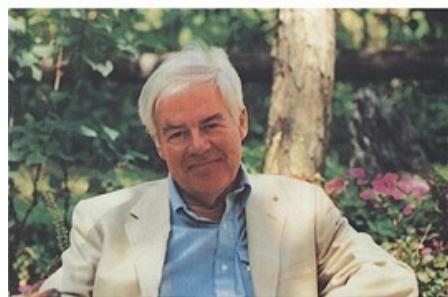


RICHARD RORTY



*Contingency, irony,  
and solidarity*

## Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity

*Richard M. Rorty*

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# Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity

*Richard M. Rorty*

**Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity** Richard M. Rorty

A major American philosopher asserts that it is literature, not philosophy, that promotes a genuine sense of human solidarity and ultimately, the advancement of liberal goals through the social consciousness it raises.

## Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity Details

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# From Reader Review Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity for online ebook

## Ross Torres says

The main issue I have with Rorty's perspective isn't his idea that language, self, and community are contingent but what I do take issue with is his claim that all we do in this contingency is re-describe (p99 quoted in full below). I think Rorty is acting in bad faith and doesn't want to accept that our so-called re-descriptions and so-called final vocabularies have considerable effects on people's lives. I wouldn't say we are looking for the true society, true epistemology in the analytic tradition's understanding of truth (which on some level Rorty also rejects), but that there is a good society, in the Nietzschean sense, meaning that which we decide to affirm and maintain out of our desire.

I acknowledge that he is addressing what I see as a fundamental question in a globalized society, how do we find 'peace', how do we end 'cruelty' in a world with so many perspectives or "final vocabularies". Final vocabularies are eradicated by violence. By bombs dropped by the armies of rich liberal democracies. By transnational corporations dispossessing indigenous peoples of their land in order to practice the "final vocabulary" of capitalism. This is another example of Rorty's bad faith and special pleading. He says that within liberal society there are spaces or the potential for spaces where free discourse can happen and new final vocabularies developed, but isn't liberal society a "final-vocabulary"? Yet somehow it has more finality, so much so that it gives us the right to destroy entire countries (Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya...). Within the so-called rich liberal democracies 'final vocabularies' are disregarded and violently repressed constantly (the history and current conditions of African-Americans, the history and current conditions of indigenous peoples...). In short liberal democracy gives us the right to be cruel and Rorty doesn't take responsibility for this (bad faith) in order to maintain his own position in global society (special pleading).

Rorty says we can never find the right description of the world: "There are only little mortal things to be rearranged by being re-described. If he had been alive or sane longer, there would have been more material to be rearranged, and thus different re-descriptions, but there would never have been the right description. For although the thoroughgoing ironist can use the notion of a "better description," he has no criterion for the application of this term and so cannot use the notion of "the right description." So he sees no futility in his failure to become an *etre-en-soi*. The fact that he never wanted to be one, or at least wanted not to want to be one, is just what separates him from the metaphysician" (p99). And herein lies the root of the incoherence of his book; Rorty is a closet metaphysician. He's still holding on to "the right description" he wants to describe our situation correctly by saying there is no right description but he still wants to be right. According to his description, his description of our inability to describe is the correct description.

Perhaps, I am a closet metaphysician myself and not reading his description as an "ironist", I'm not seeing that "ironist theory" is just "a ladder which is to be thrown away as soon as one has figured out what it was that drove one's predecessors to theorize (p97). I would say no, that 'ironist theory' is a broken ladder that I would never climb, especially if it leads to rich liberal democracies. And what would Rorty say? "No, your re-description is wrong!"? No, he wouldn't say that because there are no "right descriptions", rather he would say that I have just found more "material to be rearranged" and that we should all be liberal ironists, and I taking his lead would say the final-vocabulary of liberal democracy is just material rearranged and he would say well you are just rearranging material you haven't found a right description and...

And Nietzsche (someone who Rorty refers to often) would say that "he is bound to reserve a kick for the feeble windbags who promise without the right to do so, and a rod for the liar who breaks his word even at

the moment he utters it. The proud awareness of the extraordinary privilege of responsibility, the consciousness of this rare freedom, this power over oneself and over fate, has in his case penetrated to the profoundest depths and become instinct, the dominating instinct. What will he call this dominating instinct, supposing he feels the need to give it a name? The answer is beyond doubt; this sovereign man calls it his conscience. (p60 *Genealogy of Morals*).

Does Rorty refuse this privilege of responsibility? Does Rorty have a conscience?

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### **Joeri Kooimans says**

Rorty makes a sympathetic case for a liberal utopia in which we should realize that the vocabularies we use (e.g.: our values, and beliefsystems as mediated by our socialization and language) are contingent and must be kept open to revision. This makes them equal, because no vocabulary is privileged, nor can a vocabulary be legitimized from a neutral, objective standpoint. There are thus no "true" meta-vocabularies.

We should therefore not base our beliefs and actions about for instance solidarity on (philosophical) foundations concerning human nature, which are flawfully essentialistic, but on the ability to see others as susceptible to pain and humiliation. This is what it means to be a liberal ironist, for Rorty.

