

## **The Liberal and the Ironist: Partnering by Partition**

By Patrick Ryan

Many critics of Richard Rorty have taken his suggestion, “[...] that the liberal ironist’s final vocabulary can be, and should be split into a large private and a small public sector, sectors which have no particular relation to one another” (Rorty 100), to mean that there must be a definitive partition between one’s ironic private discourse and the common liberal discourse. Nancy Fraser, understands the coherence of the liberal ironist to depend on either a view of the two as natural partners, antithetical choices or partitioned compliments. I will return later to what exactly the ironist and the liberal are, but for now it suffices to say that the liberal is one who is committed to articulating and expanding the idea that “cruelty is the worst thing we do” (Rorty XV). The ironist, on the other hand, is one who is committed to a final vocabulary, or manner of articulating their fundamental values and beliefs, while remaining ironic about that vocabulary. The Ironist and the Liberal are certainly not natural partners. Rorty points to Nietzsche as a paradigmatic ironist, but Nietzsche’s Higher Man, the quintessential self-artist, is quite distanced from, and apathetic towards the humiliation of others, which conflicts with the liberal agenda. Ironism is deeply susceptible to isolationist and elitist attitudes. In regards to the second option, Fraser describes that a choice between either the sublime cruelty of the ironist, or the beautiful kindness of the reformer tends to, “aestheticize politics, and, so, to turn anti-democratic” (Fraser 305). Finally while the partition view does seem the most promising attempt at stabilizing the liberal ironist, Fraser finds that the lack of interplay between public and private that a partition suggests leaves the public with no vehicle for progressive change, and the private at the whims of inequalitarian self descriptions.

However, I will argue that each of these views is incorrect, as the public private divide is properly understood as a conceptual tool that creates a necessary tension between the liberal and the ironist components. I will take a historicist approach to past iterations of the public private divide in order to show that an emphasis on the tension created by Rorty's divide is the correct approach. I will then analyze each component in order to show how the tension between the two functions to make them tenable as partners. Most importantly, I hope to show that Rorty's partition is purely a pragmatic tool rather than a categorical divide.

### **A Historicist Approach to the Public / Private Bifurcation**

It seems that Fraser, and numerous others who criticize the public private bifurcation understand a categorical partition as the only manner of holding a public private distinction. Such a categorical partition is an easy target, as it is not only difficult to place a definitive divide between public and private as a categorical partition would require, but an impermeable manifold would in fact leave liberalism stagnant, and Ironism cruel as Fraser suggests. The upshot of these critiques is that the tension between the liberal and the ironist, which the first two of Fraser's options illustrate, require that they be bifurcated into public and private domains. Yet, when considered in isolation, the two still do not allow Rorty to hold freedom and justice in a single vision.

There does seem to be another option available to Rorty besides a categorical bifurcation, an option which is more consistent with Rorty's pragmatism. Traditional considerations of the liberal division of public and private have approached the bifurcation by assigning certain human capacities and activities to one or the other side of the dividing line: The ancient divide placed freedom and rationality in the sphere of the public assembly while the administration of domestic life and basic needs was relegated to the private. Rousseau inverted the distinction by suggesting that

freedom, thoughts and beliefs belonged to a rational individual in their private life, while the public was concerned with the management of social and basic needs of citizens. Hannah Arendt characterizes the public private divide more succinctly as a distinction between reason and unreason for the Greeks, and interior and exterior for the Moderns.<sup>1</sup>

Upon first glance it appears that Rorty is proposing something similar to past bifurcations, as he also appears to be relegating certain capacities to different domains. The public, for Rorty, is the realm of normal discourse and liberal social hope, while the private is the domain of abnormal, or ironic, discourse and freedom.<sup>2</sup> The categorical understanding of Rorty's bifurcation is a product of our familiarity with a certain set of problems. That is, if we take Rorty's historicism to heart, then we must understand ourselves as already immersed within a mode of approaching the public private issue based upon the problem's history. In this case, the approach in which we are already immersed when confronting Rorty, is an understanding of the public private divide as appropriately articulated when one places various human capacities on one or the other side of the divide. The tradition has especially bound freedom and rationality to the problem of the public private divide as essential faculties to place within one domain or the other.

Arendt's language in articulating the contingency of the divide's form throughout history mirrors Rorty's historicist

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<sup>1</sup> For Arendt's discussion refer to "Public Rights and Private Interests." In M. Mooney and F. Stuber, eds., *Small Comforts for Hard Times: Humanists on Public Policy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977.

