# Rorty on liberalism and postphilosophy

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Richard Rorty writes in the introduction to his book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*,

> I borrow my definition of 'liberal' from Judith Shklar, who says that liberals are people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do. I use 'ironist' to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her most central beliefs and desires – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond time and chance.[1]

Two disparate comments on these two definitions that seemingly don't have much to do with each other, but which nevertheless occur in the text as I quoted them, one immediately below the other, as if they had some inner connection in the personality of a 'liberal ironist', who happens to be the figure Rorty wants to sketch in his book. 1) Rorty's definition of liberalism as the idea that cruelty is the worst thing we do seems rather inclusive. In fact, it looks like a definition of morality, for if morality can be said to have a point or a purpose, it must be something like the avoidance of cruelty. I don't know if anyone really *wants* to define morality (why does anyone want to define liberalism?), but if someone proposed that morality is the idea that cruelty is the worst thing we do, we would not feel that bad, would we? We don't praise a person as properly moral if he thinks that cruelty is not terrible; and the more someone abhors cruelty, the more moral he must be. If this definition of morality has its weaknesses, so does Rorty's definition of liberalism. Maybe morality is not always the idea that cruelty is the worst thing we do, but maybe liberalism cannot be always identified with that notion either. I shall in any case take Rorty's definition as it stands. And assuming that the parallel view of morality appeals to us, it follows that moral thought is composed of different versions of liberalism: there is no moral outside to the liberal tradition. Antiliberals are immoralists. 2) In Rorty's account the connection between irony and the realization of the contingency of one's own

personality or selfhood – which for Rorty equals the contingency of one's own beliefs and desires, or of the vocabularies in which one describes them – is very important. Recognizing the contingency of one's selfhood results in irony, or at least seeing how contingent one's existence is considerably increases one's chances of being ironic about oneself. As further evidence for this connection we may quote a later statement in the same book. Rorty says of ironists that they are 'never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies and thus of their selves'.[2]

Rorty thinks that playful ironism is an essential ingredient of what he calls postphilosophy, which is an effort to compare and contrast different self-descriptions and self-definitions, different ways of making our lives make sense, without imagining or even hoping that one of the vocabularies we use could be true to our real essence, where 'real essence' is something that cannot be altered by redescription and redefinition in another vocabulary or language game.[3] Since the postphilosopher is aware of the contingency of – and therefore ironic about – the vocabularies we employ to express and define our selves, the point of his work is not to find the truth about those selves and thereby fix the movement of the vocabularies of the self, but to collect different ways of speaking about human lives and everything that pertains to them, such as politics and physiological theories. In a postphilosophical culture the drive that makes us 'read through libraries, and to add new volumes to the ones we found' is not the hope of finding the true self-descriptions, but simply 'the hope of offering our descendants a way of describing the ways of describing we had come across – a description of the descriptions which the race has come up with so far'.[4] The postphilosopher is a historicist all-round intellectual who

> ...passes rapidly from Hemingway to Proust to Hitler to Mary Douglas to the present situation in Southeast Asia to Gandhi and Sophocles. He is a name-dropper, who uses names such as these to refer to sets of descriptions, symbol-systems, ways of seeing. His specialty is seeing similarities and differences between great big pictures, between attempts to see how things hang together. He is the person who tells you how all the ways of making things hang together hang together.[5]

An interesting feature of postphilosophy is that its protagonists don't wish to take sides in intervocabularic disputes in anything more than a strictly playful or educative purpose, the purpose of seeing, or enabling others to see, how things appear from the point of view of some particular vocabulary. Neither do they believe it is useful to defend some definite conclusions within the vocabularies they describe and compare, because those conclusions will almost certainly look bad or even despicable from within some other vocabulary, some other 'great big picture'. As metaphilosophers they talk *about* vocabularies rather than *within*

them. Since their job is to describe and compare different ways of speaking and writing, the normative task of telling how people ought to speak or think tends to fall out as redundant. As Rorty emphasizes, otherwise than a metaphysician (which for Rorty is another name for a philosopher), the ironist postphilosopher doesn't think that arguments – logico-linguistic efforts to convince someone of the truth of a philosophical position – are that valuable:

> The metaphysician thinks that there is an overriding intellectual duty to present arguments for one's controversial views – arguments which will start from relatively uncontroversial premises. The ironist thinks that such arguments – logical arguments – are all very well in their way, and useful expository devices, but in the end not much more than ways of getting people to change their practices [i.e., language games, vocabularies] without admitting they have done so. The ironist's preferred form of argument is dialectical in the sense that she takes the unit of persuasion to be a vocabulary rather than a proposition. Her method is redescription rather than inference. Ironists specialize in redescribing ranges of objects or events in partially neologistic jargon, in the hope of inciting people to adopt and extend that jargon.[6]