Though progressive and emancipatory as this might seem, vocabularies are not, I think, as equal and contingent as Rorty argues. Some are still being privileged over others and we are disciplined to embrace some, which can be very harmful. Also, seeing things as contingent might make it harder to strive for social progress, instead of making it easier.

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### **Matthew Gallaway says**

Rorty's conception of language and fiction changed my life. Five fucking stars.

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### **Hadrian says**

1) Our own truths are the results of individual interpretations of language. For further detail, read Heidegger Wittgenstein.

2) Different people will interpret things differently. Some of these interpretations are irreconcilable. This is OK. For counterexamples, see Plato and Kant.

3) It's OK to you to try and think independently.

3a) Literature and poetry are useful means to think and explore independently. Not just in aesthetics, but on social issues as well. Not just Nabokov, but Orwell.

4) Yes, everybody, not just intellectuals, get to think and feel about things differently. For further details, see Freud.

5) Any attempt to justify liberal politics based on ideology will end up with circular reasoning. For further

detail, see Foucault and Derrida.

5a) Thus, it is OK to use pragmatic reasoning to continue to advocate liberalism (it's better than the alternatives). For further detail, see Dewey and James.

6) Do you want any practical suggestions? Sorry, you're shit out of luck here. Interpretation is what matters here.

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### **Andrew says**

Oh my, this was an interesting one. So much of what Rorty said, I agreed with to a T. Things that seem so obvious, but in the ordinary sphere of discourse are always clouded by metaphysical bullshit. The one thing he said that I couldn't jibe with (and I don't know whether I disagree with it or not, it was certainly disconcerting) was his notion of a divide between private ironism and public non-ironism. Either way, his whole thesis is very interesting and thought-provoking, and, to phrase it in a Rortian way, necessitates a vocabulary shift for all of us.

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### **the gift says**

fascinating meta-philosophy critique, about entire tendencies in thought towards metaphysician- here a bad thing- and the ironist- generally a good thing- but I can see how he could annoy those who are searching for some kind of holistic certainty, some way of thought that is atemporal, usually given capitals whether thick or thin, according to your particular final vocabulary...

so he does not refer to my favourite philosopher, so he gets things out of Heidegger, Nietzsche, even Kant, which I do not know, so he refers to Nabokov, so he gets theory-thick on Orwell, so he valourizes the ironist and never allows enquiry, doubt, freedom to talk, any rest...

Hegel suggests fiction and poetic work will soon be surpassed by Philosophy, here Rorty argues the other way round, heartening for artists, denigration of idea thinkers and all those who believe in the value of love of wisdom. for me, suspended somewhere between these ways of being, there is always already value in both styles of life- rather than deflationary dissolving, resolving, the equation of life, I like to believe life is ambiguity to be lived and not problem to be solved...

but then I am reading Heidegger at the moment, and the only commonality in all these attitudes towards Art, is that it is Important. I hope so... I am enjoying Heidegger's ideas about art as calling forth works of art, rather than the work all building up into a catalog of art...

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### **Thomas Bundy says**

Rorty posits a philosophy that is internally inconsistent, and ultimately, cowardly. To the degree that people can create their own ironic selves, they will necessarily tend to destroy solidarity. His notion of solidarity contradicts the contingent, ironic existences he argues that we have. He just doesn't LIKE that self-creators will come along that will increase suffering, so he creates a scheme that rejects their projects.

The purpose of this ideal liberal society is to eradicate cruelty and suffering and to improve the day-to-day lives of the weakest and least fortunate human beings among us. He correctly notes that this scheme is completely incompatible with the self-creation involved in the private sphere. If anyone was permitted to bind his private self-creation program upon others, humiliation and destruction of freedom (the autonomy produced by recognition of contingency) would result. Rorty, being as liberal as he is ironic, can't help but to tell us the good we ought to do; he cannot countenance true contingent irony. If he was honest he would have to admit that contingency removes any basis for community. The only thing human beings have in common is their vulnerability to suffering, but that is no basis for solidarity. The ability to feel pain is also what we share with animals, which is why Rorty's solidarity, as Nietzsche correctly forewarns, would reduce us to a herd. While he says, "there will be no higher standpoint to which we are all responsible and against whose precepts we might offend," (CIS 50), he nonetheless provides an ordering of society, based not on justice but on compassion, which Nietzsche and Aristotle both recognize as NOT being a virtue. Nietzsche says, "Error (faith in the ideal) is not blindness, error is cowardice" (Ecce Homo).

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### **Wesley says**

The late professor Rorty changed my life. Not that I agree with all his opinions, but the depth of his reasoning, the erudition and gravity and unshakable reasonableness of his writing opened my mind to new levels of thinking. Coupled with Nietzsche's Beyond Good & Evil (which I read for the same class when I was a sophomore), the effect was literally life-changing.

The book is about the impossibility of transcultural values, the possibilities and promise of sloughing off Enlightenment rationalism, sensitivity to pain and humiliation, and a proposed split between private projects and public participation (basically a Nietzsche on the inside and a Dewey on the outside). Rorty, however morose he might be (look on YouTube for videos of him speaking; he's articulate and really, really imperturbable), is an optimist about what human beings are capable of. When it comes down to it, his belief that all human beings really need to agree on is that pain and humiliation are bad and we should use politics to avoid them publicly, is demonstrative of his faith in the general malleability and plasticity of human nature (towards good). I sharply disagree in principle, but perhaps not in practice.

