Singapore Management University

Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Research Collection School of Social Sciences

School of Social Sciences

3-2006

Affinities in the Socio-Political Thought of Rorty and Levinas

Eduard JORDAAN

Singapore Management University, ejordaan@smu.edu.sg

Follow this and additional works at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research

Part of the Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons

Eduard Jordaan

Affinities in the socio-political thought of Rorty and Levinas

Abstract   This article considers the affinities in the socio-political thought of Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Rorty. The writings of both display considerable concern for the suffering of others. Both authors note the importance of a self-critical subject becoming more aware of its own injustice as very important for recognizing our responsibilities to others. Furthermore, both stress the importance of recognizing the other outside of the usual, objectifying categories, since it is the uniqueness of the other that reminds us of our responsibility for the other. Both writers view the liberal state as the best political forum in which to realize a fuller recognition of and responsibility towards the other, a form of state in which the ethical constantly interrupts the political. Rorty and Levinas disagree, however, on the legitimacy of not responding to the other.

Key words   Critchley · irony · justice · Levinas · liberal state · other · responsibility · Rorty · sentimental education

Introduction

Richard Rorty has been rather dismissive of the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas' understanding of the other strikes Rorty as 'gawky, awkward and unenlightening' and of little utility.[1] Further, Rorty does not see Levinas' thought as holding much potential for dealing with political issues and sees it at best as 'useful to some of us in our individual quests for private perfection'.[2] Given Rorty's apprehension about Levinas' work, it comes as little surprise that Rorty by and large rejects Simon Critchley's suggestion that he (Rorty) and Levinas are 'in the same line of business',[3] which Critchley bases on the claim that 'Rorty's

definition of liberalism and Levinas' definition of ethics [are] essentially doing the same work, that is, attempting to locate a source for moral and political obligation in a sentient disposition towards the other's suffering'.[4] Critchley continues, 'Do they both not agree that cruelty is the worst thing that there is, and that, furthermore, this is the only social bond that we need?'[5]

In this article, I want to take up Critchley's proposition that Rorty and Levinas are 'in the same line of business' by drawing attention to some of the affinities in the socio-political thought of these two important thinkers. I shall further claim that their work is complementary in a certain respect: Levinas spent much of his life trying to demonstrate the ultimately irrepressible ethical relation with the other and the concern and responsibility for the other this entails, whereas Rorty bluntly asserts the importance of concern for the suffering of others, which, for Rorty, is more or less all that is needed to unite people socially.[6] On the other hand, in Levinas' thought, there is an absence of politically practical suggestions, despite the fertile philosophical base he has built, an absence that Rorty's pragmatism is able to complement. Regarding the affinities in Levinas' and Rorty's socio-political thought, these will be organized along three lines: their understanding of a political subject's heightened sensitivity to the needs of others; the effecting of escalating reminders (both in intensity and frequency) of the need and suffering of others; and their views of the liberal state and society.

Before we proceed, a corrective is necessary, the corrective being a brief summary of the political moment in Levinas,[7] which serves to temper the radical demands of the one-to-one ethical relation, the extremity of which strikes some readers as hopelessly unrealistic. For some reason, in the exchange surrounding the affinities (or the lack thereof) between Rorty and Levinas, no mention has been made of the political relation in Levinas' thought, which centres on the notion of the third.[8] Not even Critchley makes any mention of the political moment in Levinas in this debate, despite Critchley's own clear discussion of this very issue in an earlier work.[9] In both *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, the exposition of the one-to-one ethical relation is followed by a discussion where the subject and the other are in the presence of the third,[10] who also 'looks at me in the eyes of the other', also summoning me to responsibility.[11] The presence of numerous others marks the limit of responsibility, as the subject distributes its responsibility in equal measure to these numerous others. The presence of the third introduces equality and justice, restoring the subject to a position where it may now demand reciprocity from the other. There is nothing chronological about the entry of the third – I have always been in both an ethical and a political relation to the other. In fact, another person is simultaneously the other and the third to me.[12]

For Levinas, it is the ethical relation that makes possible the political – 'the equality of all is borne by my inequality, the surplus of my duties over my rights'.[13] Ideally, there should be an intense oscillation between the ethical and the political, but the tradition of political and philosophical thought is by and large a forgetting and suppression of the ethical in the systematization, thematization and objectification that political rationality requires and justifies.[14] Levinas and Rorty are both concerned with bringing about a greater reverberation of the ethical in the political.

