kind of instrument.²

Structure & Goals – Ethnocentrism & Liberal Irony

In order to develop my considerations, I shall focus my attention on two crucial notions thereby presented, namely *ethnocentrism* and *ironic liberalism*, or *liberal irony*.³

The former term —ethnocentrism— describes Rorty's belief that, since all forms of rational justification are inherently, hopelessly circular, we should not be ashamed of accepting the conclusion that "the truth," or "the good," are that which *we* ourselves, *hinc et nunc*, believe to be true, or good. Henceforth, any moral or political view is fundamentally relative to the *ethnos* in which it originates, so that there is nothing abhorrent in trying to preserve what (he thinks) we have, namely Western bourgeois liberal democracy, for we cannot

¹ Rorty (1989), xv.

² I write "last" and not "latest" intentionally, for Rorty's following book, *Achieving Our Country*, is a political pamphlet that does not intend to be a piece of philosophical research at all. This happens because, first of all, Rorty believes disciplinary borders to be fluid, if not absent. Secondly, because Rorty rejects philosophy in lieu of a more general form of writing that he labels variously as "narrative," "literature," "social criticism." See Rorty (1989), 61-9; see also Rorty (1991a), 197-202 and Rorty (1992), 54-6.

³ Other relevant sources on Rorty's "ironic liberalism" and "ethnocentrism" are the essays "Antirepresentationalism, ethnocentrism, and liberalism," "Solidarity or objectivity?" "The priority of democracy to philosophy," "Postmodernist bourgeois liberalism," "On ethnocentrism: A reply to Clifford Geertz," contained in Rorty (1991a) 1-17, 21-34, 175-96, 197-202, 203-10; "Philosophy as science, as metaphor, and as politics," "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens," "Unger, Castoriadis, and the romance of a national future," "Moral identity and private autonomy: The case of Foucault," contained in Rorty (1991b) 9-26, 66-82, 177-92, 193-8; as well as "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality," and "Habermas, Derrida, and the Functions of Philosophy," contained in Rorty (1998b) 167-85, and 307-26.

figure out any better alternative in Western, bourgeois, liberal, democratic terms.⁴

The latter term —ironic liberalism— indicates the core of Rorty's defence of radical contingency —in the realm of theory— and of social solidarity —in that of practice. According to Rorty, there is no way to justify rationally, once-and-for-all, any ethical or any political system. Still, he thinks that there are enough material wealth, propensity to love, and pragmatic reasons as to support liberal democracy and oppose fascism.⁵

With regard to the former —ethnocentrism— I shall show how unclear and vague Rorty's notion of *ethnos* is.⁶

With regard to the latter —liberal irony— I shall illustrate how self-undercutting is Rorty's defence of both theoretical contingency and social solidarity at the same time.

In conclusion of my paper, I shall sketch how Rorty's liberalism seems to be entailing actually a non-circular justification, on which the rhetorical appeal of his entire project relies. But now, as a start, let me summarize these two crucial concepts of Rorty's philosophy, and let me briefly illustrate why I consider them misguided and misleading.⁷

Evolution & Pragmatism – Rorty's Anti-Epistemology

As mentioned in my introduction, Rorty thinks that we have no way to reach any so-called "God's eye viewpoint," namely an absolute standpoint from where we can scrutinize neutrally our moral and political beliefs. We are "trapped" within man-made categories of understanding. We are that which our *ethnos* is. We are a bundle of traditions and practices, which are the outcome of our natural evolution, and which are aimed at coping successfully with the environment.⁸ Against traditional metaphysics, Rorty uses Darwin and Dewey, namely he combines together the ideas that we are natural

⁴ Rorty (1989), 44-58.

⁵ On wealth see Rorty (1991a) 197-202 & Rorty (1996); on love, Rorty (1996) & Rorty (1998b) 167-85, 202-27; on pragmatic reasons, Rorty (1991a) 175-96, 203-10 & Rorty in Saatkamp (1995) 197-205.