The ironist's unit of persuasion is an entire vocabulary rather than a single proposition within some vocabulary, and his method is redescription rather than inference. Such redescription is what much of Rorty's own work has been. In the 1989 book, say, he compares Plato with Kant, Kant with Freud, Freud with Hegel, Davidson with Nietzsche, Bloom with Davidson, Baudelaire with Nabokov, Nabokov with Orwell, Rawls with Sandel, Derrida with Heidegger, and Heidegger and Derrida with Proust and Nietzsche. In his 1991 book, Rorty contrasts Dewey with Heidegger, Heidegger with Kundera, Kundera with Dickens, Habermas with Lyotard, and Foucault with Plato. He passes from one writer and vocabulary to the next with considerable ease and rapidity, in much the same way as a contemporary tourist travels around the world in a couple of weeks. He is on the move. He is curious about everything, and remembers to connect every name and scene with all the others. But this descriptive work is about all he does. The only arguments he gives, the only inferences he makes, concern the reasons why postphilosophy seems like a worthwhile activity in the first place. Even here his arguments must be more like persuasive redescriptions than logical inferences, because there is no knock-down argument for a view as comprehensive as anti-essentialism about the human selfhood. One of Rorty's favorite strategies of persuasion is retelling the story of twentieth century philosophy in such a way that it begins to seem as if all the 'important figures' (Dewey, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Derrida, etc.) agreed with his own estimation of the value of doing philosophy, which happens to be a fairly low one. The rhetorical implication is that if we want to avoid being hopelessly parochial, it is better to start some postphilosophical project and not worry so much about philosophy itself. Rorty seeks to create the impression that he himself

is waiting at the point toward which the major intellectual energies of our century have been directed. This inescapably brings to mind the Hegelian notion of the tide or tendency of history: we-here are on top of things, we are the point, the meaning, the high-point of history, its very summit.

One should stress the inference from contingency to irony to postphilosophy. These three names or concepts form a continuous line: the idea of the contingency of one's vocabularies gives rise to irony about them, and irony breeds postphilosophy. They also constitute an onion, a Russian doll: within the postphilosopher one finds the ironist, and within the ironist the thought of contingency.

Liberalism and ironist postphilosophy: my first thesis will be that Rorty can reconcile these two aspects of his personality – which here means something like a 'system of beliefs and desires' – only by splitting that personality in two parts, parts that don't communicate with each other very fluently. Rorty as an ironist postphilosopher and Rorty as a liberal don't mesh too well: the doll-onion, and more particularly its two upper layers, repels the liberal, and vice versa. This is the view I shall propose in the first section of this chapter.

If the remarks of that first section track the truth, then it will seem that as an intervocabularic enterprise postphilosophy is, and has to be, committed to neither liberalism nor antiliberalism exclusively, or, what comes to the same, to both liberalism and antiliberalism to some degree – fifty-fifty, if one likes exact figures. My aim in the second part of the chapter would therefore be to find clues of antiliberal attitudes in Rorty's text. If Rorty is indeed a postphilosopher, as he says he is, there should be textual evidence not only of liberalism, but also of antiliberalism. I shall try hard to unearth Rorty-the-antiliberal. If I don't succeed, I will have to conclude that the initial appearances are true: Rorty indeed suffers from a mild multiple personality disorder.

Let us first see what Rorty has to say about his commitment to liberalism.

## I

As an ironist Rorty believes that liberalism is merely (or 'merely', if you like) one contingent vocabulary or a family of vocabularies among others. One cannot answer the question 'Why avoid cruelty?' in a way that would appeal to someone who doesn't already feel liberal, just as one cannot convince an atheist of the existence of God by theoretical arguments, or prove the existence of an immortal soul to anyone who doesn't already agree with much of one's own world-picture. For ironists 'there is no answer to the question "Why not be cruel?" – no noncircular theoretical backup for the belief that cruelty is horrible'.[7] In the end the liberal can only refer to reasons that non-liberals don't recognize as such:

> There is no *neutral*, noncircular way to defend the liberal's claim that cruelty is the worst thing we do, any more than there is a neutral way to back up Nietzsche's assertion that this claim expresses a resentful, slavish attitude, or Heidegger's that the idea of the 'greatest happiness of the greatest number' is just one more bit of 'metaphysics,' of the 'forgetfulness of Being'. We cannot look back behind the processes of socialization which convinced us twentieth-century liberals of the validity of this claim and appeal to something which is more 'real' or less ephemeral than the historical contingencies which brought those processes into existence.[8]

Here Rorty seems to be quite right. We feel that Plato didn't really convince us in his discussion of the Gyges's ring, Hobbes in his argument against the Foole, Kant in his reflections about the inconceivability of someone rationally choosing an egoistic life strategy, or Gauthier in his theory that constrained maximization will appeal to a purely self-interested agent. Neither do we believe that there is any non-circular argument to prove that nationalistic chauvinism (religious fundamentalism, political arrogance and aggression, etc.) is irrational: for liberals themselves it is irrational, but unless one is willing to beg the question, there is no proving this point to the chauvinist. Since circular justifications are all we are going to get, the figure of a cruel egoist or nationalistic fanatic will continue playing the Other of the moral game. This is what Rorty means when he says that there is 'no neutral, noncircular way to defend the liberal's claim that cruelty is the worst thing we do.'

And *yet* the postphilosopher is in Rorty's view free to call himself a liberal. Locutions like 'since I am a liberal' and 'we liberals' are among the most frequently used in his 1989 book. (See, for instance, the words 'us twentieth century liberals' in the above quotation.) How come? Why does Rorty think it is possible for someone to be a liberal ironist? The pattern of Rorty's argumentation seems to be the following. First Rorty generously recognizes that he cannot really defend his liberal attitudes without begging the question: there is no non-contingent reason why we should be kind instead of cruel. We just happen to have been educated to utter liberal judgements in circumstances that seem to call for moral comment, and there is no conclusive reason or argument why we should stay within this vocabulary instead of entering some antiliberal one. Then Rorty goes on to say that this doesn't really matter: let us define ourselves as liberals even if we know that in the end our liberal language-games and the moral judgements they involve are quite contingent. Rorty is well aware of the contingent, non-rational sources of his liberal views. His liberalism is foundationless; but it is so quite self-consciously. Rorty wants to say, 'Let us be ironic about liberalism – *but let us still be liberals*'. Even if we cannot find any conclusive reason for not being cruel to each other, we should nevertheless avoid cruelty. In fact, one should not even ask, as Nietzsche did, 'What has the suffering of my fellow humans to do

with me?' just as one should not ask, as theists do, 'Why don't you believe in God?'.[9] Rorty says that