Having said this, let us pause for a moment at what Critchley thinks puts Rorty and Levinas in 'the same line of business' and which drives their respective projects, namely their sentient dispositions for the suffering of others and their shared view of cruelty as the worst thing we do. It might be banal to say that cruelty is the worst thing we do,[15] but, as far as academic philosophy is concerned, the frequency with which Rorty and Levinas concern themselves with cruelty, suffering and oppression, coupled with the 'social hopes' they cherish, makes their work quite remarkable. In Rorty, we find the sentience towards the suffering of others in his definition of a liberal as someone 'who thinks that cruelty is the worst thing we do'[16] which he bases on his rather foundational claim that what unites humans is their shared ability to feel pain.[17] Rorty, however, does not offer much further explanation for why this commonality should then proceed to assume the importance it does. Similarly, Levinas feels that ethics is first philosophy, that is, there is an irreducible ethical structure that underpins, enables, informs and justifies theoretical thought and other forms of systematization. The *face* of the other, that is, the other person as impossible to fully reduce to a theme or concept, indicates the limit of systematization, and in fact shows systematization to have been a forgetting and suppression of what is other in the categories of the same. Unlike Rorty's abrupt assertion of the pivotal importance of sentience towards the other's suffering, much of Levinas' philosophical work has been devoted to painstakingly demonstrating the human as that which ultimately cannot be reduced to a theme, object or concept and to explore the ethical awareness and responsibility that flow from such an awakening to the other.

Levinas locates the underlying sentience for the suffering of others in what he terms the *saying*, a non-linguistic sociality, a proximity to the other outside of thematization, a fragile relation in which there is always the danger of violating the other by placing him or her in a system of relations. The fragility of the ethical saying is suggested as 'a movement that already carries away the signification it brought' or as a 'disturbance [that] disturbs order without troubling it seriously'.[18] *Proximity* is to be exposed to the vulnerability of the other who

summons one to respond ethically, that is, in being unable to shirk one's responsibility for the other. To realize the responsibility of the ethical saying in a concrete manner, there is a need for thematization, institutions, theories, science, decisions, etc., which Levinas summarizes as the *said*. The non-linguistic saying needs the said to concretely respond to the other, despite the fact that the (necessary and unavoidable) objectification and thematization that characterize the said are a betrayal and a suppression of the other's uniqueness. It is the uniqueness of the other that summons me to responsibility. Our infinite responsibility and the guilty conscience that stems from never having done enough drive a reduction of the betrayal of the saying that has occurred in the presence of the third. Lessening the betrayal of the saying is possible in two ways: through a heightened sensibility and vulnerability of the subject to the other and by means of increased reminders of the needs of the other. I will claim that these two ways correspond greatly to Rorty's notions of irony and sentimental education, respectively, to which we turn in the next two sections. The liberal state is the best possible forum in which the betrayal of the subject's infinite responsibility for the other and of the uniqueness of the other can be reduced, partly explaining Levinas' and Rorty's enthusiasm for the liberal state, which forms the focus of the final section.

Heightened sensibility

A significant similarity between Rorty and Levinas lies in the emphasis they place upon the importance of a subject becoming aware of its own injustice and dominance of others and the increased self-questioning such an awakening leads to. In both writers, there is the view that persons too ensconced in their social and self-proclaimed identities remain relatively blind to the needs of outsiders.

In the case of Rorty, the *liberal ironist* exemplifies individual self-questioning, albeit that this putting into question of oneself does not go as far as in the case of Levinas. The liberal *ironist* is deeply aware of the potential perils of being too smitten with the contingent forms of life one finds oneself in – 'it is hard to be both enchanted with one version of the world and tolerant of all others'.[19] Ironists recognize the coincidental character of their social identities, vocabularies and relationships and worry about the possibility that they may have been 'initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game'.[20] Ironists are anxious about being 'stuck' in the vocabularies of their particular social situation and being acquainted with only 'the people in their own neighbourhood', so ironists spend their time acquainting themselves with individuals and groups that strike them as

unfamiliar.[21] (For Levinas, '[t]he seeking out of the other man, however distant, is already a relationship with this other man, a relation in all its directness, which is already proximity'.[22]) When one recalls that for Rorty moral concern is a matter of 'we-intentions',[23] of solidarity, irony becomes more than just a recognition of the contingency of one's personal identity – irony also becomes a recognition of one's contingent moral identifications and the arbitrary disregard for the suffering of persons excluded from our 'we'. Recognition of the contingent focus of one's moral concern leaves the ironist ambivalent about when to 'favour members of one's family, or one's community, over other, randomly chosen, human beings'.[24] When one further recalls Rorty's definition of a liberal (borrowed from Judith Shklar) as someone who 'thinks that cruelty is the worst thing we do'[25] and who is sure to 'notice suffering when it occurs',[26] one (initially) comes to view the liberal ironist as representing a person deeply concerned with the needs of others while at the same time moving away from focusing his or her concern in any narrow communitarian sense. Such a shift in the liberal ironist's moral attention allays charges of communitarian self-interest and reciprocity and demonstrates the moral generosity of the liberal ironist.