⁶ Both these lines of criticism have been explored partially by other commentators, hence I will not claim to be totally original or groundbreaking: on Rorty's liberal irony see Bhaskar (1991), Baruchello (1998), Dudrick (2001), Karlsson (1998), Marsonet (1996), Kekes (1996), Stone (1993), and Phillips (1992); on Rorty's ethnocentrism see Baruchello (1998), Haack in Saatkamp (1995) 126-47, and Phillips (1992).

⁷ More on this issue is in my essay "Painful Liberalism," which is to be published on *Bijdragen Tijdschrift voor Filosofie en Theologie*, University of Utrecht.

⁸ This claim might be taken for a renewed form of transcendental idealism, but Rorty strongly opposes this reading of his philosophy, insofar as he presumes that we are also and primarily worldly creatures, whose linguistic faculties do not pertain to any super- or extra-natural realm. Rorty (1991a), 1-12.

creatures fighting for survival and that our intellectual creations are instruments to satisfy our tasks. There is no deep spiritual or rational structure to be found in the world, as well as there is no profound, hidden "nature" or "essence" inside us, from which ethics or politics may be derived. On the contrary, Rorty's "liberal utopia" deals with the notion of "a *societas*" inside which "Morality is a matter of... 'we-intentions,' [i.e.] the core meaning of 'immoral action' is 'the sort of thing *we* don't do.'"⁹ In other words the principles guiding our moral and political lives "are reminders of, abbreviations for, [the] practices [of our *ethnos*], not justifications for such practices. At best, they are pedagogical aids to the acquisition of such practices."¹⁰ Liberalism itself, then, is what people in the West "believe in, and so much better for us."¹¹

First Criticism – Ethnocentrism & Its Limits

In the first place, I believe Rorty's ethnocentrism to be misguided. One thing is to talk about Germany, Wales, or Caithness; another is to talk about "liberal ethnos" and "the West." What and where is this ethnos to which Rorty pays such high tributes? Where is this liberal, democratic "West"? Is it a myth or a real entity? And if it is real, which powers, legal institutions, political voices are meant to represent it?

Rorty's writings are far from clear on this point. "Ethnos" and "ethnocentrism" are so generously used by Rorty in his writings, that both of them can be understood as dealing with a set of existing nations, an ideal form of political life, a literary canon, Western Europe and North America, North America alone, and much more.¹² Indeed, I confronted Rorty himself with the question "what do you mean with the term 'ethnos'?" He replied by confirming the very same vagueness that I am criticising:

Nothing too precise, or better, when I think about this term I do not mean much else than what you read in my books. *Ethnos* does not mean a precise model of social organization. It is meant to remind you that, once theoretical foundations have vanished, all that you have is your *Gemeinschaft*. It is the place where you were brought up, the place that you can call your own, at least in a broad sense.¹³

⁹ Rorty (1989), 59.

¹⁰ Ibidem, 58-9.

¹¹ Rorty (1991a), 207.

¹² Rorty often speaks on behalf of the "ethnos," "community," "*Gemeinschaft*" that "we are," and about that "which we do," but who are this "we"? What is this "community" like? On the various meanings of "ethnos," "community," "we," etc., see, for instance, Rorty (1989), 44-61; Rorty (1991a), 76-7, 103-4; Rorty (1998a), 35-8.

¹³ Baruchello (1999), 482.

In the second place, I believe Rorty's ethnocentrism to be misleading.

