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Christopher S. Boehlke

"Fascist Ironism!?"

Introduction

In an article entitled "The Irony of Contingency and Solidarity," Timothy Cleveland examines the plausibility of Richard Rorty's liberal ironism and concludes that it is a self-defeating and incoherent position. The ironist, according to Rorty, is one who has liberalism among her final beliefs, one who realizes the absence of any deep justification for her beliefs about liberalism, and one who has little need of the distinctions between "logic and rhetoric, or between philosophy and literature, or between rational and nonrational methods of changing other people's minds" (Rorty 1989, 83). Yet for the liberal, it seems as though certain distinctions must be made in order to avoid cruelty. Rorty maintains that "the only important distinction in the area is that between the use of force and the use of persuasion" (Rorty 1989, 84). But without a distinction between rational and nonrational methods of changing people's minds, how can persuasion be distinguished from force? Cleveland concludes that it cannot, and thus, the only plausible ironist is most likely to be a totalitarian or Fascist ironist. In this paper, I argue against Cleveland's interpretation of Rorty and show why liberal irony is both consistent and beneficial.

Cleveland's Argument

Cleveland believes that "in order to be a liberal who favours a society in which human equality and solidarity can be realized and maintained, one must endorse political principles which guarantee the liberal freedoms" (Cleveland, 233). Rorty's ironist, however, is one who dismisses the necessity of such principles. Ironists are "never quite able to take themselves seriously because they are aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, are always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of themselves" (Rorty 1989, 74). A final vocabulary is simply the fully contingent and foundationless collection of words which are nevertheless authoritative because they form the linguistic ground for all actions, beliefs, and claims about knowledge, morality, etc. This vocabulary is "final" in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse" (Rorty 1989, 73).

Furthermore, the ironist dismisses the notion that "truth" is out in the world, in reality, waiting to be discovered. In other words, "truth" is not correspondence. Thus,

interesting philosophy is rarely an examination of the pros or cons of a thesis. Usually it is, implicitly or explicitly, a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things (Rorty 1989, 9).

In fact, Rorty contrasts the ironist with the traditional philosopher, whom he calls the metaphysician. Metaphysicians "take the paradigm of philosophical inquiry to be logical argument--that is, spotting the inferential relationships between propositions rather than comparing and contrasting vocabularies." They think "there is an overriding intellectual duty to present arguments for one's controversial views--arguments which will start with relatively uncontroversial premises" (Rorty 1989, 77, 78). Ironists, however, think "that such arguments--logical arguments--are very well in their way, and useful as expository devices, but in the end not much more than ways of getting people to change their practices without admitting that they have done so," and thus espouse "redescription rather than inference" (Rorty 1989, 78).

Building upon this model of the ironist, Cleveland asks, "How can someone who adopts the ironist stance toward argument, logic, and reason--toward rational and non-rational causes of behavior--be a happy liberal?" (Cleveland, 229). More specifically, Cleveland argues that "any liberal, even one who believes that cruelty is the worst thing we do, must admit that in a liberal society freedom of speech must be protected" (*Ibid.*). This recognition of the freedom of speech, however, requires recognizing a certain distinction. As Rorty says, "The only important political distinction in the area is that between the use of force and the use of persuasion" (Rorty 1989, 84). Yet how can an ironist who does not see much use for the distinction between rational and non-rational methods of changing other people's minds, who claims that such a distinction is not justifiable in any deep sense, distinguish between persuasion and force? "Why should freedom of speech be so sacrosanct if speech is simply one among many causes of belief? Can an ironist who favours liberalism answer these questions?" (Cleveland, 229).