For Levinas, proximity to the other puts my egoism into question – it is a 'crisis of being . . . because I begin to ask myself if my being is justified, if the *Da* of my *Dasein* is not already the usurpation of somebody else's place?'[27] The negativity of guilt for having already expropriated the other becomes positive in expiation for the other, in responsibility.[28] Responsibility for the other is radically individualizing – it 'is the most profound adventure of subjectivity',[29] for 'I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me'.[30] My election as unique summons me to the other, requires me to answer in the first person – 'it extracts me from the concept in which I continually take refuge'.[31] In substitution, the subject no longer draws its identity from what it has in common with others, from its place in a system of relations, but is individualized through its response to the other, saying 'here I am', a positioning of the subject that

> . . . consists in inverting its identity, in getting rid of it. If such a desertion of identity is possible without turning into alienation pure and simple, what else can it be if not a responsibility for others, for what others do, even to a point of being made responsible for the very persecution it undergoes.[32]

When one views fraternity as people being united by what they have in common 'the essence of society is lost sight of. . . . That all men are brothers is not explained by their resemblance, nor by a common cause of which they would be the effect.'[33] The basis for sociality lies not in human commonality, organization around a concept, but in its contrary, in substitution, which 'divests me without stop of all that can be

common to me and another man, who would thus be capable of re-placing me [if we were the same]'.[34] Claiming one's moral identity in terms of what unites one with others, or merely claiming one's identity in the generality of being,[35] offers the subject shelter from the permanent ethical accusation by the other.

> In thematisation, the plastic character of an object, the form, clothes and protects the ego apparently exposed to critique. Apperceiving itself as universal, it has already slipped away from the responsibilities to which I . . . am bound, and for which I cannot ask replacements.[36]

Being a Rortian liberal ironist or a Levinasian elected subject seems extremely demanding, for it requires an unremitting self-questioning and a constant awareness of responsibilities to others. However, both Rorty and Levinas undercut the ethical demands lain upon the subject in similar ways. Upon first glance, the liberal ironist appears saintly in her concern with the suffering and oppression of others, increasingly shifting her focus to people formerly disregarded. However, Rorty undermines the socio-ethical demands of being a liberal ironist (by insisting on a sharp division between the public and the private and by asserting the demands of each sphere to be 'equally valid'[37]), to a point where Rorty can be seen as justifying the choice to turn away from the suffering of others so as to focus on one's private self-creation. '[O]ur 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.'[38]

Statements such as 'I am responsible for the persecutions that I undergo' and 'I am responsible for the other's responsibility' attest to the demands of Levinasian ethics.[39] However, the infinite demand of the ethical relation is eased by the presence of the third person next to the other, whose presence enables a 'salvation' of the subject, establishing terms of equality and reciprocity between the subject and the other, as was explained in the introductory section. In the presence of the third, the subject is permitted time to pursue its own plans, to be for-itself. As Critchley makes clear, my relation with the other is always both politi-cal and ethical.[40] The subject's political relation with the other has always already interfered with (and compromised) the ethical relation with the other. Though it is the ethical relation that makes the political possible, there is always the danger that the ethical is alienated and lost in the impersonal political order.[41] In modern political society, in which people know each other through a concept (as a 'that'), in which people live indifferently 'alongside' one another, 'there exists a tyranny of the universal and the impersonal, an order that is inhuman though distinct from the brutish'.[42] The trend towards 'inhumanity', the forgetting of

the ethical, is strengthened by the assumed legitimacy of being for-oneself in the presence of the third, a trend that is garnering growing approbation in our burgeoning global human rights culture, the tenets of which are individualist. But, sociality, the ethical one-for-the-other, is the command 'not to remain indifferent to [the other's] death, not to let the other die alone; that is, an order to answer for the life of the other man, at the risk of becoming an accomplice to that death'.[43] What would a politics more aware of the ethical entail? There would be an intense and constant 'vibration' between the ethical and the political, between being for the other and being for oneself, between guilt before the other and insisting upon one's rights against the other, an ambivalence, an acknowledgement of ambiguity and complexity, hesitation before every decision.