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### **Laura says**

The arrogant musings of a left-wing social philosopher who essentially divides people into three categories: dumb bunnies, common-sensers, and people who have the deep insight to agree with him. The only take-home message worth taking home was that philosophy is not as effective a vehicle for ideas as literature, which I knew beforehand.

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### **Trevor says**

I was at work a week or so ago and my boss got me to track down a quote by this guy and then to read over the article the quote was from. The article is here:

<http://web1.uct.usm.maine.edu/~bcj/is...>

Anyway, I've tended to avoid American pragmatists since a bad experience in my undergrad degree. But I've been reading lots of Dewey – you sort of have to if you are going to be doing anything around the sociology of education – and then the article above was so interesting that I thought I might read a bit more of this Rorty guy.

This was also interesting. I'm very fond of Hegel – look, I know he was a reactionary old fart and all that. All the same, I like that he saw change as the fundamental thing you need to know about the universe and that standard logic, that is, logic that is based on identity, simply cannot help us to gain a deep understanding of how the world works because identity is the wrong end of the telescope for understanding the world. We need a kind of dialectical logic to really understand the world – a dialectical logic that sees change as the thing to focus on, not identity. The thing that is most obvious about the world isn't that it is always the same – it is rather that it is always changing. Having a philosophy that is based on the premise of the eternal unity of the universe (Plato, say) can only take you so far in understanding a universe that is fundamentally in constant flux. That Plato had to invent a world of forms where these unchanging things could go on unchanging and to thereby assert that this world we live in is 'unreal' probably ought to have been a bit of a give away.

Now, I've gotten into trouble saying this sort of thing before here on goodreads and I have even had to block someone who would fly into irrational rants at the mere mention of Hegel's name – someone who proudly said that the night he had torn one of Hegel's books to pieces was one of his favourite memories. Such is the nature of philosophy, I guess – nothing like a good book burning to warm the soul. Still, my credo is that everything is related to everything else and change is the only absolute – and as both of these ideas come from my mate Hegel, what can I say? And Rorty, as with most of the American pragmatists, is rather fond of Hegel too.

Hegel haunts this book. Right from the introduction we are told that the author is much more interested in the idea of a contingent human nature – that is, something born of Hegel's historicism – than of a Platonic or Kantian human essence.

But if there is no true and deep human essence doesn't that make all of our opinions and hopes relative and meaningless? How does one avoid the abyss of nihilism if there is not a grounding truth to human nature? How, to make the case more relevant to Rorty who here wants to assert the value of liberalism, can we assert such a view if there is no human nature to ground it with?

In some ways these are the same arguments that religious type people make against atheists. 'Why don't you just rape and kill and steal and cheat if you don't believe in God?' – to which the only answer is, "You mean, the only reason you don't do those things is because you're afraid of what God might think?" Gosh.

Rorty has a very particular notion of what being liberal means. He says, "I borrow my definition of "liberal" from Judith Shklar, who says that liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do." Now, again when I was an undergraduate I wrote a short story for my professional writing degree which played with very similar ideas. Clearly, people aren't all equal – in many ways the least interesting things to say about people are to point out those things that make us all the same. But at the time I thought that one of the things that proves our common humanity is the revulsion we feel when we see someone being tortured. I was young and didn't realise at the time that people get around this problem by defining whole groups of others as less than human – and then anything can happen to 'them' as 'they' don't count at all.

So, I quite like this definition of liberal, but I also have reservations. That is, there is a naivety about it that reminds me of my own naivety (and nothing repulses us more...)

Not only does Rorty see our definition of human as being contingent, but he also says that all contingency boils down to how we go about using language. Ironically enough, Rorty therefore sees language as being the main way we might go about fixing these problems. Language allows us to redefine problems and so to make one of those Kahnian paradigm shifts. And the people who are best able to do that with language are certainly not philosophers – but rather poets (in the broadest sense of the term).

I guess my quick and dirty summary of this book is – we need to be taught how to feel compassion for people who aren't 'like us' and the best way we have to learn how to feel compassion is to read fiction. For God sake, we even learn how to feel compassion for a guy who has been turned into a cockroach if we read particularly good fiction – so, how could that not make the world a better place?

The things I liked about this book were that it was fairly easy to read, it said interesting things about Foucault, Nietzsche, Hegel, Habermas and Nabokov and things that were sympathetic to their core ideas (and not just pointing and laughing or shrugging shoulders in disregard). It was clear Rorty had engaged with their ideas in ways that were much more than can be obtained from a quick glance over.

So, this leads me to what I'm going to make of all of this. I guess I have the same problem with Rorty as I do with Foucault. After reading them it is as if I have been shown all of the things that are wrong with the world, but am not shown a way out of the labyrinth. Foucault's point, I guess, is that there only is labyrinth, not a way out. But the attraction of Marxism, say, is that it offers a clear way out – even if that way out to date has lead either to nightmare or nowhere.