Cleveland then seeks to imagine the different responses Rorty might give to such questions. He offers three possibilities. First, Rorty might refuse to answer them at all, in which case he admits that the ironist is an inconsistent character, but offers no explanation. Second, he might concede the inconsistency, but "alleviate the tension by relegating the conflicting aspects to different purposes in the liberal ironist's life in such a way that the purposes do not conflict" (Cleveland, 230). That is, he might use his public/private distinction and his insistence that these two realms are "equally valid, yet forever incommensurable" (Rorty 1989, xv) to make it feasible for the liberal ironist to endorse liberalism in public, while in private s/he recognizes the fact that such liberalism is not ultimately justifiable.¹ Finally, he might say that the ironist can actually make such

¹ A discussion of this important issue is beyond the scope of this paper, yet I will offer one quick remark. After a comparison between the Humean skeptic and the Rortian ironist, Cleveland concludes that Rorty is not able to make such a public/private distinction because, "there is nothing in the political and ethical problems of 'public' life which forces one to abandon what Rorty call the ironic stance one takes in private" (Cleveland, 231). While, in my opinion, Cleveland almost completely misinterprets Rorty's position on this issue, he particularly fails to recognize that for Rorty's ironist there is a public obligation to avoid cruelty, specifically humiliation, which threatens to destroy the final vocabulary of which one is constructed. Such an obligation is actually

a distinction, but that it must be relativized to a particular language game. Rorty explains that

where webs of belief and desire are pretty much the same for large numbers of people, it does become useful to speak of an 'appeal to reason' or to 'logic,' for this simply means an appeal to a widely shared common ground by reminding people of propositions which form part of this ground. More generally, all the traditional metaphysical distinctions can be given a respectable ironist sense by sociologizing them--treating them as distinctions between contingently existing sets of practices, or strategies employed within such practices, rather than between natural kinds (Rorty 1989, 83).

This statement simply appeals to the contingency of such a distinction, that it has no more justification than the fact that a certain number of people agree to it. According to Cleveland, however, this will not suffice; for one may encounter a contingent set of distinctions or beliefs which serve to promote the suffering of others (Nazi Germany, George Orwell's 1984, or present-day Serbia, for example). In such cases, the liberal ironist cannot adopt the existing contingent vocabulary or distinction between persuasion and force, so she is forced to offer a redescription. Yet this poses quite a problem. The new distinction may serve the liberal cause; but without the ability to distinguish between persuasion and force in any justifiable sense, based on the ability to distinguish between rational and non-rational methods of changing other people's minds, the liberal ironist seems to be one who is willing to "employ very non-liberal means--means indistinguishable from coercion--to maintain liberal society" (Cleveland, 235). In other words,

without a distinction between reasons as causes which are in principle distinct from other kinds of causes any politically important distinction between persuasion and force is either arbitrary or unjustifiably biased, no matter how many people agree to it in the society (Cleveland, 235).

Hence, building upon Rorty's statement that for the ironist the vision of social hope "is a matter of weapons and luck, not a matter of having truth on your side, or having detected 'the movement of history'" (Rorty 1989, 91), Cleveland concludes that the most likely ironist may be the Fascist or totalitarian ironist. He remarks that "in so far

imperative to the ironist's philosophy because s/he recognizes that everything is open to redescription. Thus, s/he is as threatened by the impending powerlessness, obsolescence, and futility of her final vocabulary as anyone else is. As will become evident later in this paper, this awareness of the power of humiliation, becomes the basis of Rorty's notion of solidarity.

as one is a liberal ironist, one will be forced to concede that one's means for realizing and maintaining a liberal society are not ultimately distinguishable from the Fascist's" (Cleveland, 237).

Yet Rorty seems to have one last response when he says that

within a language game, within a set of agreements about what is important, we can usefully distinguish reasons for belief from causes for belief which are not reasons. We do this by starting with such obvious differences as that between Socratic dialogue and hypnotic suggestion. We then try to firm up the distinction by dealing with the messier cases: brainwashing, media hype, and what Marxists call 'false consciousness.' There is, to be sure, no neat way to draw the line between a cause of changed belief which was also a reason and one which was a 'mere' cause. But the distinction is no fuzzier than most (Rorty 1989, 48).

Cleveland thinks, however, that either Rorty has just described the process of making a distinction which is unproblematic (in which case, his ironist stance is in peril) or one simply interprets distinctions relative to language games (in which case, such a distinction remains arbitrary or unjustifiably biased).