After sketching positions that seemingly demand much from the subject in terms of assuming responsibility with regard to suffering others, both Rorty and Levinas come to recognize the legitimacy of private concerns vis-à-vis public responsibilities towards the other, though Levinas does so fearing for the alienation and suppression of the ethical. Rorty, on the other hand, has a clear conscience about choosing for private self-concern, an option that he considers to be as valid as choosing in favour of responsibility for others in the public sphere. However, the growing recognition of individual human rights, coupled with the individualism of pervasive neo-liberal economic principles, has served to tilt the balance towards the political vis-à-vis the ethical relation, reinforcing an asocial indifference of citizens existing in equality.

The negative consequences of Rorty's justification of asocial individualism are offset by what he sees as a central feature of liberal societies, the types of society in which we typically find such asocial (liberal!) individualism. Liberal societies are characterized as having a tradition whereby 'the human stranger from whom all dignity has been stripped is to be taken in, to be reclothed with dignity',[44] that is, solidarity is created with previously excluded people, and in Rorty's thought, solidarity is a precondition for moral concern. However, for Levinas, the goodness of being for the other is not an attribute of societies, but originates in the irreplaceable subject. 'Goodness does not radiate over the anonymity of a collectivity presenting itself panoramically, to be absorbed into it. . . . It has a principle, an origin, issues from the I, is subjective.'[45]

Rorty's emphasis on *solidarity*, that is, moral concern as based on seeing people as being 'like us', is problematical for various reasons: there seems to be a contradiction in seeing strange people as being like us; it is not clear that moral concern is in fact based on solidarity (this seems more like calculation and reciprocity, rather than moral

generosity and expiation); solidarity is undesirable because it is by defi-
nition exclusionary; we tend to create solidarity with people who need
it less (e.g. Americans with western Europeans); to what extent can we
actually establish solidarity with 'strange people' on the other side of
the world? Etc. Fortunately, one can discard the idea of solidarity while
still recognizing the value of the process whereby solidarity is estab-
lished, *sentimental education*. Sentimental education draws attention to,
or reminds us of, persons and groups we may have been cruel to or who
are suffering.

Increased proximity to the other

In both Rorty and Levinas there is a connection between an increased
concern for the other and the other's approaching us outside of the more
typical categories in which it is usually presented. The static objectifica-
tion of the other in a concept hides his or her humanity, pre-empting
our recognition of him or her as unique. It is the uniqueness of the other,
what overflows categories of knowledge, that is ethical, that constitutes
what Levinas terms the 'face' of the other and is what reminds us of the
humanity of and our responsibility to this unique being. One area where
Rorty and Levinas differ is in focus and it is as such that we can see
their work as complementary in explaining the ethical approach of the
other. Levinas is more useful in suggesting why we do not recognize our
duties to the other when she or he is objectified, whereas Rorty is more
helpful in suggesting practical ways in which the other can confront the
subject as face (sentimental education).
    According to Levinas, traditional philosophy and progressive
politics have tended to look for what is common among people and to
emphasize their similarity. While this is entirely understandable and
commendable given a world history of oppression, inequality, hatred
and racism, such an emphasis on human commonality has had the effect
of suppressing what is unique, what is other. While the Enlightenment
emphasis on the equality of persons has inspired great moral progress,
therein lies also a dark side, a side that glosses over the human in people,
that is, over their uniqueness. The aspiration towards a political society
in which citizens are equal constitutes a striving towards a social
arrangement in which persons become interchangeable units in a system
and life occurs indifferently *alongside* one another. Such equality masks
the ethical accusation of the subject in which she or he is responsible
for the other to the individuating point of substitution. However, in this
section our concern lies with the alterity of the other, not the election
of the responsible subject.
    The political order in which each subject has his or her freedom
similarly and rationally preserved is an impersonal order that 'consists

in negating or in absorbing the other, so as to encounter nothing'.[46] To be approached by the other as face is to be struck by a human being who ultimately cannot be reduced to a theme, who is resistant to totalization and who cannot be contained in a system. I am awakened to the other 'precisely when the other has nothing in common with me, when the other is wholly other, that is to say, a human other'.[47] The other is 'at once what disturbs order and this disturbance itself'.[48] The persistent resistance by the other to objectification and thematization awakens the subject to its prior domination of the other and muddles the subject's clear conscience. 'The event of putting into question is the shame of the I for its naïve spontaneity, for its sovereign coincidence with itself in the identification of the same.'[49] *Proximity* to the other is an event that arrests the subject in its naïve freedom and makes it stand in front of the other in a state of guilt, under accusation, responsible.[50] Even though in proximity the other is outside the grasp of the subject, unmediated by a concept, the subject remains in an ethical relation with the other. Proximity is contact without grasp. It is a relation of vulnerability, sensibility to the unique. 'Proximity, difference which is non-indifference, is responsibility',[51] the impossibility of abandoning the other.[52]