> ...we heirs of the Enlightenment think of enemies of liberal democracy like Nietzsche or Loyola as, to use Rawls's word, 'mad.' We do so because there is no way to see them as fellow citizens of our constitutional democracy, people whose life plans might, given ingenuity and good will, be fitted in with those of other citizens. They are not crazy because they have mistaken the ahistorical human essence. They are crazy because the limits of sanity are set by what we can take seriously. This, in turn, is determined by our upbringing, our historical situation.[10]

But doesn't it seem as if the ironist postphilosopher, insofar as he really is an ironist postphilosopher, *shouldn't feel quite at home* in the liberal vocabulary? He is always on the move, restlessly playing the liberal vocabulary against its Others, finding and inventing new outsides and margins to it, like a tourist, or better, like a permanent traveller. For the postphilosopher, it appears, there is something *unheimlich* about liberalism, something that reminds him of repression and measures of exclusion. Since he is aware of the radical contingency of the liberal vocabulary, the postphilosopher reads about ancient Egyptian customs and the reception of Nietzsche's works in late 19th century Russia rather than consults the latest commentaries on Mill's book on liberty. Rather than defending some current version of liberalism, he compares it with some others. Instead of claiming that Rawls is right, he contrasts Rawls's theory with Sade's novels or ironizes the veil of ignorance by treating it as an interesting metaphor. And instead of criticizing Nozick's criticism of Rawls, he opts out of the discussion altogether, preferring the distant metaphilosophical attitude. The purpose of his work is not to find the truth about liberalism, but to see how it hangs together with some other vocabularies. Why doesn't Rorty think this way? Why does he call himself a liberal?

Let us return to the idea of contingency. A non-ironist like Rawls could say, and does say, 'I know the liberal vocabulary is socially and historically contingent. *So what?* I want to see how things seem from within that vocabulary'. A philosopher may quite consistently stay within the language game of liberalism, and issue judgements that are perceived as correct according to the criteria of validity which define that game. He can acknowledge that his intuitions and judgements are historically and socially contingent, and yet 'stand for them unflinchingly', as Rorty quotes Isaiah Berlin's quotation of Joseph Schumpeter:[11] the liberal judgements and intuitions are appropriate to *us*, where the scope of the 'us' is defined by the historical and social borders of the liberal vocabulary. Rorty comments on Rawls's project: 'Rawls is not attempting a transcendental deduction of American liberalism or supplying philosophical foundations for democratic institutions, but simply trying to systematize the principles and intuitions typical

of American liberals'.[12] In Rorty's view Rawls is a sociologist or social psychologist who wants to define, rather than defend, the principles that guide the moral judgements of American liberals. Rawls knows quite well that the liberal intuitions he wants to systematize are contingent and in the end foundationless, but doesn't care about that fact. It is rather like in the first person case: at bottom one finds it extremely difficult to be ironic about one's own happiness and well-being, even if one cannot answer the question 'Why should I care about my own life?' in a way that someone who seriously *doubts* the legitimacy of that concern would recognize as valid. In the end there is no 'because' or 'therefore', but only the fact of self-concern itself. As one can express this, there is no proof of the rationality of self-concern. It *just is so* that our own lives should attract our serious care and attention: pain is bad, pleasure is good, and that's that. Similarly *it just is so* that even if there is no compelling reason why we should not be cruel, we should nevertheless not be cruel. How could anyone be ironic about extreme cruelty? Isn't it obvious that cruelty must be avoided? One would like to say that the pains and sufferings of other people are bad in themselves, or that other people are ends-in-themselves. There is no non-circular justification for these thoughts – but let us still think this way.

It is quite all right for a *philosopher* to say this, for he doesn't wish to infer from the contingency of a final vocabulary to the appropriateness of being ironic about it. He may even state that liberalism is not a contingent vocabulary *at all*, because it articulates the truth of people as ends-in-themselves, and this truth is independent of the liberal vocabularies we happen to use. People as ends-in-themselves are here what Rorty would call a 'truth out there', Derrida a 'transcendental signified', and Sellars a special case of the 'myth of the given': a fact that any vocabulary must recognize or at least leave room for on pain of being irrational. The liberal philosopher may think that people are ends-in-themselves no matter how you describe them. This idea constitutes what Rorty says liberalism doesn't have: a metaphysical foundation. Cruelty ought to be avoided because of the non-contingent fact that people are ends-in-themselves.

But what about a postphilosopher like Rorty? Can he continue being a postphilosopher without loosening his grip on liberalism? I think not, simply because postphilosophers want to be ironic about all final vocabularies they perceive as contingent. Postphilosophy is an inherently ironic project. Since liberalism is contingent vocabulary, their irony doesn't end when liberalism begins. And the point is that you cannot be thoroughly ironic, thus thoroughly postphilosophical, about liberalism and yet call yourself a liberal. An ironist about liberalism is someone who doesn't take other people very seriously, and in particular doesn't think that their status as ends-in-themselves is any stronger than the liberal vocabulary itself. Since it just *happens* that we use the liberal vocabulary, it just *happens* that people seem ends-in-themselves. From this the postphilosopher infers that it is best to be ironic about both liberalism and its claim that people are ends-in-themselves.