Cleveland concludes that on its own, the ironist position seems to be quite consistent. However, Rorty's redescription involves coupling this ironism with a liberal political outlook. This makes his redescription quite incoherent and ultimately self-defeating; for the ironist perspective on language and truth cannot help but undermine the goals of liberalism. Cleveland says that "the serious liberal concerned with human solidarity and freedom cannot accept a contingent, in the sense of arbitrary or unjustifiably biased, distinction between persuasion and force. Liberalism limits concessions to contingency" (Cleveland, 240).

Rorty's Defense

From Rorty's point of view, Cleveland is simply a metaphysician who insists that liberalism must be founded on principles and the rest of philosophy must be based upon logical reasoning. These ideas are precisely what Rorty wants to dismiss. In this section, I defend Rorty's redescription by presenting what I believe would be his most plausible response to the issue at hand.

First, Cleveland insists on using a notion of truth and rationality which Rorty deems obsolete and powerless. According to Rorty, the tradition of philosophy has attempted to make sense of human existence by emphasizing the notion of objectivity or "the idea of Truth as something to be pursued for its own sake" (Rorty 1985, 4). This notion requires the philosopher or intellectual to be in immediate relation with the intrinsic nature of things. Accordingly, the powers of human reason allow one to stand above mere appearances and construe truth as correspondence to reality. Justification is thus construed as the link between human nature or the powers of reason and the rest of the world or nature.

On their view, the various procedures which are thought of as providing rational justification by one or another culture may or may not really be rational. For to be truly rational, procedures of justification *must* lead to the truth, to correspondence to reality, to the intrinsic nature of things (Rorty 1985, 5).

Cleveland is firmly entrenched in this tradition, as will become more evident shortly.

Rorty's ironists, on the other hand, do not consider their vocabularies to be closer to "reality" or "the way things are out there" than other vocabularies. They believe that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed:

[They] do not see the search for a final vocabulary as (even in part) a way of getting something distinct from this vocabulary right. They do not take the point of discursive thought to be *knowing*, in any sense that can be explicated by notions like 'reality,' 'real essence,' 'objective point of view,' and 'the correspondence of language to reality' (Rorty 1989, 75).

They see the gap between truth and justification not as something to be bridged by isolating a natural and transcultural sort of rationality which can be used to criticize certain cultures and praise others, but simply as the gap between the actual good and the possible better (Rorty 1985, 5).

Throughout his critique of Rorty, Cleveland assumes that when Rorty relativizes distinctions, truths, and values to a particular language game or set of agreements about what is important, all of those distinctions, truths, and values become either arbitrary or unjustifiably biased. This is no surprise to Rorty, who asserts that "'Relativism' is the traditional epithet applied to pragmatism (his philosophy) by realists (Cleveland's philosophy)" (Rorty 1985, 5). He even outlines what he believes the term "relativism" most commonly refers to. He denies that his philosophy embraces either the view that "every belief is as good as every other," or the view that "'true' is an equivocal term, having as many meanings as there are procedures of justification" (Rorty 1985, 6). Rather, "relativism" in Rorty's terms simply means that "there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society--ours--uses in one or another area of inquiry" (*Ibid.*).

Rorty, however, offers a qualification of his theory of truth in regard to this final definition of relativism which he hesitates to call "relativity." He explains:

the pragmatist is not holding a positive theory which says that something is relative to something else. He is, instead, making the purely *negative* point that we should drop the traditional distinction between knowledge and opinion, construed as the distinction between truth as correspondence to reality and truth as a commendatory term

for well-justified beliefs.... [T]he pragmatist does not have a theory of truth, much less a relativistic one. As a partisan of solidarity, his account of the value of cooperative human inquiry has only an ethical base, not an epistemological or metaphysical one. Not having any epistemology, *a fortiori* he does not have a relativistic one (*Ibid.*).