The book ends, more or less, with a discussion of Orwell – particularly his 1984. My fear is that we read 1984 as if it was a vision of a communist future which we have avoided and so which is no longer relevant except as history – it is important to remember that 1984 was set in a future England. Society has become much better at controlling populations than the Soviets or the Nazis were ever capable of. As Postman points out, we do this by something closer to Brave New World than 1984. Sartre says that it is impossible to write a truly great novel premised on anti-Semitism. But we can and do make endless numbers of crap films based on anti-Islam. As much as we might hope that art might bring us to a more compassionate world – it seems just as capable of bringing us to a more divided one too. Perhaps philosophy isn't the answer – we have seen far too many philosophers line up and essentialize the whole of the Muslim world as if everyone living under a crescent moon was immediately identical. Art has been too often tragically silent in all this too - that is, it has been either silent or complicit. Far too rarely has it lived up to Rorty's high estimation.

This was a much better book than I thought it might have been. But I thought the essay I've linked to at the top of this was possibly as good as this entire book. If you are unfamiliar with Rorty I would highly recommend you have a look at that.

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### **Shane Eide says**

[www.emergenthermit.com](http://www.emergenthermit.com)

The late Richard Rorty scandalized people with his 'relaxed attitude' when it came to truth. He was often charged with terms like 'flippant' and 'relativistic.' To rest at such a description of Rorty as a thinker would be to ignore his contribution to the dialogue of liberal thought, and also, to entertain the most refined prejudice of one contingent vocabulary. Contingent vocabularies are what this book is all about. In

Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, Rorty sets out to create a dialogue in which people who think that being cruel is the worst thing that one could do will gather together and find a way to eliminate the highest amount of suffering possible.

For Rorty, foundationalism and metaphysics are out of the question. As Wittgenstein revealed, there are no mechanics that put an idea in closer proximity to 'truth.' Philosophical problems are not cosmic problems but problems of grammar. But the problem with getting the grammar right is that all vocabularies are contingent, so all of our 'knowledge' belongs to a specific language game within a set of inherited rules.

There are two strains of thought that occur often in western philosophy. They are 'private irony' and 'liberal hope.' Through most of the book, Rorty relies as much on novelists as cultural models as he does on philosophers. It has been the 'liberal hope' of thinkers to come up with a way to make things better for everyone around them. It has been the 'private irony' of other thinkers to find a means of self-recreation. This latter kind of thinker is an 'ironist'—one who recognizes the contingency of her own vocabulary, trusts no vocabulary that claims to be 'final' (though she doesn't think it possible for any vocabulary to be final).

The ironist sets out to create her own vocabulary in order to find a place amidst the other recognized vocabularies. Rorty posits that, this private irony, though capable of bringing people to personal transformation, is seldom capable of providing any reliable model for society as a whole. Rorty relies on little to back his statement up other than providing aggregate examples of ironists and their horrific views of society, rather than providing a direct incompatibility that private irony has with liberal hope. To exemplify (quite convincingly) some of the failures of ironists to provide this liberal hope, he presents us with Nietzsche's disastrous culture modeled after the 'will to power,' paired with Foucault. Derrida and Proust don't seem to have much to say about society at all, though they provide spectacular personal mythologies.

As Rorty lays out, there is obviously a need for private irony, just as there is a need for liberal hope, but he feels it important to separate the two in practice. The vocabulary of 'I' cannot always agree with the vocabulary of 'We,' and it is the 'We,' vocabulary that affects each 'I.'

Rorty argues that, for the most part, what moves the masses is not some new language game or system of thought, but something that people can relate to: in this case, art. Rorty uses novelists as models for liberal hope, for they don't waste inordinate amounts of time trying to figure out essences or approximations that certain ideas have to reality. They simply represent something that is affecting their world and so get close to their readers.

The two models of liberal hope that he goes into at length are Nabokov and Orwell. Rorty is perhaps revolutionary in his use of Nabokov as a vehicle for liberal change, for most of Nabokov's readers simply take him at his word when he says of his own work that he has absolutely no message to convey and no moral goal to achieve. Nabokov may have believed this of himself, but Rorty gives us some cogent reasons to suspect that Nabokov was terrified of suffering and thought that cruelty was the worst thing a human could do. He cites examples from *Lolita*, arguing that Humbert Humbert's indifference to the suffering of those around him offers a far more complicated moral than the simple idea that 'pedophiles are bad.' Rorty cites examples from Nabokov's other masterpiece, *Pale Fire*, and has a very easy time convincing us that the moral of both novels are very similar. In both of them, he challenges us to be aware of what's around us, and often, you will find that someone is suffering.

In Orwell, we see the faultiness of absolutes in the name of a cultural idea. Though Orwell didn't write masterpieces of English prose, his work was a more conscious vehicle for liberal hope which saw danger and addressed it directly in a time when others didn't see it.

It is important to note that Rorty finds it equally important to have both private irony and liberal hope, but his whole book sets out a means of separating them in a way that will keep each where it can be utilized best. Rorty seeks to do away with 'Kantian distinctions' like 'content versus style' and bad questions like, 'is art for art's sake?' For Rorty, all different kinds of art can do all different kinds of things.