However, the ethical relation is extremely fragile, given that the other also already exists in a concept, a theme. In daily life it is impossible to interact with every person as though he or she were the only person in the world. The other is an alterity that cannot speak its name, for that would immediately mean a betrayal of the other's uniqueness. But this betrayal of the unique other whose uniqueness summons the subject to responsibility, is unavoidable and necessary – one needs systematization, knowledge, institutions, objectivity, etc., to concretely respond to the other. Yet, Levinas recognizes that some ways of containing the saying in the said are less of a betrayal than others, or, put differently, ways of representing the other are more or less approximate to the alterity of the other. So what Levinas, and with him Rorty, are after 'is the gradual enlargement of our imagination',[53] so as to come closer to the strangeness of the other (but which in turn opens onto an even deeper awareness of the unfathomable uniqueness of the other).

Sentimental education is the process that harbours the potential consequence that there will be an increase in moral concern, particularly with respect to persons previously disregarded or unnoticed. Sentimental education is the drawing of attention to unnoticed or insufficiently rectified oppression, cruelty and suffering. Sentimental education bears the potential of making people feel 'revulsion and rage where once they felt indifference and resignation'.[54] It is a process whereby our images of others become less objectified, or in Levinasian terms, less of a betrayal of the alterity of the other. Similarly, Rortian sentimental education aspires to have people be viewed as 'fully-fledged',[55] since pragmatists

such as Rorty regard 'personhood as a matter of degree, not an all-or-nothing affair'.[56] The instruments of sentimental education are novels, movies and television programmes, which, for Rorty, are gradually replacing 'the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress'.[57] Art and poetry can also act as conduits for sentimental education, in that these forms of expression create new reactions to familiar situations through the use of new metaphors and 'unfamiliar noises'.[58] In this process of sentimental education, Rorty further finds a spot for political activism, whether purveyed through internal or external agents, which can create splits and tensions in the dominant discourse(s) and culture(s) so as to create space for new ideas to be voiced and heard and for change to become possible[59] – campaigns in which the media is of central importance.[60]

Where sentimental education brings about moral progress (defined as more people caring for more diverse people more often and more intensely), such progress needs to be translated into social justice and guaranteed through institutions and laws in order to benefit the other. Rorty identifies 'connoisseurs of diversity' (sentimental educators, such as journalists or anthropologists) who raise our awareness of persons and groups excluded from justice, while 'guardians of universality' guarantee the equal treatment of all by public institutions.[61] Sentimental education draws attention to the otherness spilling over the objectifications of the other, otherness uncontained in the categories by which we know the other, only for this overflowing of otherness to be enclosed again in the objectifying categories of justice, institutions and knowledge. However, this ensuing objectification is less of a betrayal than was the initial view of the other. This is not just a gradual process, as society comes to construct fuller identities of persons and groups, but also an unending process, a striving for a society without suffering and oppression – a 'justice always to be made more knowing in the name, the memory, of the original kindness of man toward his other'.[62] It is a disposition Levinas describes as a

> ... rebellion against injustice that begins once order begins. ... As if it were a matter of a system of justice that accused itself of being senile and decrepit as soon as there were institutions to protect it; as if, in spite of all recourse to doctrine and to political, social, and economic sciences, in spite of all references to reason and to techniques of revolution, man had sought within revolution to the extent that it is disorder or permanent revolution, a breaking of frameworks, an obliteration of ranks, liberating man, like death, entirely, from everything and from the whole; as if the other man were sought – or approached – in an otherness where no administration could ever reach him; as if through justice a dimension opened up in the other man, that bureaucracy, even if it were of revolutionary origin, would block because of the very universality of the dimension.[63]

For Rorty, the liberal is the type of person who exemplifies the noticing of suffering wherever it might occur,[64] whereas Levinas is less clear about the political appellation of the subject doing the noticing. What these two writers do agree upon, however, is that the liberal state is best suited for such noticing of suffering and oppression and for moral progress to occur.