Rorty is interested in dismissing the traditional notion of reason or rationality which is "conceived as a transcultural human ability to correspond to reality, a faculty whose possession and use is demonstrated by obedience to explicit criteria" (Rorty 1985, 11). Thus, when someone like Cleveland insists that he provide explicit criteria, principles, and foundations for his conception of liberalism and his distinctions between persuasion and force, Rorty would probably admit that his justification of these habits involves circularity. But his circularity would simply be an appeal to an agreed upon set of distinctions found within a particular language game, the language game of liberalism. Furthermore, he would insist that someone like Cleveland and his philosophical method would not be able to do any better. Thus, when Rorty describes the process of making distinctions in certain language games and then comments that "there is, to be sure, no neat way to draw the line between a cause of changed belief which was also a reason and one which was a 'mere' cause. But the distinction is no fuzzier than most" (Rorty 1989, 48), he is emphasizing the fact that the traditional method of making distinctions based on criteria ultimately fails to be clear-cut as well. Furthermore, this method actually serves to clarify little, if anything, in the long run because reasons are generally neutral between liberalism and whatever it is being compared to. By this I simply mean that if discussions are to take place on the level of arguments based on criteria and reasons, as Wittgenstein said in *On Certainty*, "I said I would 'combat' the other man--but wouldn't I give him *reasons*? Certainly; but how far do they go? At the end of reasons comes *persuasion*. (Think what happens when missionaries convert natives.)"

Rorty offers his alternative in a clear paragraph which reads:

The pragmatists' justification of toleration, free inquiry, and the quest for undistorted communication can only take the form of a comparison between societies which exemplify these habits and those which do not, leading up to the suggestion that nobody who has experienced both would prefer the latter. It is exemplified by Winston Churchill's defense of democracy as the worst form of government imaginable, except for all the others which have been tried so far. Such justification is not by reference to a criterion, but by reference to various detailed practical advantages. It is circular only in that the terms of praise used to describe liberal societies will be drawn from the vocabulary of the liberal societies themselves. (Rorty 1985, 11-12).

From Cleveland's perspective the shift from the application of criteria to the simple consideration of practical advantages offers no hope for liberalism or solidarity.

This pessimism is the result of his traditional notion of reason and relativity. Without the application of criteria, Rorty offers no ahistorical vantage point, no way to step outside of one's community and evaluate it in terms of that which transcends it, the powers of human reason. Thus, there is no way to endorse the habits and principles of liberalism; there is only relativity. I hope the previous discussion has shed some light on these views and Rorty's counter-assertion that

the realization that the world does not tell us what language games to play should not, however, lead us to say that a decision about which to play is arbitrary, nor to say that it is the expression of something deep within us (Rorty 1989, 6).

The next part of Rorty's response to Cleveland's accusations is tightly connected to the first, but centers on the notion of contingency. Contingency simply means that things can be otherwise. It is a double-edged sword, however, because in regard to history or past events, the manifestation of new ideas or descriptions is the product of chance, luck, accident, or randomness: thus Rorty's statement that "the idea of human solidarity is simply the fortunate happenstance creation of modern times" (Rorty 1989, 68). Yet in regard to the future, contingency focuses on the notions of novelty, innovation, originality, and creativity. This is the power and possibility of redescription. Thus, for the ironist, the ability to create social hope "is a matter of *weapons and luck*, not a matter of having truth on your side, or having detected the 'movement of history'" (Rorty 1989, 91, my italics).

Rorty's ironist is not most likely to be a Fascist ironist because "we have to start from where we are" (Rorty 1989, 63). We have to start with liberalism. Hence, building on his statement that "terms of praise used to describe liberal societies will be drawn from the vocabulary of the liberal societies themselves," Rorty says he thinks that

contemporary liberal society already contains the institutions for its own development.... Indeed, my hunch is that Western social and political thought may have had the last *conceptual* revolution it needs. J. S. Mill's suggestion that governments devote themselves to optimizing the balance between leaving people's private lives alone and preventing suffering seems to me pretty much the last word (Rorty 1989, 63).

Rorty goes on to explain that the ironist regards her final vocabulary of liberalism

as an ability and a desire which, like the ability to formulate differential equations, arose rather late in the history of humanity and is still a rather local phenomenon. It is associated primarily with Europe and America in the last three hundred years. It is not associated with any power larger than that embodied in a concrete historical situation, for example, the power of the rich European and

American democracies to disseminate their customs to other parts of the world, a power which was enlarged by certain past contingencies and has been diminished by certain more recent contingencies (Rorty 1989, 93).