<sup>2</sup> Rorty's normal and abnormal discourse can be thought of in terms of Kuhn's normal and abnormal periods of science. Just as periods of normal science entail general agreement regarding a theory, so too does normal discourse refer to the vocabulary, beliefs and values that are popularly accepted. In this sense normal discourse is that which provides a ground of common understandings in which interlocutors understand one another. Abnormal discourse refers to vocabulary which is foreign to popular understandings.

arguments regarding the mind / body problem. According to Rorty's historicist arguments in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, the closest the Greeks came to a mind body problem was a distinction between reason and unreason. The mind body problem only really emerged in the Modern era out of a distinction between internal and external. The parallels present in both the historical iterations of the mind body problem, and the public private divide suggest that just as the mind body problem is tied up with a Modern understanding of the self, so too is our understanding of the public private divide centered on an understanding of the self. This is evident in Fraser's critique as it places emphasis on how Rorty divides up the ironic and liberal faculties of the individual into the public and private.

While Rorty meticulously drew out the historically contingent nature of the mind / body problem so that we might, "think of the term 'mind' and 'language' not as the name of a medium between self and reality but simply as a flag which signals the desirability of using a certain vocabulary when trying to cope with certain kinds of organisms" (Rorty 15), he did not do so for the public private issue. Thus, many of the modern biases, including the focus on human faculty, remain undisrupted when one attempts to understand Rorty's manifold. With an awareness of how our immersion within the Modern tradition has shaped our approach to the bifurcation, it is now more appropriate to follow the example that Rorty has provided with the mind / body problem, and take a pragmatic approach to the bifurcation of the liberal ironist. Rather than a categorical partition, one more fitting to Rorty's pragmatism would be one erected in order to create tension between the liberal impulse and the ironist impulse, serving to mitigate both impulses. In this sense, there is nothing necessary about the partition between public and private, as Rorty suggests. The partition is merely a conceptual tool that creates tension between the liberal and the ironist so that the problems that Fraser's

first two options for the liberal / ironist relation encounter can be avoided.

### **Ironism, Values and Self-Artistry**

In the remainder of this essay I will consider how Rorty's bifurcation establishes friction between the liberal and the ironist and how this friction makes the liberal ironist tenable. While irony belongs to the private, specifically to one's final vocabulary, Ironism is largely dependant upon public, normal discourse. Ironism is parasitic upon normal discourse; manipulating familiar terms so as to assign them unfamiliar metaphorical meanings. Normal discourse provides the content for Ironist metaphor. In this way, there is no definitive line between the public and private, but rather there is always an intermingling of the two. Rorty's ironist is born out of his rejection of universal human characteristics, which are given form in the self. While Kant attempted to ground knowledge in the rational nature of the self, Nietzsche rejected the notion that there was any human nature to be realized and in doing so also refuted discovered Truth in favor of made truth. Rorty took up Nietzsche's notion of self-creation as the alternative that we are left with once we part with the idea of human nature.

On Rorty's reading, Nietzsche has replaced the Platonic Will to Truth with the Will to Power as the fundamental nature of humans. Rorty wishes to embrace Nietzsche's notion of self-creation without any claim to fundamental nature. Thus, Rorty's ironist is only complete when Nietzschean self-artistry is coupled with a Freudian understanding of the self as contingent upon one's personal and cultural history. Freud's great accomplishment was to recognize the contingency of the self as he, "[...] eschews the very idea of a paradigm human being" (Rorty 35). The self-artist does not enjoy unbounded freedom that they would afford themselves through an appeal to power as fundamental nature, but must create within their personal socio-historical contexts. They must

appreciate that they lay the task of self-creation before themselves while already inhabiting a specific understanding of the self. Freud pressures us to recognize that there is nothing sacred about our current, or any, understanding of the self. According to Freud, the self is a product of personal and cultural history, thus the self-artist must confront their own history and metaphorically rearticulate the self-understandings that accompany that history. In short, by placing the self within history one comes to appreciate the historical contingencies which have shaped the self, and with the façade of fundamental nature discredited by this recognition, self-creation becomes viable. This is a more thoroughgoing, pragmatic approach, as the self is historically contingent *and* opened to self-creation.

If one understands the Nietzschean Will to Power in this Freudian sense, as a contingent formulation of the self that was a product of specific historical contexts, then an interplay between the Higher Man and the herd comes to light. Rorty characterizes ironist self-creation as follows

Her description of what she is doing when she looks for a better final vocabulary than the one she is currently using is dominated by metaphors of making rather than finding, of diversification and novelty rather than convergence to the antecedently present. She thinks of final vocabularies as poetic achievements rather than as fruits of diligent inquiry according to antecedently formulated criteria (Rorty 77).