As Rorty says, 'the issue is one about whether philosophy should try to find natural starting-points which are distinct from cultural traditions, or whether all philosophy should do is compare and contrast cultural traditions'.[13] Postphilosophers choose this latter strategy. So if Rorty is a postphilosopher, he doesn't take sides in the dispute between liberals and antiliberals. He merely compares and contrasts these two cultural traditions. This is why Morton Gurewitch writes, no doubt ironically, 'The liberal ironist is a heroic intellectual who counters the platitude that irony and solidarity are mutually antagonistic'.[14] The antagonism of ironistic postphilosophy and a liberal commitment to human solidarity is a 'platitude'. This is why resisting it requires a 'heroic intellectual'. Ironists are the sort of people who don't really commit themselves to any social cause or programme, but prefer to keep their distance. (For example, Anatole France had to temporarily shed his ironic attitude when he got horrified about the Dreyfus affair and defended the poor man against injustice.) They are on-lookers rather than participants; they smile rather than act. Rorty's liberal ironist is, if not a conceptual impossibility, then at least an empirically unlikely character.

Another way to make this point is that Rorty seems to be opposed to pragmatist wisdom in making a sharp distinction between theoretical reflection and practical engagement. In theory, he says, there is no reason to be a liberal instead of an antiliberal; but in practice we should still be liberals. But liberalism is a view about how we should live our lives. If there is no reason to believe in it, then why act on it? While a philosopher thinks that we have a good reason to be liberals instead of antiliberals, a postphilosopher like Rorty's doesn't. And while the former are able to keep their actions in line with their words, the latter isn't. He must think that while liberalism is not any better than antiliberalism in theory, it is better in practice. And I wonder whether it is rational to think that way.

Or let us focus on Rorty's expression 'postmodernist bourgeois liberalism'.[15] 'Postmodernist' roughly means 'postphilosophical'; liberalism means that cruelty is the worst thing we do. But what about 'bourgeois'? Bourgeois common sense has two conflicting features. On the one hand, it claims that you should be a decent citizen, a liberal person who doesn't interfere in other people's lives, and who occasionally gives alms to the poor. But the bourgeois also have another side, which is the idea that you should promote your own interests. And promoting one's interests doesn't always coincide with promoting the liberal ideology. Sometimes it requires being cruel to others, using them to one's own advantage, leaving them suffer, etc. Rorty would like to see the bourgeois as good-hearted liberals only, and this, I think, is his peculiar blindness. Rorty is blind to the fact that the society in which he lives – the society in which we all live – and its bourgeois tradition is not merely one of liberalism, but of self-interest as well. So one cannot be a postmodernist bourgeois liberal. If one wants to be a postmodernist, one has to manage with the bourgeois part and its two sides: self-interest and liberalism. Rorty's references to Nietzsche and Loyola are slightly beside the point, because those character types don't probably appeal to his readers,

educated and fairly broad-minded as they are. Very few of us like Nietzschean overmen or religious fanatics (nationalistic chauvinists, political extremists, etc.). But quite many of us like money and power.

Rorty doesn't follow the lines of his postphilosophical thinking to their logical conclusion: persistent irony about all final vocabularies, including liberalism. Despite his seemingly jovial attitude, Rorty is still a bit too serious about cruelty. I think we can understand this seriousness: one easily becomes serious about a final vocabulary that surrounds one from all sides, and the rhetoric of the American public culture, if not the reality of the American society, is indeed very liberal. But this doesn't remove the fact that liberalism is still a quite contingent vocabulary, a vocabulary we should learn to be ironic about. Irony about liberalism doesn't of course mean repudiating it, and favoring some antiliberal vocabulary instead. It rather involves refusing to take sides in the discussion between liberalism and its alternatives, i.e., vocabularies which don't involve the idea that cruelty is the worst thing we do. On the one hand, since postphilosophers don't think that reasons of cruelty must be weaker or 'less real' than ones of non-interference, generosity, and kindness, they wish to see to it that philosophy doesn't overmoralize their lives. Liberalism as the claim that cruelty is the worst thing we do cannot avoid such overmoralization, because it requires that agents always act decently, just as any football coach always requires that his trainees play good and even outstanding football. Cruelty can only appear as the irreducible Other of liberal thinking, and postphilosophers don't simply say No to this Other. They wish to enlarge their selves with the non-liberal vocabulary of cruelty too. It is not always true that cruelty is the worst thing we do. But on the other hand, postphilosophers also think that the liberal reasons of kindness are real. Cruelty should indeed be avoided, and for reasons that have nothing to do with the self-interested fear of getting caught and being excluded from cooperative schemes for mutual advantage. It should be avoided because of distinctly moral reasons, reasons that articulate the notion of other agents as ends-in-themselves. Even if the postphilosopher doesn't think that the liberal final vocabulary should escape irony, he doesn't believe that the self-definition 'we *anti*liberals' should do so either. In sum, the postphilosopher doesn't assume an extreme point of view: contrary to what Rorty says, he is neither a complete liberal nor a complete non-liberal. As a moderate person he stays at the borderline between these two extremes.