Firstly, due to the mentioned fuzziness of its referent, hardly any existing social community can be addressed through this concept. The rhetorical power of Rorty's ethnocentrism is unlikely to be of much use to any real advocate of solidarity, especially if compared to old-fashioned metaphysical ideas such as those of "the human being," "*le citoyen*," or "thy neighbour," which still pervade most public debates, in spite of critical race theory or radical feminism.¹⁴

Secondly, should Rorty's approach succeed, then ethical and political issues would become more and more issues about the exact definition of local identities —Who are "we"? Who is a member of our community? Who is to be allowed inside our tribe? Who are "they"? How can we turn "them" into some of "us"? Ethnocentrism, in this sense, could easily turn into a replica of nationalism, or of tribalism, or into a form of imperialism.¹⁵ Cultural identities, in fact, are only partially a matter of agreement or peaceful conversation. Quite often, in order to determine and nurture a sense of "ethnicity," "poetry" is accompanied by "force," whether legal or illegal, and this applies to liberal democracy as well as to any other recognizable "community." Perhaps, "poetry" itself is just an expression of "force," insofar as a dominant section of the population selects the "literary canon," and the school programs.¹⁶ And we should not forget that cultures are fluid, living entities, incorporating other potential or actual "ethnoses" and cultures, thus involving profound tensions.¹⁷ Naturally, unless the dominant group succeeds in homogenizing all differences —and we all shall live in Rorty's "liberal utopia"...¹⁸

Thirdly, let us be so generous as to grant Richard Rorty with some agreement on the exact meaning of his "Western liberal ethnos," to which he says to belong.¹⁹ We might identify it with the wealthy countries in Europe and North America, plus Australia and New Zealand.²⁰ If we do so, then a clear defence of liberal democracy turns into a riddling historical morass. In fact, in the variegated existence of these nations, so many different forms of political life have succeeded one another, that gathering all of them under the same "umbrella-ethnos" seems quite ludicrous. "Liberal" and "democracy" have hardly meant the same thing for the many members of such an "ethnos," and probably still do. For instance, some of these members would call

¹⁴ I am not an advocate of "essentialism," but one cannot ignore its historical merits and rhetorical appeal.

¹⁵ See Haack in Saatkamp (1995), 126-47 and Kekes (1997).

¹⁶ I want to thank my wife Rachael Lorna for the discussions we had on this point.

¹⁷ "Socializing is often a matter of who manages to kill whom first" [Rorty (1989), 185].

¹⁸ Viz. air-attacks or economic sanctions to countries trespassing "human rights" —is this "redescription"?

¹⁹ Rorty (1991a), 206-7.

²⁰ I leave it to the reader to freely add or subtract countries from this group.

themselves “liberal” and “democratic,” even if they did not granted full civil rights to women as far as two years ago;²¹ some others would use the adjective “social-democratic,” and not “liberal,” as to describe their main constitutional root;²² others could say that they live in states that promote “bourgeois freedoms” through systematic oppression of dissension, whether by economic or political means;²³ whereas other “liberal democracies” have constitutions founded on God’s own will;²⁴ moreover, such a group of countries cannot be said to be the cradle of “liberal democracy” alone, insofar as fascism, State religion, and populism may equally claim to be an essential part of their political DNA.²⁵

Cruelty & Politics – Rorty’s Liberalism

With regard to “liberalism,” in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* we read that “liberal institutions [have] facilitated the sense of human solidarity,”²⁶ and that “liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do.”²⁷ In brief, since “cruelty is horrible,” solidarity constitutes its opposite, and liberalism, more than any of “the available alternatives” on the field,²⁸ is the right kind of political organisation in order to maximise the chances of success in this direction.²⁹ “Liberalism,” in this way, can be defined then as *aversion to cruelty*.³⁰

With regard to “irony,” Rorty writes:

I shall define 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 encountered; (2) she realizes that arguments 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.³¹

²¹ All cantons in Switzerland have been granting the universal suffrage since as late as 1999.

²² Finland and Norway, for instance.

²³ Russia and the USA, for instance.

²⁴ Canada and the USA.

²⁵ Italy, Spain, and, again, the USA.

²⁶ Rorty (1989), 197.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, xv.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, 197.

²⁹ Rorty’s definition of cruelty is borrowed from Shklar (1989), namely “the imposition of pain by a stronger party on a weaker one for the attainment of some goal.”