Sentience for the other in the liberal state

Finally, I want to indicate Levinas' and Rorty's surprisingly similar views of the liberal polity. In the political, that is, in the presence of the third, the Levinisian subject is salvaged – there is a time to be for oneself, although the burden of responsibility inescapably weighs on one. To similar effect, Rorty demarcates a sharp distinction between the public and the private spheres. In the political, there is a moment of decision – is one to act for the other or for oneself? For Levinas, there is some justification for (temporarily) not acting for the other – this is the significance of equality. Not acting for the other can be further legitimized through appeals to spurious, though legitimate, principles.[65] Rorty reaches a similar moment of in/decision – there is no indication when private (for oneself) or public (for the other) concerns should predominate. However, in both writers, there remains a bad conscience about the effects of the autonomous subject's exercise of freedom, about 'the tendencies to cruelty inherent in searches for autonomy'.[66] The difference between the two writers is that Levinas is less willing to accept the equal legitimacy of choosing either way, despite recognizing the acceptability of private concerns in the political order of the said. Furthermore, compared to Levinas, Rorty is too accepting of the lapse into the equality of living *alongside* the other. From a Levinasian perspective, this stands in tension with the sentient disposition for the suffering of the other that exists so strongly in the liberal state, as sensibility for the suffering of the other is what is *not* based on equality, but on the difference between subject and other.

Despite the aforementioned commonalities, the most striking similarity between Rorty and Levinas regarding their view of the liberal state is that both identify it as a political form in continuous search for a better justice, as well as being the form of state most accommodating to such a pursuit. Consider their exact words. For Levinas, in the liberal state 'justice is always a revision of justice and the expectation of a better justice',[67] 'always concerned about its delay in meeting the requirement of the face of the other'.[68] Rorty, though still reflecting a view of moral concern as based on solidarity, sees a virtue of liberal society as trying to shake off the 'curse' off its inevitable 'ethnocentrism';[69] ethnocentrism

being the privileging of certain social categories, practices, relationships and discourses that might have the effect of suppressing the otherness of certain persons and obscuring their vulnerability as faces. Such blindness to the other is overcome in the liberal state where the citizenry 'prides itself on constantly adding on more windows, constantly enlarging its sympathies'.[70]

It appears as though 'a sentient disposition towards the other's suffering'[71] is the inspiration behind Rorty's and Levinas' strange characterization of the liberal state. It further seems as though both writers recognize that a better justice lies in drawing attention to the other outside of the categories in which it is usually regarded, staid and oppressive classifications in which the uniqueness of the other is lost. Greater sensitivity to the suffering and needs of the other is a result of noticing the other outside the forms in which it has been cast, for the humanity of the other resides exactly in its resistance to forms of knowledge and classification.

It is the freedoms people enjoy in liberal societies, relative to other political forms, that make these societies so well suited for there to be a deep concern with the other (as other). Irony, which Rorty only sees as private, enables the public association with, and concern for other, oppressed people. Though some citizens might deem concern for strange other people unpatriotic or offensive, in liberal societies tolerance of plurality is a public virtue and is judicially enforced. It is the breathing space proffered freedom in liberal societies that enables the exposure of injustice, oppression and suffering. Apart from an environment conducive to asking for a reckoning in the name of the other, freedom of expression, liberal education, government support for the arts and so forth, assist in and encourage the creation of more nuanced images of the other, representations more approximate to the uniqueness of the other, and also makes the subject more aware of ways in which the other has been oppressed and disregarded. Liberal societies, by definition, welcome the constant struggle on behalf of oppressed otherness, making 'life easier for poets and revolutionaries'.[72]

Despite the aforementioned heady humanism of the liberal state, both Rorty and Levinas recognize the need for the state to objectify and categorize unique persons, given the exigencies of governing a complex society, but also given the importance of the principle of equality. Part of the historical struggle for equality has been for the equality of all citizens before the law. Though there has been a progressive trend to make ever finer and more sensitive distinctions in order to take account of social plurality, when it comes to applying the law, liberal societies treat like cases alike. This means, for example, a similar categorization of persons according to their crimes and a marginalization of their uniqueness, of sentimental stories that might evoke pity. In a society

based on 'procedural justice' 'guardians of universality' ought not to pay too much attention to what is other about the criminal.