Ironism, we may note in passing, has its own particular form of cruelty: redescribing another person's life against his will. Rorty writes,

> Ironism, as I have defined it, results from awareness of the power of redescription. But most people do not want to be redescribed. They want to be taken on their own terms – taken seriously just as they are and just as they talk. The ironist tells them that the language they speak is up for grabs by her and her kind. There is something potentially very cruel about that claim. For the best way to cause people long-lasting pain is to humiliate them by making

> the things that seemed most important to them look futile, obsolete, and powerless. Consider what happens when a child's precious possessions – those little things around which he weaves fantasies that make him a little different from all other children – are redescribed as 'trash ', and thrown away. Or consider what happens when these possessions are made to look ridiculous alongside the possessions of another, richer, child... Redescription often humiliates.[16]

> Or think what happened when the first European pilgrims saw the naked savages of Africa: they started redescribing the natives in terms that made it look as if their brutish lives had to be worthless and fit for nothing so long as they kept on defining themselves in their own terms. Or consider how easy it is to cause suffering to someone who struggles to keep his head in one piece with some religious or therapeutic vocabulary by suggesting that there is no way he could rationally choose between different final vocabularies or self-descriptions. Saying that all those good-looking, life-saving vocabularies are quite contingent may be a cause of great pain. It humiliates.

Having said all this, we have to observe that Rorty 1) is somehow aware of the incompatibility between postphilosophy and liberalism, and 2) has a solution to this tension or contradiction. First he wonders whether it really is possible to be both an ironist and a liberal, both 'Nietzsche and J.S. Mill'. Then he proposes that we should think of ironism as the private side of our lives, and be liberals in the public domain. Private irony, public liberalism.[17] While we should continue standing by each other in the public domain, it is none of the other people's business what we do in our private lives: if someone like Rorty wants to be ironic about liberalism at home, then other people ought to keep their distance and not intervene.[18]

In fact, Rorty occasionally writes as if irony about *anything at all* were a private matter:

> But even if I am right in thinking that a liberal culture whose public rhetoric is both nominalist and historicist is both possible and desirable, I cannot go on to claim that there could or ought to be a public culture whose public rhetoric is *ironist*... Irony seems inherently a private matter. On my definition, an ironist cannot get along without the contrast between the final vocabulary she inherited and the one she is trying to create for herself. Irony is, if not intrinsically resentful, at least reactive. Ironists need something to have doubts about, something from which to be alienated.[19]

As Roy Bhaskar notes, Rorty's idea of the private ironist brings to mind a lonely intellectual, 'writing a diary no one can read'.[20] While the Rortyan ironist plays with all sorts of final vocabularies at home, he suddenly turns into a serious, commonsensical, literal-minded citizen at the front door, wearing a grey tie and

flannel trousers. He spends his days diligently doing what everyone else does, but wastes his nights musing about how ironic it is that he should be doing all that, and not something entirely different. He combines private irony with public professionalism, romantic intellectualism with efficiency in the pursuit of pregiven social goals.

But it cannot be that all kinds of ironic commentary are private matters, because just like its philosophical complement, postphilosophical discourse is a public venture, and according to Rorty's account philosophers should become postphilosophers, and thus ironists. Should postphilosophers really keep their discourses to themselves, and never show them to anyone? Should they refrain from contributing to literary supplements and attending conferences? In particular, what if the public rhetoric of some society is decidedly antiliberal? What if it is racist, sexist, oligarchic, Stalinistic, Pol Potian, or aggressively nationalistic? What if it is cruel in one or several of the great number of ways in which people can be cruel to each other? Should one refrain from irony even then? I don't think so, and neither does Rorty, if I have understood him correctly. He wants to apply to postphilosophical literature what Salman Rushdie said about all literature: literature claims the right to speak of everything in all conceivable ways.[21] On this view literature should have the right to irony, i.e., to expose the contingency of all those final vocabularies we think are essential to our own self-understanding, to think otherwise, to describe it all in another way, to add a few new voices to the conversation of mankind, to resist the totalizing pretensions of all vocabularies. Literature, including postphilosophy, is of course a private institution in the sense that both the writing and the reading processes typically take place in circumstances we can call private. But in another sense literature is a perfectly public institution: people write for public consumption, and anyone can either buy or borrow copies of the books he judges interesting. We cannot even suspect that Rorty wants to repress the ironic voices, can we? It is surely symptomatic that Rushdie expressly refers to Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, and approves of Rorty's criticism of foundationalism (which is the idea that our vocabularies are something more than human contingencies), whether religious, political, or philosophical. How could this Rorty now suddenly think that all irony is a private matter? How could he have joined the reactionary forces? Or could Rushdie really have made a mistake in referring to Rorty's book? It is not easy to believe that a person who speaks of liberalism and the virtue of tolerating a multiplicity of different opinions so well and so beautifully thinks of irony as a private matter.

So let us agree that some kind of public irony is both possible and desirable. The question is whether public irony about liberalism in particular should be banned, or whether we should cease being postphilosophers when it comes to liberalism as a public ideology. Referring to the kind of cruelty through redescription in which ironists are especially gifted, Rorty says that according to

the 'liberal ironist' (which is the sort of ironist I claim does not exist in a pure form, untainted by antiliberalism)

> we need to distinguish between redescription for private and for public purposes. For my private purposes, I may redescribe you and everybody else in terms which have nothing to do with my attitude toward your actual or potential suffering. My private purposes, and the part of my final vocabulary which is not relevant to my public actions, are none of your business. But as I am a liberal, the part of my final vocabulary which is relevant to such actions requires me to become aware of all the various ways in which other people whom I might act upon can be humiliated.[22]

One suspects that Rorty doesn't here pay sufficient attention to the indeterminacy of the criteria we use to make the distinction between private and public spheres. Quandaries arise. Whether some place or activity is private or public is often debatable, and when it is, one doesn't know whether one is entitled to postphilosophical irony or not. This point is not intended as a criticism of Rorty's position, but rather as a friendly reminder of what everyone – including Rorty himself, I am sure – knows.