Though Rorty does come dangerously close to the same kinds of foundationalism that he rejects when he slips into using words like ‘mistake’ to refer to contingency—as if there was some foundation in which culture would be grounded if it weren’t for this ‘inherited’ set of circumstances we’re always thrown into—he offers ‘solidarity’ as a brilliant synonym for truth, at least in terms of liberal hope.

He says:

If we are ironic enough about our final vocabularies, and curious enough about everyone else's, we do not have to worry about whether we are in direct contact with moral reality, or whether we are blinded by ideology, or whether we are being weakly "relativistic."

For Rorty, an idea's proximity to some 'out there' truth is not even something worth determining or fixing. He is concerned with the truth that is best for all of us. He says that the better question is not 'Do you believe and desire what we believe and desire?' but, 'Are you suffering?'

In the end, he argues that if we want private irony and liberal hope, it is possible to have both.

In my jargon, this is the ability to distinguish the question of whether you and I share the same final vocabulary from the question of whether you are in pain. Distinguishing these questions makes it possible to distinguish public from private questions, questions about pain from questions about the point of human life, the domain of the liberal from the domain of the ironist. It thus makes it possible for a single person to be both.

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**Intery says**

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## **Nick Wellings says**

The publication of *Contingency Irony, Solidarity* seems to have been a major event in philosophy. It seems that many philosophers were scandalised, angry or offended by the text and its position. It was true to say that to read CIS was to encounter an intellectually brave and morally novel work like nothing I have read before. Why?

Rorty wants to show us a preferred state of society. To do this Contingency Irony Solidarity (CIS) thumbs its nose at a lot of sacred cows. Rorty attempts to pull the rug out from under most of our seemingly sacred principles, many of which seem unassailable, necessary and true.

## METHOD AND TRUTH

## Rorty's Method

As with genealogy of families, intellectual genealogy thrives on the assumption of 'purity' the surety that comes from secure and unchallenged unbroken descent. To be able to prove through the branches back to the

root of things, one obtains legitimacy. Rorty shows us the parochial nature of our historical situation by tracing these lines of "purity" (my scare quote marks, Rorty is too subtle to lend value judgement to his ideas) which have become second nature, part of our mental and cultural furniture. In historicising, Rorty "de-divinizes" them, flinging back the cultural curtains to disenchant our Oz.

Seen this way, many of our ideas on politics, freedom, selfhood turn out to be historically contingent narratives, part of the cultural milieu, the phrases and concepts part of what Rorty calls our final vocabularies. To so disenchant, to destabilise and in so doing, disabuse us of certain institutions and of Truth in general, Rorty's aim is to build an internally consistent plausible model from which liberalism (his preferred government/life style - and by extension, he hopes, ours,) can find a foothold. The chief target of Rorty's deconstructive gaze is one of the hoariest in philosophy: Truth.

#### TRUTH:

Contra X-Files, Rorty asserts right from the start of CIS that the Truth is not out there. (In this respect I would classify him as a deflationist\*.) Instead we are makers of our own cultural and personal truths. This is where many commentators got angry - Rorty was charged with being a Relativist, tantamount to saying he was an intellectual anarchist or terrorist. He defends himself in the book and elsewhere against this, knowing it is an issue that sinks his epistemological ship if the shot is true. Further, Rorty's is a thoroughly postmodern philosophy, analytic thought with Continental flavours, cooked up by American hands. (Quelle horreur!)

To return to Irony and to simplify: Rorty explains via Wittgenstein that our language games are all that is the case: they are our truth. These vocabularies are amenable to transformation. It seems that our words can be our projects. Once this is realised we can narrate a radical (liberal) future to ourselves.

#### CONTINGENCY:

If our historical narratives (one is reminded of Lyotard) are contingent, Rorty asks us to realise that our notions of self, place in society are also. Contingency here means not so much parochialism obtaining from chance historical patterns (which is mere tautology), event subtending event, life with life, but more to do with malleability: in thinking of historical counterfactuals, we may be more responsive to those times when we have choice of action, and may be able to change our life trajectories. After all, every philosopher and most people realise that they are temporal beings. In Heideggerian terms, we are "thrown" into Being, but have the means to catch ourselves. (As an aside, I am reminded that Bloom tells us our modern consciousness emerged with Shakespeare, the soliloquy a device of "self-overhearing", this overhearing a mark of Modern mind...)

Rorty's solutions to contingency (irony, solidarity) here are to my mind, peculiarly American: the transformative element through irony, the idea of American Dream (coined 1931, the year of Rorty's birth) the self-help and Landmark for a type elements which say (correctly) that one must change ones life - to use as Rorty does, Nietzsche's dictum: we must become who we are.

Therefore we have so far the Contingency of self and society explained. Next follows Irony. Realising our contingency we are gifted through irony to change our selves and society. Lastly comes Solidarity.

#### SOLIDARITY:

With Truth deflated and our cultural projects seen as contingent, we are left in a precarious position. If one dispenses with an idea of any privileged truths and truthholders one becomes lost in competing truths. Rorty's solution is to accept this plurality but to cheerlead for liberalism, hoping it's historical track record and status as "pretty good so far!" makes it a favourite in the footrace of Western narratives. I suspect he may have done this to foreground the fact that those blessed with agency and freedoms are able to chose its structure a preferable state of order for their existence.