However, such an understanding seems to downplay the Freudian contribution to self creation. It is important to take into account that ironic redescription is not a creating out of thin air but is rather historically contingent and parasitic upon normal discourse

Referring to Nietzsche's understanding of values, will help to modify how Nietzschean self-artistry plays into Rorty's Ironism. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the prophet goes into the mountains in

seclusion in order to find the path to the Super Man. During his time there, Zarathustra works tirelessly organizing and reorganizing a great table of facts, ideas and values. This activity is a literal portrayal of how Nietzsche imagines self-creation. Since the creation of new values entails free will, Nietzsche realizes that the only alternative is the reorganization of existing values. In other words, values are reorganized so that different things come to be valued. Since value matrices determine which types of actions and thoughts are internally consistent for an individual, the process of reorganizing and shifting values also shifts the possible thoughts and actions that would make sense to the individual. Since the self is the imagined unity of thought and behavior, and since reorganizing values opens up new possibilities for thought and behavior, the reorganization of values is self-creation. Most importantly, in experiencing a variety of possible selves through self-artistry, the *Urbmensch* comes to appreciate the contingency of any specific set of values.

Yet, the very notion of reorganizing values suggests that there already existed a matrix of values. Nietzsche's treatment of values was an inversion of what he referred to as Christian Morality, which he believed to be the culmination of the Platonic tradition. In this sense, not only was the idea of self-artistry a result of the socio-historical context within which Nietzsche was writing, but self-creation is intelligible only when opposed to the numerous failures and inconsistencies that Nietzsche draws out of Christian Morality. In short, at its inception, Nietzsche's self-artistry was parasitic upon the common discourse of his day. More generally speaking, the ironist's abnormal discourse is unintelligible without the normal discourse. As Rorty's characterization demonstrates, the ironist requires the stability of meanings in normal discourse, as a foil to metaphorical redcriptions. Just as Nietzschean self-artistry and the Will to Power emerge out of specific historically contingent conditions, and are made intelligible only within the

context of those conditions, so too is one's private irony always using normal discourse as a touch point.

While I have used Nietzschean self-artistry to illustrate the inner workings of Ironism, one of the most salient features of self-artistry is its relation to values. Free will is an illusion for both Nietzsche and Rorty, as both would agree that one's mode of being, to use Heideggerian language, or one's value matrix, determine which types of thoughts and actions present themselves as internally consistent with one's most basic understandings, or values, as Nietzsche calls them. Rorty calls our most basic values our final vocabulary. When considered in light of the discussion of the role of values for Nietzsche, one's final vocabulary is associated with a self that is prone to think and behave in certain ways. Nietzsche does not place any constraint upon the process of self-artistry and seems to think that it is the prerogative of the Higher Man to reorganize values, and thus subjectify himself, in *any* way that he chooses.

### **The Partnering of Liberalism and Ironism**

Rorty, however, has in mind a more restrictive self-artistry. Irony should not merely be aimed towards coming to experience a variety of interesting subjectifications, but it is seeking value matrices, or final vocabularies, that expand, "our chances of being kind, of avoiding the humiliation of others," and that recognize, "[...] a common susceptibility to humiliation is the only social bond that is needed" (Rorty 91). Rorty's ironist is committed to exploring final vocabularies with a liberal understanding that, "cruelty is the worst thing we do" (Rorty XV), and redescription that sharpen the liberal instinct are the only ones worth pursuing.

When left in isolation in the private sphere, there is no reason for the Ironist to have a preference for such liberal redescription. However, when the liberal instinct is opposed to the ironists' project of self-creation via the public / private bifurcation a

tension results which grounds the ironist. In other words, the liberal impulse, which is a part of an individual's public, normal discourse, prevents the ironist from slipping into narcissism and elitism. The tension created between liberalism and Ironism keeps the ironist's project productive; it provides the ironist with a criterion against which to measure their ironic redescrptions. The liberal impulse allows the ironist to discern between good redescrptions, or those which serve the ideal of liberal hope, and bad redescrptions, or those which make cruelty and humiliation more possible. Thus, the public private divide is a purely pragmatic tool that sets up a liberal criterion for ironic redescrptions: there is nothing essential about good and bad redescrptions; Rorty is merely creating a tension between liberal and ironist in order to put the ironist to work in the cause of freedom.

The tension created by partitioning public and private also serves liberalism. Rorty describes liberalism as belonging to the public realm, and understands the liberal to be concerned with the reduction of cruelty and humiliation. Liberalism produces a sense of solidarity, which is opposed to the individualistic nature of pure Ironism. Rorty suggests that, "what binds societies together are common vocabularies and common hopes. The vocabularies are, typically, parasitic on the hopes – in the sense that the principal function of the vocabularies is to tell stories about the future outcomes which compensate for present sacrifices" (Rorty 86). Thus, Liberalism is placed in the public realm as it is founded in consensual social hope for progress; it is founded in the hope that our future may find us freer than we are presently.