I have two worries that have nothing to do with the occasional difficulty of making the distinction between the private and the public domains. The first is normative, the second psychological.

1) Why is the public-private split so important when we want to know whether it is desirable to be ironic about liberalism? For instance, why not cruelly redescribe other people in public? More generally, why not be ironic about liberalism in public? Postphilosophers want theirs to be a public venture. Rorty desires to align the distinction between philosophy and postphilosophy with the distinction between the public and the private domains, but that is an alignment any postphilosopher refuses to accept. Postphilosophy is not merely a private matter, just as criticism of religious fundamentalism is not something you must practice in the private sphere. According to liberalism itself criticism of liberalism may be a private matter, but postphilosophers are not liberals. In our view public cruelty is not that objectionable if it is not directed at us.

2) Is it really possible for one and the same person to so divide his psychic energies that he switches from a friendly liberal to an ironist posthilosopher the moment he comes home and draws the curtains? Or better, can anyone do this without splitting his personality in parts that don't remember each other, i.e., without suffering from a multiple personality disorder?[23] Assuming the answer is No, then there are two possible ways to proceed, two possible paths. A: Rorty's personality doesn't constitute a well-integrated whole. One of its sub-systems keeps producing liberal propaganda while another revels in postphilosophical fantasies. There is no single Rorty, but two: Rorty-the-liberal and Rorty-the-postphilosopher. B: We have missed some piece of textual evidence of Rorty's

antiliberal views. Maybe Rorty is both a liberal and an antiliberal after all; maybe we just haven't read his book carefully enough.

The doubt number two is the essential one, for *if* it is psychologically possible for someone to be both a good liberal and a good postphilosopher, then it is presumably possible for him to rationally maintain the position that while irony is a private matter, liberalism must be our public attitude. The idea that postphilosophical irony is a private matter is not an impossible one, *given* that one is psychologically capable of alternating between liberalism and postphilosophy. But, to repeat, if someone is able to do this, then I will urge that he must be deranged, because he is not a unified character, but is rather composed of two personalities.

Let me now pursue path B. I want to know whether Rorty's 1989 book doesn't give us any reason to believe that its author has an antiliberal side, too. Without such a side, I claim, we are obliged to think that Rorty is an MPD-case.

## II

Sometimes Rorty appears to think that some varieties of cruelty are not very objectionable. He writes that

> our responsibilities to others constitute *only* the public side of our lives, a side which competes with our private affections and our private attempts at self-creation, and which has no *automatic* priority over such private motives... Moral obligation is, in this view, to be thrown in with a lot of other considerations, rather than automatically trump them.[24]

Or consider this statement: 'This book tries to show how things look if we drop the demand for a theory which unifies the public and private, and are content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable'.[25] Rorty uses terms like 'solidarity', 'liberalism', and 'justice' more or less interchangeably. So when he here says that solidarity constitutes the public side of our lives, he could as well has spoken of liberalism as our public attitude.

These statements make it seem as if Rorty wanted to continue being a postphilosopher by claiming that cruelty should be avoided only to the extent to which we regard ourselves as members of the public domain. While liberalism is our public attitude, our private lives are somehow associated with non-liberal vocabularies. 'Somehow associated', because Rorty's statements admit of at least two interpretations. He doesn't indicate whether he thinks that active cruelty is not necessarily that bad if it occurs in the proper privacy, or whether he thinks that not helping one's private friends is not that bad. That is, I am not quite sure whether Rorty tolerates active private cruelty or accepts private omissions of kind actions.

Both interpretations support the view that Rorty doesn't wish to call himself too liberal. There are limits to his liberalism. Sometimes cruel motives may rationally trump liberal ones.

Then there is a third interpretation that would effectively undermine our interpretation of Rorty as a postphilosopher, namely the interpretation where Rorty is John Stuart Mill: occasionally we are morally entitled to say to our neighbors that it is none of their business what we do. If this is all Rorty means to say, then we can hardly call him a postphilosopher, for postphilosophers need a positively antiliberal side, and not merely the idea that we are morally entitled to a domain of privacy where our own likings are the sole determinant of what we have a reason to do. Unless extreme utilitarians, all liberals grant the existence of such a domain. We don't after all call a person cruel just because he sometimes prunes his roses, plays backgammon, writes an ironic diary, or drinks beer, even if he could do something morally useful instead of engaging in these communally useless activities. People like that may still think that cruelty is the worst thing we do: they don't conceive of themselves as cruel on account of the fact that they don't constantly appear as public benefactors or moral saints. So let us ignore this dull interpretation. According to our preferred mode of reading, Rorty endorses the claims of antiliberalism to some extent. He thinks that cruelty is not always the worst thing we do.