My thoughts:

I really liked how he used Proust Heidegger and Nietzsche to buttress his argument. Some cogent and subtle criticism throughout those sections. I especially liked how Proust is given to us as exemplar of irony, a master at realising his self's nature.

Though I am unschooled I did have some felt objections to some of his concepts (felt as in, a twinge of doubt and not so much intellectually expressed argued thoughts). Let's put it that at the end of the book I was less than convinced. Rorty's own Grand narrative of ironic liberalism seems to ignore the microscale, as if he is saying let the little things sort themselves.

I had further issues with how Rorty chooses to illustrate his moral/ethical ideas. CIS's ethical politics are drawn from Sklar's dictum that cruelty is the worst thing we can do to one another which is fine by me. I did not agree that the way in which he aims to remind us of this through art was the best course of action.

Rorty says that our most profound artists are alive to their own contingency, their stance is ironic, their perspective larger than ours. One conventionally calls this wisdom, but Rorty shies away from this (remember how he likes to disenchant? Is wary of value judgements?). Nabokov and Orwell are yoked in to reinforce his ethical rules: Nabokov and cruelty and Orwell on dangers of totalitarianism. We must, qua Rorty, read from our betters to learn how we must act. Working to work away from cruelty, we forge solidarity. Having read Orwell, we are aware of the danger of collective agency given collective solidarity (anarchy, totalitarianism?).

This seemed a little flimsy to me. One does not live by books. Our cultural gatekeepers may be mandarins, we follow their examples by the fictions they read privately or present to us publicly, but in the world as it is, who governs book in hand or mind? The bible or Quran might be texts most suited to this but then the spectre of fundamentalism rears its head.

One might ask why for instance that the work of Goya (specifically his Disasters of War series) does not suffice to educate or warn us? Painting could arguably be more democratic than reading as, seeing is available to most of us, and we can confront the visual message therein whereas not everyone can read. The same for say, Midnight Express or Papillon which must educate us against the horrors of imprisonment as Shawshank Redemption tries to show us how sweet liberty is to those deprived of it, or as Paths Of Glory or To Kill A Mockinbird shows us danger of injustice and Guess Who's Coming To Dinner warns us about racism\*. I can't recall reading why Rorty chooses books over film but I think he was a professor of comparative lit too. An objection here might be that in our age there is ongoing debate around the idea that brutal films seem only to debase us and our offspring, corrupting our morals and such like, and its harder for books to corrupt minds.

Problematic too I thought was that in Rorty's world, whither basic decency? It's not mentioned in CIS. It seems truly that anything goes - as long as it is ironically mediated, working for liberal principles. This is to ignore a great weight of evidence that the Golden Rule was expounded by Jesus and Confucius, that it seems

pretty pancultural not to aggravate ones neighbour and to generally be nice. Cruelty may be the worst thing we can do but decency perhaps the best. To me it seems that in CIS the baby of decency is thrown out with the bathwater of Enlightenment tropes. I favour the philosophy of Levinas where encounter with Other is key to existence, morality and selfhood. Self mediated through encounter. Rorty's Others seem to be only fictional (Orwell's Winston, Nabokov's Humbert) his morality equated with these fictional representations. There must be some kind of concession to "common sense". We do not abhor murder because Brutus and his conspirators knifed Julius Caeser. Nor because it was done in public. (Perhaps I am reading him wrongly. There are very likely 'more things dreamed of in his philosophy....'etc.)

Rorty problematises the gulf between private irony and liberal expectation a little too much for my liking too.

Last thoughts: I found the chapter on Nabokov veered a little into pure literary criticism. The Orwell chapter stronger as more directly and convincingly linked to Rorty's argument. The Solidarity chapter and concluding remarks a bit rushed/crammed and not as conclusive as I would have liked. Rorty essentially entreats us to expand our notions of togetherness to include others we would not normally include in the idea.

Overall though, a fun book! Rorty's style is relaxed and even though I had trouble with a few sentences or ideas here and there, it wasn't a big deal. Anyone who likes to engage with thought on self and society will find a lot to ruminate on in here.

## Notes

\* Deflationism: <http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deflationism>

\* I realise some of these film choices are not the best paradigmatic fits.

## Further reading:

For a far better review than mine try Dennis Dutton's!

[http://denisdutton.com/rorty\\_review.htm](http://denisdutton.com/rorty_review.htm)

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## **philosovamp says**

As someone better versed in the Continental tradition, my perception of what I was told was "analytic" philosophy has varied from curiosity, to hesitant respect, to disdain. I can now say that, insofar as this book is an "analytic" work, it is expansive, eclectic and eye-opening to what sorts of philosophy can be done; it has especially piqued an interest in me for Pragmatism. If you know way more about Heidegger than Wittgenstein and feel that's a good thing, I urge you to read this.