³⁰ Also this definition of liberalism is a borrowing from Shklar (1989).

³¹ Rorty (1989), 73.

As a consequence, “liberal ironists” are to be seen as opposed to “liberal metaphysicians,” namely people like Rawls or Habermas, insofar as the former:

[D]o not believe that there is... an order beyond time and change which both determines the point of human existence and establishes a hierarchy of responsibilities... [and who] are far outnumbered (even in lucky, rich, literate democracies) by people who believe that there must be one. [...] Thus, whereas [the liberal metaphysician] thinks of the high culture of liberalism as centering around theory, [the ironist] thinks of it as centering around literature (in the older and narrower sense of that term — plays, poems, and, especially, novels).³²

In addition to this, the liberal ironist’s function is to enlighten her fellow-citizens, who are still lost in the midst of theological and metaphysical illusions, such as those of a “final vocabulary,” or of the human being having an “essence or nature,” or of “being in touch with reality,” or of “representing the world adequately.” Using Rorty’s expression, the liberal ironist has to “re-describe” their vocabulary — she must shutter their worldviews with her sceptical and Nietzschean hammer.³³ The goal is the construction of an ironic, liberal state, in which the need for philosophical inquiry is disappeared together with the hopes for a theoretical foundation of the existing practices.³⁴

Second Criticism – Irony & Its Limits

In the first place, I believe Rorty to be misguided, insofar as the distinction itself between the two disciplinary (*sive* professional *sive* vocational) categories is misguided, particularly if applied to non-philosophers. More exactly, in the reality of literary production, it is quite difficult to distinguish between the two parties, namely the “metaphysical” side and the “ironic” one. It is not always the case that the desire for absolute, universal, necessary grounds for the legitimisation of democracy, or of liberal values in general, comes only or mainly from one party alone.³⁵ Moreover, it is difficult to draw a clear-cut distinction between the search for the rational foundations of the favoured social structures, whether they being a common “human nature” or a “fundamental worldly order,” and their support via appeal to sentiment. The two methods usually go together, especially in a highly rhetorical area such as the literary one. Rorty’s “poets,” in other words, cannot be sharply opposed to the despised “metaphysicians,” for they cannot be said to do the job he wants

³² Ibidem, xv and 93.

³³ Nietzsche is surely one of the major “heroes” in Rorty’s intellectual Pantheon; see Rorty (1989), 98-108.

³⁴ “[A] postmetaphysical culture seems to me no more impossible than a postreligious one, and equally desirable” [Rorty (1989), xv].

³⁵ I take “liberal values” to be the set of “standard ‘bourgeois freedoms;’” Rorty (1989), 84.

them to do.³⁶ For instance, just to mention some of the names to whom Rorty himself refers: ³⁷ Dickens cannot be easily described as an intellectual who did not believe in a universal, intrinsic dignity of all human beings, based on “justice, religion, and truth.”³⁸ Nor can Zola be regarded as distrusting the notions of “objective truth” or “nature,” especially with reference to science.³⁹ The same can be said of George Orwell, to whom Rorty devotes an entire section of his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Whereas Rorty claims: “somewhere we know that philosophically sophisticated debate about... objective truth... is pretty harmless stuff,” Orwell stated that “the feeling that the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world... frightens me much more than bombs.”⁴⁰

In the second place, I believe this claim of Rorty’s to be misleading, insofar as it invokes a total “poeticization” of the ethical and political sphere (and scientific, too).⁴¹ Instead of making the spectrum of plausible alternatives more nuanced, Rorty’s rejection of the distinction between argumentation and persuasion “jumps” to a modern version of emotivism.⁴² Yet, this is not the only option available. Masters of rhetoric such as Giambattista Vico,⁴³ and, in more recent times, Chaim Perelman,⁴⁴ should remind us that the choice is not between rigid Leibnizean *calculemus* and Behaviourist TV-ads. These two dimensions do exist, but as the extreme poles of a series of degrees of probability (or verisimilitude) in which demonstration and persuasion cooperate.⁴⁵ Rorty is too swift, radical, and uncritical in his move from “clear and distinct ideas” to “guts” and “hearts,” or, if we like, from Plato to

³⁶ The Heideggerian “poets” opposes the term “theorists,” see Rorty (1989), 96 and Rorty (1991b), 17-20.