I just wonder how useful it is for Rorty to speak of liberalism as the public side of our lives, and of our need for private perfection and self-creation as that which entitles us to be less than perfectly liberal. First of all, the distinction between public and private domains doesn't seem to be doing any useful work here: one cannot seriously believe that Rorty is willing to accept cruelty simply because it occurs in privacy, where 'privacy' means something like 'at home', 'in the family', or 'among friends'. What rational difference does it make whether one is cruel in public or private? Isn't one cruel just the same? Secondly, why does Rorty speak of our need for poetic 'self-creation' as the source of antiliberal motives? Why doesn't he say, as seems natural and not so euphemistic, that antiliberal motives are ones of cruelty and egoism? Rorty had better speak of cruel instinct, heartless indifference, and straightforward egoism as the sources of antiliberal reasons for action. Instead of the distinction between private and public areas, and between self-creation and liberalism, we have the simple distinction between cruelty and kindness, or between egoism and altruism. Paraphrased, Rorty's statement goes as follows: 'our responsibilities to others constitute only the altruistic side of our lives, a side which competes with our egoistic drives and our egoistic attempts at self-assertion, and which has no automatic priority over such egoistic motives'. If one wants to capture the idea that most of us have friends or spouses or children whom we don't want to see suffer, one can speak of nepotistic desires or group-centric affections instead of egoistic drives. In any case, the essential contrast is between I-here or we-here and you-there instead of privacy and the public sphere.

So there is some textual evidence that Rorty is not as liberal as his frequent references to 'we liberals' seem to indicate. This evidence is not abundant, and that is why I am not sure whether I should make use of it all. But it is there anyway. Rorty is a bit like Sade, only conversely so. The writings of these authors give us the vague idea that they do not support liberalism and antiliberalism quite wholeheartedly. The general thrust of their texts points toward liberalism (Rorty) and antiliberalism (Sade), but there are also some hints of antiliberalism and liberalism, respectively. While Rorty is not quite sure whether cruelty really is always the worst thing we do, Sade has his own troubles with the possibility of perverse pleasures. (If cruelty is never wrong, then how can one obtain perverse pleasure by being cruel? Perverts need norms to transgress.)

One still has the uncomfortable feeling that Rorty's text is not very consistent. The textual evidence about Rorty's (wish for) non-liberal or antiliberal attitudes somehow seems *too scarce*, given all his talk about playful postphilosophical irony. Why isn't there more of that evidence? Why is Rorty so silent about his cruel, antiliberal thoughts? Or are we ultimately obliged to assume that he is quite simply confused and inconsistent? This inconsistency can be thought to emerge at two different levels, that of the wish and that of reality, as well as between these two levels. At the level of wishes the contradiction would be between Rorty's desire to be a postphilosopher and his desire to be a liberal. At the banal level of reality it would be between his postphilosophy and his liberalism. It could also exist between his desire to be postphilosophical and his actual liberal personality, or between his wish to be a liberal and his actual postphilosophical ego-structure.

One can think of interpretations of Rorty's work that make the contradiction between his (wish for) postphilosophy and his (wish for) liberalism appear either less obvious or even non-existent. First, perhaps Rorty is just being prudent in not advertizing his antiliberal side in public very voluptuously. One can here recall Hobbes's story about the man who 'hath sayd in his heart, there is no such thing as Justice; and *sometimes also with his tongue*'.[26] Hobbes called him a Foole. It could be that only foolish postphilosophers tell about their antiliberal thoughts and dispositions in books and articles, because the readers will then exclude them from their midst, or at least become reserved and mistrustful. This is not quite certain, however. In fact, my judgement is that a postphilosopher may gain as well as lose by openly declaring his ironic views, first of all because people don't always believe what they read, and secondly because consistently postphilosophical views may get so popular that their protagonists are praised in all conceivable ways, assuming a society that doesn't repress literary expressions of cruel sentiments. Sade's antiliberal books are read everywhere. Were Sade alive, he would profit from them in many ways. Rorty might be more cautious, of course. He might judge that some inconsistency between postphilosophy and liberalism is a small price to pay for not having to cope with all the suspicions which confessing one's flirt with cruelty may generate. On this interpretation there is a contradiction between what Rorty says about postphilosophy and what he says about liberalism, but this

contradiction is made less severe by the fact that cruel people may wish to conceal their thoughts from public curiosity.

One selfish advantage of not confessing one's antiliberal views is that postphilosophers like Rorty can best disseminate their writings in liberal societies, especially ones that don't practice antiliberalism by suppressing inofficial voices and descriptions. If literature indeed wants to speak of everything in all conceivable ways, as Rushdie proposes, then postphilosophers will not have an easy time in totalitarian regimes, regimes that organize themselves around some antiliberal final vocabulary. Freedom of speech in particular is an important background requirement of a successful career as a postphilosopher.

But maybe Rorty doesn't really conceal anything; perhaps he is only being enigmatic and allusive. An interpretation along these lines offers itself if we place extremely heavy emphasis on the crucial statement according to which 'our responsibilities to others constitute only the *public* side of our lives, a side which competes with our private affections and our private attempts at self-creation, and which has no *automatic* priority over such private motives'. Rorty could here be thought to be hinting that he will refrain from abusing his neighbors (including us) in public, and confine his cruel exploitations to the private sphere. The distinction between public and private matters would now assume a significance we didn't appreciate before. Instead of proposing that it is all right for him to be somewhat cruel in all domains of life, he says that we don't have to be afraid, because he will only be cruel in his private life. There is a private Rorty and a public Rorty, a daytime Rorty and a night-time Rorty. While the former is a liberal, the latter is not. By making this move Rorty is able to avoid the threatening inconsistency between liberalism and postphilosophy, and *yet* not make his fellow-citizens worried. This is the most subtle interpretation I can find/invent. On the one hand, since Rorty doesn't want to contradict his postphilosophy by being a complete liberal, he lets go of complete liberalism. But on the other hand, since he doesn't want to make us worried about his cruel side, he hints that he will only be antiliberal at home.