If one considers what Rorty means by freedom, then the line between the public and private begins to blur. Rorty is advocating a negative freedom as the absence of cruelty and humiliation, which makes the ironist project of redescription possible. In his discussion of Orwell Rorty characterizes cruelty and humiliation as:

Getting somebody to deny a belief for no reason is the first step toward making her incapable of having a self because she becomes incapable of weaving a coherent web of belief and desire. It makes her irrational, in a quite precise sense: She is unable to give a reason for her belief that fits together with her other beliefs. She becomes irrational not in the sense that she has lost contact with reality but in the sense that she can no longer rationalize – no longer justify herself to herself” (CIS 178).

In debunking the foundationalist project in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, there is no longer any recourse to some *given* to justify one’s beliefs. If one’s most fundamental beliefs and values, one’s final vocabulary, are called into question then there is no noncircular argument to support those beliefs. To return to Nietzsche’s discussion of values, if one value were called into doubt then the entire configuration would be rendered incoherent: the actions and thoughts that the value matrix would make possible would no longer be internally consistent. In short, cruelty is making one’s final vocabulary impossible, and since one’s final vocabulary is correlated with a certain type of self, the self is also impossible, and the victim is denigrated to a sub-person status. Thus, the liberal impulse is directed towards protecting the final vocabulary of the individual, which belongs to the private realm.

In sojourning into the private realm, the public, liberal impulse has once again created a tension between public and private. This time the tension serves liberalism by producing an answer to the question of how it is that the liberal is supposed to go about reducing cruelty. Holding a belief about cruelty is quite different than possessing a program for its reduction. It is for this reason that Fraser is critical of Rorty’s public sphere, when considered in isolation, as lacking a vehicle for political change.

It is the ironist that serves as the vehicle that Fraser thought absent. The liberal impulse makes Ironism possible since the vast majority of humans are united under the common hope of reducing cruelty, and thus the ideal that the individual's final vocabulary must be respected. One certainly cannot be Ironic about their final vocabulary if they do not have one. So, the liberal impulse is responsible for keeping Ironism viable. In turn the ironist comes to work in the service of liberalism, as they come to favor redescriptions which promote the liberal hope of reducing cruelty.

### **Liberalism: Contemporary and Contingent**

One of the most serious problems that confronts Rorty's liberalism is how he can support it. Rorty explains liberal ironists to be, "people who include among [their] ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease" (Rorty XV). Rorty admits that liberalism is an ungrounded belief, so why is liberalism a public vocabulary rather than a private final vocabulary?

In addition to liberalism's role in creating an atmosphere safe for Ironism, I think that Rorty would see his notion of liberalism entering the public realm in a manner similar to that of Rawl's notion of justice as fairness. In regards to the foundations of justice, Rawls has to say that, "justice as fairness seeks to identify the kernel of an overlapping consensus, that is, the shared intuitive ideas which when worked up into a political conception of justice turn out to underwrite a just constitutional regime" (Rawls 246-247). Rawls is suggesting here that our shared conception of justice as fairness is a product of overlapping final vocabularies. While the motivations behind a conception of justice are varied, the important part is that the partial overlap of final vocabularies allows for the existence of a common discourse about justice.

Rorty's liberalism would enter the public sphere of normal discourse in exactly the same manner. While our motivations behind thinking that cruelty is the worst things someone can do will inevitably vary, the overlap in final vocabularies creates a consensus about a certain way of speaking of liberal hope. Thus, it is appropriate for liberalism to belong to normal discourse, and an overlap of our final vocabularies, "is the most we can hope for, nor do we need more" (Rawls 247).

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, when considered alone, the ironist may be prone to isolationist and elitist tendencies, while liberalism would suffer for lack of a progressive vehicle. By partitioning the public and private and relegating the liberal and the ironist to each domain respectively, the tension created keeps the ironist from lapsing into solipsism, and the ironist in turn, comes to serve the liberal cause by creating better liberal redescrptions. The private final vocabularies also come to overlap in a view of liberalism, thus creating public normal discourse about liberal hope. In other words, the partitioning of the public and private anchors both liberalism and Ironism. The immense amount of interplay between the two realms demonstrates that a categorical partition is impossible, but a pragmatic and merely conceptual partition serves the purpose of solving the problems that confront liberalism and Ironism when they are considered in isolation. Thus, liberalism and Ironism naturally compliment one another but only through the tension created in their partitioning.

### **Works Cited**

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