³⁷ Two exemplary “heroes” of Rorty’s: see Rorty (1991b), 78-81 and 183.

³⁸ “[I]t is impossible for any fabric of society to go on day after day, and year after year, from father to son, and from grandfather to grandson, punishing men for not engaging in the pursuit of virtue and for the practice of crime, without showing them what virtue is, and where it best can be found—in justice, religion, and truth” [Dickens (1841)].

³⁹ “Je ne veux pas peindre la société contemporaine, mais une seule famille, en montrant le jeu de la race modifiée par les milieux. Si j’accepte un cadre historique, c’est uniquement pour avoir un milieu qui réagisse; de même le métier, le lieu de résidence sont des milieux. Ma grande affaire est d’être purement naturaliste, purement physiologiste. Au lieu d’avoir des principes (la royauté, le catholicisme) j’aurais des lois (l’hérédité, l’énéité). Je ne veux pas comme Balzac avoir une décision sur les affaires des hommes, être politique, philosophe, moraliste. Je me contenterai d’être savant, de dire ce qui est en en cherchant les raisons intimes. Point de conclusion d’ailleurs. Un simple exposé des faits d’une famille, en montrant le mécanisme intérieur qui la fait agir. J’accepte même l’exception” [Zola (1869)].

⁴⁰ Rorty (1989), 183; Orwell (1968), III, 88-9.

⁴¹ On ethics & politics: Rorty (1989), 60-1; Rorty (1998b), 180-5; on science: Rorty (1991a) 31-34, 157-58.

⁴² On argumentation and persuasion: Rorty (1989), xv, 16-20, 23-34, 51-3.

⁴³ See Vico (1988), chapter 1.

⁴⁴ See Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969), 53-6, 61-2, 256.

⁴⁵ The field of Aristotle’s “dialectical knowledge.”

Protagoras. His “anti-rationalism” makes all realms of knowledge become the same sort of “conversation.”⁴⁶ But this is not necessarily the case. Even in a non-dogmatic, or “anti-metaphysical” context, one thing is an ordinary “chit chat,” in which our prejudices are deployed without much care, another is a “dialogue,” in which our prejudices are brought onto the surface and scrutinized.⁴⁷

A second reason to see Rorty’s “liberal irony” to be misleading is that the total “poeticization” of the ethical and political sphere does not leave us with any answer to the totalitarian threat. We can only appeal to the interlocutor’s heart, or, if we allow for a more generous interpretation of Rorty’s message, to contingent pragmatic reasons. Still, in either, or even in both instances, the totalitarian counterpart may refute our appeals, for they being equally or less acceptable than its own grounds; as well as it can demonstrate that there are pragmatic reasons to ground its own case.⁴⁸ Yet, Vico and Perelman would remind us once more, we do not share with the interlocutor the emotional and the pragmatic spheres alone: we share also the sphere of rational debate, or we would not be able to communicate at all, nor would we recognise each other as counterparts —not even fighting ones. Thus, instead of “purging out” possible means of interaction, we should use them together with those that we already have. Our faculties are not mutually exclusive.⁴⁹

A third reason to see Rorty’s “liberal irony” to be misleading is that “irony” and “liberalism” work against each other. Firstly, irony is disruptive of any strong conviction, whether liberal or not.⁵⁰ Secondly, if liberalism aims at reducing cruelty, then Rorty’s irony is not liberal, for its task is to redescribe other people’s vocabularies, thus causing them to experience pain, insofar as “most people do not want to be redescribed.”⁵¹ Thirdly, Rorty’s attempted corrections to these two problems are inadequate. He thinks, in fact, that a sharp split between private and public spheres may be a good remedy. One can be a heartless, cynical ironist in the private sphere, trying to accomplish only what her deeper desires are like, showing no moral concern of any sort. As for her private matters, the ironist may pursue her plans as a pure “self-creator,” whatever they are like.⁵² At the same time, though, when engaged in the public sphere, it is the shared set of values of her community that guides the ironist’s conduct, i.e. the ironist loyally complies with the *mores*

⁴⁶ Rorty (1991a), 60-2.