> For if we had watched the war criminal grow up, had travelled the road he had travelled, we might have had difficulty reconciling the demands of love and of justice. But it is well for society that in most cases our ignorance permits us to avoid this dilemma. Most of the time, justice has to be enough.[73]

Here, we find Rorty emphasizing the importance of equality, though he leaves a back door for a taking-into-account of the uniqueness of a person, the 'road he had travelled'. Without leaving such a back door ('*Most of the time*, justice has to be enough') Rorty would have undermined and contradicted his view of liberal society as constantly asking whether and how it has been cruel and oppressive, by, for example, listening to a 'long, sad, sentimental story'.[74]

Although the other always takes precedence over the subject in the one-to-one ethical relation, in the political relation, that is, in the presence of more than one other, there is a need for justice and judgement. In the terms of *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, where the distinction between the saying and the said plays an important role, the ethical saying needs the language, institutions, knowledge and written texts of the said to regulate responsibility for the other, to decide who is guilty, to prescribe what to do. However, the liberal state is always aware of its violation of the other and mindful of the ethical relation with the other, 'a state questioning itself',[75] and as such

> . . . legislation [is] always unfinished, always resumed, a legislation open to the better. It attests to an ethical excellence and its origin in kindness from which, however, it is distanced . . . by the necessary calculations imposed by a multiple sociality, calculations constantly starting over again.[76]

Rorty and Levinas recognize the (inevitable) suppression of otherness in justice, the 'bad conscience of justice',[77] (forgetting 'the road the other has travelled', in Rorty's terms) while also strongly associating with the imperative to somehow let sensitivity to otherness seep into the justice system of the liberal state. If one were to identify a difference between Rorty and Levinas regarding justice in the liberal state, it would be that there is a greater willingness on the side of Rorty to accept the static objectivity of justice. For Levinas, 'justice *always* [has] to be perfected against its own harshness'.[78] By contrast, consider, for example, Rorty's explanation that moral duties in a liberal democracy are divided between 'agents of love' and 'agents of justice'. Agents of love draw attention to people who have not been considered as equals in the workings of justice and proceed to show why these people should be included as equals. On the other hand, agents of justice, or 'guardians

of universality, make sure that *once* these people are admitted as citizens, *once* they have been shepherded into the light by the connoisseurs of diversity, *they are treated just all like the rest of us*'.[79] What we find here, albeit implicitly, is Rorty reverting to his view that solidarity is the basis for moral concern, that once strange people have been shown to be like us, they may join us as equals. One of the problems with solidarity, and by the same token, equality, is that it covers over the face of the other and the election of the responsible subject, as both the subject and the other become interchangeable with other units in the system.

Despite the attention that has been paid to the affinities between the social thought of these two writers throughout this article, and despite the concern of both with the suffering of other people, a central point of divergence between Rorty and Levinas turns on their disagreement over the legitimacy of a turn away from concern for the other. For Rorty, concern with the suffering and oppression of the other may end when the other is granted rights equal to his or her former persecutors. Furthermore, for Rorty, the subject may feel justified in concerning itself with its private quests for self-creation, even in the face of the suffering of others. In Levinas' view, the equality of the other before the institutions of the state is not enough, for, in equality, there remains an element of violence against the other, a violence that 'appears even when the hierarchy functions perfectly, when everyone submits to universal ideas. There are cruelties that are terrible because they proceed from the necessity of the reasonable Order.'[80] It remains incumbent upon the subject to see the 'tears of the other', 'the tears that a civil servant cannot see'.[81] Further, the infinite responsibilities of the Levinasian subject cannot accept the 'equal validity' of the liberal split between the public and the private. So, when Rorty feels that pretty much all we need for moral progress to occur is for there to be more liberals, we find Levinas disagreeing through a rhetorical question asked 70 years ago, 'We must ask ourselves if liberalism is all we need to achieve an authentic dignity for the human subject?'[82]

Department of Political Sciences, University of Stellenbosch, Matieland, South Africa

Notes

1 Richard Rorty, 'Response to Simon Critchley', in Chantal Mouffe (ed.) *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 41.
2 Richard Rorty, *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 96.

See also Richard Rorty, 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism', in Mouffe, *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, p. 17.

3 Rorty, 'Response to Simon Critchley', p. 42.

4 Simon Critchley, 'Deconstruction and Pragmatism: Is Derrida a Private Ironist or a Public Liberal?', in Mouffe, *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, p. 33.

5 ibid.

6 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 92.