As for the book, the part that matters, I must say that Rorty packs very much into very crisp, clear sentences. As a result, much of the work is being done in the background - between the lines, in Rorty's other essays, and in other texts. This book demands re-reads and re-descriptions to do it justice, and Rorty admits that the justifications for his particularly idiosyncratic readings of authors like Freud or Derrida must be sought elsewhere. Thus, some major confusions or qualms I have about Rorty's project here might be irrelevant until

I've read further.

Before that, I can only describe Rorty's crystallization of diverse streams of thought into a broad and identifiable view of the world, ironism, as masterful and personally influential. His rejection of both metaphysical thinking and charges of relativism is confident and convincing, and his unwillingness to collapse autonomy or solidarity to the other is daring. And the network of thinkers he draws upon is exciting in its scope, going from Wittgenstein to Kuhn to Foucault.

But Rorty is not just describing ironism, he's describing liberal ironism. It'd be a tautology to say that his very rigid separation of the private and the public is typical of an advocate of liberal political ideology. He provides a more thorough case for that separation than anyone else I've seen, but I was dogged by a suspicion of it; why this distinction and where does it come from, if not the Plato-Kant continuum? Rorty writes that "socialization goes all the way down," so why is it a coherent means of describing groups as comprised of individuals having their own inviolable domain with such a sharp distinction? Of course, the response could be: there is nothing true or necessarily externally coherent about the rigid demarcation of the private and the public, it is a useful re-description for the "we" group of liberals. Well, being, probably, in at least one community other than Rorty's where this description is used, I can only claim skepticism. But this rigid demarcation between the private ironist and the public liberal, where you don't necessarily care at all for others in your private libidinal fantasies, and surrender that on the entrance into the public sphere, leads him to pretty startling claims like: Foucault, Nietzsche, Heidegger or Derrida are immensely important figures for the private ironist, and completely useless for liberal society. He thus goes back and flattens the work of these writers, not only suggesting they are useless but for your individual projects, but, I think, insinuating, that they were mistaken to try to do anything other than Proust did in the first place. I find that difficult to swallow and not quite defensible.

At a more particular level, Rorty's claim that science and philosophy has fallen far behind literature in giving meaning and excitement to lives in liberal societies I find strange, as science and technology have an importance growing in scale and complexity the world over. That more people could recognize Hawking or Tyson than Nabokov demonstrates this at least a little. Rorty's neglect of science, while also making frequent referral to ideas derived directly from a study of philosophy and history of science via Kuhn, is either an omission of brevity's sake or a blindspot. This is especially important in that Rorty cites the capacity for suffering as essentially a replacement for reason or goodness as the essential natural quality of all humans (and animals); that he could do this on any but a physiological and psychological basis, somehow outside of our languages, would be curious if not contradictory; yes all people seem to suffer, but as Rorty acknowledges the most profound forms of suffering, humiliation, are engineered - they're socialized. Another alternate viewpoint I would have liked to see considered is in the Nabokov/Orwell section; he draws on these two novelists (poets, rather) to discuss cruelty as a private question (Nabokov) and a social ill (Orwell). I would have much rather seen Rorty tackle someone like de Sade, who rather than prodding at personal cruelty or appalling at its social extremes, embraced it in both spheres. That cruelty is, for de Sade, not just the frightening trait of even the intelligent, but every single powerful or intelligent person in the West, is a tougher problem for Rorty. As a final short ancillary remark, I wish I knew if Rorty would be so optimistic about his predictions of the power of literature in liberal society; a lot less people are getting their moral instruction from Orwell as from Rowling. What a monster the culture machine is.

The final, and probably bigger question, is at the very end: is ironism and solidarity more useful for liberal society than metaphysical thinking? Rorty doesn't dare ask: what's useful for other communities? I am not sure how he would approach that question were he alive today, a very different West from that of 20 years ago when this was published. Certain actors in liberal society today wield, it could be argued, ironism as a social force, not a private one, to attack institutions; human solidarity as Rorty perceives it giving way to

apparent sectarianism unlike that seen in decades; and a ballooning of metaphysical thinking, such as in scientism or "true/false news" all suggest that ironism and solidarity are not inviolably useful tools for even Rorty's "we's" aims.

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### **Geoffrey Fox says**

Rorty is a delightfully stimulating conversation companion, starting a conversation in my head as I read and recognize many observations and have to puzzle over others. In three major sections, he presents his view of how we humans can struggle for personal liberation — he calls it autonomy, which I think is good — without losing sight of our commitment to the well-being of others, that is, solidarity. Our only way of doing either is through language, by which we create our descriptions of the world. Which is what we call "truth": "Truth cannot be out there — cannot exist independently of the human mind — because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not."

The ironist recognizes that his/her truth is not final or absolute, but contingent. New experience will require a new description, or at least an adjustment of our old vision. When so many adjustments are needed as to make that older version practically useless, we must create a new one. By changing our language, using old words but with new meanings and when necessary inventing new words, we change our worlds — as Copernicus did to Ptolemy, Darwin to a whole theological tradition, or Orwell (in Rorty's fascinating analysis of "1984" — did to a complex language of the Left. I am thankful for his recognition of the revolutionary function of writers, the original ones like Nabokov, Orwell, Nietzsche, Dickens, Heidegger (yes, even despite his Naziism), Habermas, Derrida, to mention only those Rorty here discusses in detail.