⁴⁷ See Mitscherling (1989).

⁴⁸ See Marsonet (1996).

⁴⁹ “All new arts and sciences should be added to those we already possess enlarging our stock of knowledge, as far as necessary, so that human wisdom may be brought to complete perfection” [Vico (1990), 3-4].

⁵⁰ See Dudrick (2001).

⁵¹ Rorty (1989), 89; for criticism see Stone (1993).

⁵² Rorty (1989), 85.

maiorum.⁵³ Now, on the one hand, it is quite difficult to draw just this sharp line between private and public, as this is a legal distinction that varies with the social perception of what should be left out of the State's reach. Besides, the redefinition and modification of such a line is one of the ironist's public tasks.⁵⁴ Then, try to imagine the infernal "divided self" of the ironist: endless doubts and confusion are likely to arise along the edge of such a thin, volatile dividing line—when to behave according to one's projects? When to follow the tribe's whims?⁵⁵ Disillusion, paralysis, hypocrisy, duplicity, calculated cynicism might all become companions of the ironist, since there is no rational barrier preventing her from becoming Nietzsche's *letzter Mensch*.⁵⁶

Evident Reasons – Understanding Rorty's Success

Concluding, one might wonder: how can such a confused political philosophy be so successful? Why is Rorty regarded so often as a contemporary *maitre à penser*?⁵⁷

Rorty's brilliant style and his epochal break with the analytical tradition may furnish part of the answer. Additionally, originality and exquisite versatility cannot be denied, especially in terms of synthetic vision, and of innovative, intriguing insights. Plus, so I believe, there is a further, hidden reason that justifies the worldwide appeal gained by much of his thought. It is my opinion, in fact, that something extremely intuitive, rooted in many a culture, if not in all of them, lurks behind Rorty's ethnocentric, ironic liberalism. Behind the lines there is something so basic as to cast doubts on Rorty's contingency itself, namely that he is just working in a determined, highly circumscribed, social-historical frame of reference, and that "No well-grounded theoretical answer" can be given in reply to the interrogative "why not be cruel?"⁵⁸

Hidden Reasons – Pain-Avoidance & Ethical Minimalism

Sketching briefly what I believe this "something" to be like, I take Rorty's definition of liberalism—i.e. *aversion to cruelty*—as to involve a universal,

⁵³ Ibidem (1989), 196-9.

⁵⁴ Again, I want to thank my wife Rachael Lorna for the conversations we had on this point.

⁵⁵ See Dudrick (2001).

⁵⁶ The reference, of course, is to Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*.

⁵⁷ "Rortyan" philosophical and non-philosophical literature: Geras (1995), Jackson (1992), Olds (1997).

⁵⁸ Rorty (1989), xv-i.

“natural” principle of pain-avoidance.⁵⁹ Suffering, especially when unjustified, or gratuitously inflicted, is seen as horrendous in all cultures,⁶⁰ and it is not surprising that more than a few thinkers assumed it to be the source of normativity itself.⁶¹ Lucretius, Jeremy Bentham, and Peter Singer, just to name a few, are examples of such a trend.⁶²

Then, if this were the case, there would be a common thread linking all sorts of “we-intentions,” i.e. the shared beliefs that Rorty places at the origin of all moral and political convictions of an ethnos, and which he believes being relative just to the selected one. In other words, the rhetorical power of Rorty’s anti-cruelty message would rely on a minimal, universal, grounding, normative *fil rouge*. Rorty would be exploiting some sort of anthropological *datum*, namely the recognition of the fact that the human being tries to avoid pain as much as possible, because such is its “nature.” And whether such a “nature” were a biological-evolutionary given, or the deliberation of a *rationis foro interno*, this is not a problem for my thesis, since there would be always and nevertheless a ground to answer the question “why not be cruel?”