So we have at least three interpretations of Rorty's views. The simplest one is that we should discount or ignore the textual evidence that suggests that Rorty has any antiliberal dispositions. This interpretation is supported by the fact that this evidence is meager in comparison to all the textual evidence to the contrary. The vast mass of Rorty's text claims that Rorty is a kind person, Punkt. The problem with this simple interpretation is that it makes Rorty seem confused and incoherent: one cannot be a postphilosophical ironist and a good liberal at the same time. So maybe we should be charitable and consider the alternatives? The second interpretation doesn't entirely remove the contradiction but only makes it less obvious and less blatant by claiming that since Rorty is a prudent, cautious person, he doesn't want to publicly confess his cruel thoughts and feelings, but withholds them from his readers. The text is peculiarly silent about Rorty's antiliberal side, but if we are allowed to think that Rorty doesn't always write

down everything he knows about himself – if his book is not a diary – then we may suspect that he just doesn't want to say what he really thinks, that he conceals himself. Our third interpretation makes the contradiction disappear. According to this interpretation Rorty says that since he will only be antiliberal in his private life, we don't have to be afraid. Even if this last interpretation is the most charitable, its plausibility is reduced by the fact that it requires substantial speculation on a few lines in a large book.

Is there such a thing as the correct interpretation of Rorty? Can we ever know what Rorty really meant to say, what his intentions were? Or do we here have a few possible interpretations, interpretations among which only feeling and vague intuition can decide?

These doubts about the rational underdetermination of interpretation – about the possibility of finding the uniquely correct interpretation – get even more intense if we return to our assumption that Rorty wants to be a postphilosopher. Perhaps we should reconsider this assumption. *Does* Rorty really want to be a postphilosopher? What if he doesn't? What if he prefers the philosophical attitude as far as liberalism is concerned? Then we would have an inconsistency, or at least a difference that calls for an explanation, between what he says he is doing and what he actually is doing. If Rorty really wants to drop his postphilosophy when it comes to liberalism, then why does he not say so? This clearly creates a presumption against the notion that Rorty doesn't describe himself as a postphilosopher about liberalism. The author's own words are after all the primary source of evidence about his beliefs.

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Even after all these interpretative hypotheses and caveats the suspicion of Rorty's not having a unified personality remains. The evidence of Rorty's antiliberalism is very, very scarce in comparison to all the evidence of his liberalism. Rorty just doesn't seem to be cruel enough. For this reason one is still prone to think that there is an inconsistency between his postphilosophy and his moral views. It is as if Rorty's ego was not one consistent, self-contained system, but a collection of more or less incompatible personality fragments. There may be enough thematic and stylistic unity in it to justify the belief that someone with a single ego or personality wrote the whole book; but just as Europe has many traditions of thought that communicate with each other less than transparently, the man we call Rorty has an ego with contents that sometimes seem like different personalities. My final clinical judgement is that Rorty should be seen to suffer from a mild multiple personality disorder. The source of this disorder is the struggle, which is not a simple antithetical opposition but rather an oblique incompatibility, between the ironist postphilosopher and the kind liberal. To be consistent, Rorty should either affirm both liberalism and antiliberalism, or deny his postphilosophical

views; but since he cannot make up his mind between these two, he keeps on oscillating between them in a slightly confusing way.

## Notes

1. Rorty, 1989, p. xv.
2. Ibid., pp. 73-4.
3. See Rorty, 1982, introduction, and Rorty, 1989, chapters 1 and 4.
4. Rorty, 1982, p. xl.
5. Ibid., p. xl.
6. Ibid., p. 78.
7. Ibid., p. xv.
8. Ibid., pp. 197-8.
9. See ibid., p. 87, and Rorty, 1991, p. 198.
10. Rorty, 1991, pp. 187-8.
11. Rorty, 1989, p. 46.
12. Rorty, 1991, p. 189.
13. Rorty, 1982, p. xxxvii. Emphasis deleted.
14. Gurewitch, 1994, p. 35.
15. Rorty, 1991, p. 198.
16. Rorty, 1989, pp. 89-90.
17. Ibid., p. 85.
18. Rorty, 1991, p. 198.
19. Rorty, 1989, pp. 87-8.
20. Bhaskar, 1991, p. 90.
21. See Rushdie's speech on the occasion of Herbert Read's death in 1990. Since religious fanaticism prevented Rushdie from delivering the paper himself, it was read by Harold Pinter. I myself read the Finnish translation of that speech in the first 1996 issue of *Parnasso*.
22. Rorty, 1989, pp. 91-2.
23. According to the 1994 statement of the International Society for the Study of Dissociation, the diagnostic criteria for multiple personality disorder are the following. 'A. The presence of two or more identities or personalities or personality states (each with its own relatively enduring pattern of perceiving, relating to and thinking about the environment and self). B. At least two of these identities or personality states recurrently take control of the person's behavior. C. Inability to recall important personal information that is too extensive to be explained by ordinary forgetfulness. D. The disturbance is not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance (e.g., blackouts or chaotic behavior during Alcohol Intoxication) or a general medical condition (e.g., complex partial seizures). Note:

In children the symptoms are not attributable to imaginary playmates or fantasy play.' Quoted in Hacking, 1995, p. 19.

24. Rorty, 1989, p. 194.
25. Ibid., p. xv.
26. Hobbes, 1973, p. 74.

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