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### **Mohammad Sadegh Rasooli says**

My review in Persian: <http://delsharm.blog.ir/1396/12/09/rorty>

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### **Sharifa says**

An absolute must-read for any student (or fan) of the analytic tradition in Western philosophy.

Rorty criticizes not only basic assumptions in the Enlightenment tradition's approach towards examining meaning, speech and truth but also how this approach that we've inherited is flawed in understanding itself and other systems of thought. If all this sounds excessively obtuse, I hope you take my word it isn't. The implications of these ideas range not only from the political and sociological but also to the interpersonal and deeply metaphysical. If nothing else, this book is sure to impart a disconcerting but illuminating sense of self-awareness.

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### **Jee Koh says**

I've always wondered how to reconcile Nietzschean self-creation with liberal politics, and so it is with a tremendous sense of excitement, and relief, that I learn from Richard Rorty that it is not necessary to reconcile the two, that in fact it is a mistake to try for some kind of synthesis. One has to be contented with

their separation, to be a liberal ironist, as Rorty calls it. The irony is directed at all final vocabularies, one's own as well as others', understanding that there is no final vocabulary that is not contingent and not formed by one's historical and social contingencies. Discourse and socialization goes all the way down, and the best one can hope for is to re-write a small part of one's inherited script. The geniuses among us re-write a bigger part. That is the self-creation advocated by Nietzsche. It retains his perspectivism but relinquishes his essentializing move of making "the will to power" a commonality in all human beings. "The will to power" may be a useful description of people some of the time, but it is nonetheless merely a description. We cannot step out of our language to judge whether it corresponds to a truth out there in reality or a truth in here in us.

As for the "liberal" part of being a liberal ironist, Rorty repeats Judith Shklar's useful definition: liberals are people for whom "cruelty is the worst thing they do." There is no non-tautological way of defending this definition, just as there are no non-tautological ways of defending other definitions. The test of the pudding is in the eating. Is it a useful way to bring about the progressive changes that liberals have traditionally wish to see happen in society? To my mind, it is. It highlights the desire to avoid pain, which we share with animals, and by extension, the desire to avoid humiliation, which we don't share with animals because we have selves that are constituted by language and therefore capable of being humiliated. The avoidance of pain seems sufficiently "basic." This definition of liberalism also seems broad enough to encompass a wide range of politics, and narrow enough to exclude the politics of exploitation and intolerance.

*Contingency, irony, and solidarity* consists of three parts. Part I titled "Contingency" argues for the contingency of language, selfhood, and a liberal community. Part II titled "Ironism and Theory" re-examines the roles of private irony and liberal hope in the writings of Proust, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida. Part III titled "Cruelty and Solidarity" shows how the pursuit of self-creation (Nabokov) and of community (Orwell) could be cruel to others. There are books, as Rorty argues, that we read for re-creating ourselves, by becoming more sensitive to others' pain, for instance, and there are books, different ones, that we read for re-creating our communities. Narratives, more than philosophies, are useful in describing or re-describing others' pain, and so are more useful in sensitizing us to it.

In Rorty's liberal utopia, we are free to pursue our private dreams of self-perfection, as long as we don't cause hurt to others or use more than our fair share of resources. The goal of such a utopia is the increase of Freedom, and not any approximation to Truth.

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## Ryan says

I read this book as a challenge to myself. An engineering education tends to engender a Manichean sensibility, as solutions are either correct or incorrect. When Richard Rorty died in 2007, I read a slate.com profile that classified him as that worst pariah of American middle-class sensibility - a relativist. But, there was a definite measure of respect for the positions he took. So I decided to give him a try, hoping to open my mind, but expecting to dance gleefully on his bleeding heart.

Sadly, I wasn't able to dance as this book completely captivated me by throwing aside many notions I had about "truth". This book was a tough read for me - at best, I'm but a dilettante when it comes to philosophy, but with some Wikipedia assist, I could keep up. I just think it's a very well written, very well thought out book. And Rorty seems to actually care about what happens in the world, with people. This opposed to some abstract philosophical construct that we should aspire to. That gives the book a good deal of it's power, because it's talking about things we can do to make life a little better.

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**Darran McLaughlin says**

Outstanding. This is the closest that a work of philosophy has ever come to reflecting my own personal beliefs. Rorty was an analytical philosopher in the Anglo-American tradition that had a 'road to Damascus' conversion to Continental philosophy. His writing is in the tradition of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida combined with the Pragmatists, but he writes very clearly. He writes in such a way as to express exactly what he means to say, without ducking behind vague and complex language like many of the Post-Modern or Post-Structuralist philosophers.

Rorty believes that the best way for human beings to understand life, the world and other people is through literature, and so do I.

He provides a coherent defence of Liberalism.

He reconciles his (and my) liking of various antithetical thinkers, writers and ideas. For example, I love Nietzsche, but I wouldn't want to live in the kind of world he seems to want to create, and this book shows how that is possible.

I shall need to re-read this book to fully understand and appreciate it, but Rorty has already entered my pantheon of guru's.

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