Interestingly, Rorty’s writings “betray” a few hints towards such a non-ethnocentric and non-ironic interpretation of his liberalism. First of all, Rorty’s three key-terms “cruelty,” “humiliation,” and “suffering,” which delimit most of his ethical and political reflections, are always treated by him as *species of pain*. Secondly, in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* we read: “What binds societies together are common vocabularies and common hopes. The vocabularies are, typically, parasitic on the hopes.”⁶³ Richard Rorty distinguishes between a moral-political vocabulary and a set of social hopes, on which the former stands. There is a terrain that is *prior* to the formulation of an ethnocentric, rhetorical nexus of moral values and political goals. Thus, in the case of the alleged circular vocabulary of the “liberal ethnos,” there would seem to be some pre-liberal hopes, on which the specific vocabulary relies. And which *spes* would be found thereby is not difficult to imagine, for: “[W]hat unites [the subject] with the rest of the species is... susceptibility to pain... [i.e.] a common selfish hope, the hope that one’s world—the little things around which one has woven into one’s final vocabulary— will not be destroyed.”⁶⁴

⁵⁹ The same considerations apply, *a fortiori*, to Judith Skhlar’s liberalism.

⁶⁰ On minimalism, trans-cultural norms: Kung (1990), Maxwell (1990), 219-28, Shea & Spadafora (1992).

⁶¹ Often by coupling it with its opposite: pleasure.

⁶² Even the masochist knows and shows this, insofar as masochism always involves a selection among forms of pain, as well as complicated procedures to avoid excesses or derangement from the meticulous *mise en scene* of the sadomasochistic love-game.

⁶³ Rorty (1989), 86.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, 91-2.

Conclusion – Painful Notes

In brief, here lies the possibility of envisaging a pain-avoidance principle in Rorty's philosophy: all human beings —“our species”— tend to refrain from *pain*. This is the hope that binds people together in societies. Maybe it is not the only hope capable of this, as Thomas Hobbes would state instead; maybe it is not a sufficient condition, but merely a necessary one. Still, it would allow for a well-grounded answer to the question “why not be cruel?”

Naturally, I recognise that this principle of pain-avoidance is somewhat vague and imprecise; plus, the absence of a theory of sympathy/empathy makes it difficult to move from a subjective angle to an inter-subjective one. In truth, I do not intend to deepen this issue much further in this occasion. Yet, I hope that it is evident why it can become a theoretical “anchor” for the philosophical enquirer, who still looks for an answer to the question on cruelty. As I infer out of Rorty's own words, its universal character is strong and manifest enough: it applies to all humans, it binds them together. Manifest is also its grounding capacity, whatever being the exact interpretation that we want to attribute to it: Kantian, utilitarian, or Darwinian.⁶⁵ Manifestly normative are also the consequences, for liberalism, as we saw before, is the ethical and political model that better enhances solidarity, which, as Rorty says: “has to be constructed... in the form of an ur-language which all of us recognise when we hear it.”⁶⁶ And pain seems to be just the pivotal element for this “ur-language,” for pain “is what we human beings have that ties us to the nonlanguage-using beasts [and to] victims of cruelty, people who are suffering.”⁶⁷

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⁶⁵ Of course, in the case of a Darwinian interpretation, it would be more appropriate to talk about two levels of contingency —i.e. the evolutionary one and the ethnos-related one— rather than about a necessary ground and the contingent ethnos developing vocabularies on it.

⁶⁶ Rorty (1989), 94.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, 94.

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