7 A further corrective to a reception of Levinas' thought is desirable and one which concerns the critical attention Mark Dooley focuses on Levinas' willingness to bring 'God' into his philosophical writings. I share Dooley's discomfort about this. However, it should be stressed that this is a late development in Levinas' thought and that his philosophy can stand firmly without God's help. In Levinas' jargon, 'God', 'infinity' and 'the other' are used analogously to suggest that which escapes totality and thematization. To harp on Levinas' mention of God is to caricature Levinas' philosophical profundity. See Mark Dooley, 'The Civic Religion of Social Hope: a Response to Simon Critchley', *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 27(5) (2001): 35–58.

8 The two writings from which this exchange flowed forth are Critchley, 'Deconstruction and Pragmatism' and Rorty, 'Response to Simon Critchley'. See also Simon Critchley, 'Metaphysics in the Dark: a Response to Richard Rorty and Ernesto Laclau', *Political Theory* 26(6) (December 1998): 803–17; Dooley, 'The Civic Religion of Social Hope'; and Mark Dooley, 'Private Irony vs. Social Hope: Derrida, Rorty and the Political', *Cultural Values* 3(3) (July 1999): 263–90.

9 Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2nd edn, 1999), pp. 219–36. Critchley's book was first published in 1992.

10 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969) and Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981).

11 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 213.

12 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 160.

13 ibid., p. 159.

14 ibid., p. 169.

15 Kekes scathingly attacks the 'intellectual vacuity' of this definition of a liberal. 'This slogan is mere verbiage that cannot withstand the most elementary questioning. Why is cruelty the worst thing we do? Why not genocide, terrorism, betrayal, exploitation, humiliation, brutalisation, tyranny, and so forth? If it is said in reply that all serious evils are forms of cruelty, then the liberal becomes one who believes that serious evil is the worst thing we do. But who would disagree with that?' John Kekes, 'Cruelty and Liberalism' in *Richard Rorty*, ed. Adam Malachowksi (London: Sage, 2002), p. 74.

16 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. xv.

17 ibid., p. 92.
18 Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 70.
19 Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers*, vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 195.
20 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 75.
21 ibid., p. 80.
22 Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 242.
23 Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 200.
24 ibid., p. xv.
25 ibid.
26 ibid., p. 93.
27 Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, p. 85.
28 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 203.
29 Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other* (London: Athlone Press, 1998), p. 99.
30 Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 101.
31 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 145.
32 Levinas, *Entre Nous*, p. 59.
33 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 213–14.
34 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 59.
35 'Being is inseparable from the comprehension of Being; Being already invokes subjectivity. But Being is *not* a being. It is a neuter which orders thought and beings, but which hardens the will instead of making it ashamed': Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), p. 52; emphasis in original.
36 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 92.
37 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. xv.
38 ibid., p. 194; emphasis in original.
39 Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 99.
40 Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, pp. 230–1.
41 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 161.
42 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 242.
43 Levinas, *Entre Nous*, p. 169.
44 Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 202.
45 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 305.
46 ibid., p. 292.
47 Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, p. 16.
48 Levinas, *Entre Nous*, p. 91.
49 Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, p. 17.
50 Levinas, *Entre Nous*, p. 58.
51 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 139.
52 Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, p. 167.
53 Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 14.
54 Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers*, vol. III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 204.

55 ibid., p. 224.
56 ibid., p. 219.
57 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. xvi.
58 Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 166–72.
59 ibid., p. 14.
60 Levinas also attributes an important role to the arts, the press and political activism as vehicles for progressive change. Strivings for a greater justice can be 'heard in the cries that rise up from the interstices of politics and that, independently of official authority, defend the "rights of man"; sometimes in the songs of the poets; [or] sometimes simply in the press or in the public forum of the liberal states': Levinas, *Entre Nous*, p. 196.
61 Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 206.
62 Levinas, *Entre Nous*, p. 229.
63 Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, pp. 242–3.
64 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 93.
65 On the spuriousness of moral claims, see Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981), pp. 6–21.
66 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 144.
67 Levinas, *Entre Nous*, p. 196.
68 ibid., p. 203.
69 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 198.
70 Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 204.
71 Critchley, 'Deconstruction and Pragmatism', p. 33.
72 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 60.
73 Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 205–6.
74 Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 184.
75 Levinas, *Entre Nous*, p. 205.
76 ibid., pp. 229–30.
77 ibid., p. 230.
78 ibid., p. 229; emphasis added.
79 Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 206; emphasis added.
80 Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, p. 23.
81 ibid.
82 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism', *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Autumn 1990): 63.