Cleveland begins his argument by saying that

the liberal ironist is simply an ironist among whose basic, final beliefs is the belief in liberalism. The liberal ironist, being an ironist, realizes that the belief in liberalism cannot be defended in any deep way, but continues to hold on faithfully to it in light of this realization (Cleveland, 227).

He concludes by saying that

the positive moral of this story is that the serious liberal concerned with human solidarity and freedom cannot accept a contingent, in the sense of arbitrary or unjustifiably biased, distinction between persuasion and force. Liberalism limits concessions to contingency (Cleveland, 240).

What this brief discussion of contingency has revealed is the true nature of the word "final" in Rorty's redescription. The liberal ironist does not, as Cleveland seems to think, survey the world of politics, use the powers of human reason to stand above mere appearances, and then decide to support liberalism based on principles which are independent of the contingently existing social situation. Social influences determine which "final" vocabularies, habits, and values the ironists and everyone else taking part in a particular language inherit and are constructed of. But the novelty of the term "final" lies in the fact these vocabularies, habits, values, etc., are simply the products of historical circumstances which are open to redescription and hence are not "final" at all.

Richard Rorty and the rest of us living in the Western world have inherited the "final" vocabulary of liberalism. This is retrospective contingency. In his book entitled *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty takes advantage of contingency in terms of the ability to redescribe and offers a vision of human solidarity which accommodates both the ironists' quest for private perfection and the liberals' quest for social justice. In the section that follows, I reveal the final component of what I think Rorty's response to Cleveland would be. This response focuses on the fact that Rorty's redescription seeks to link irony and liberalism, not irony and fascism (as Cleveland might think), because liberalism, defined as belief that "cruelty is the worst thing we do" (Rorty 1989, xv), is the most beneficial for the ironist's endeavor of self-creation and private perfection.

According to Rorty, ironism results from a recognition of contingency and an awareness of the power of redescription. From these rather simple ideas, Rorty develops a notion of humiliation which serves as the link to solidarity. He explains that

most people do not want to be redescribed. They want to be taken in 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--the 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. Something like that presumably happens to a primitive culture when it is conquered by a more advanced one. The same sort of thing sometimes happens to nonintellectuals in the presence of intellectuals.... The redescribing ironist, by threatening one's final vocabulary, and thus one's ability to make sense of oneself in one's own terms rather than hers, suggests that one's self and one's world are futile, obsolete, *powerless*. Redescription often humiliates (Rorty 1989, 89-90).

Rorty goes on to note that redescription and possible humiliation are the mark of the intellectual in general, for both metaphysicians and ironist possess the same weapons.² The major difference between the two, however, is the fact that the metaphysician redescribes in the name of reason; s/he backs up his/her redescrptions with arguments. But this is of little help, for arguments are

neutral between liberalism and antiliberalism. Presumably the relevant difference is that to offer an argument in support of one's redescription amounts to telling the audience that they are being *educated*, rather than simply reprogrammed--that the Truth was already in them and merely needed to be drawn out into the light. Redescription which presents itself as uncovering the interlocutor's true self, or the real nature of a common public world which the speaker and the interlocutor share, suggests that the person being redescribed is being empowered, not having his power diminished.... The metaphysician, in short, thinks that there is a connection between redescription and power, and that the right redescription can make us free. The ironist offers no similar assurance. She has to say that our chances of freedom depend on historical contingencies which are only occasionally influenced by our self-redescrptions. She knows of no

² I apologize for the length of these quotes, but they contain the heart of Rorty's vision of solidarity and hence deserve the space.

power of the same size as the one with which the metaphysician claims acquaintance. When she claims that her redescription is better, she cannot give the term 'better' the reassuring weight that the metaphysician gives it when he explicates it as 'in better correspondence to reality.' So I conclude that what the ironist is being blamed for is not an inclination to humiliate, but an inability to empower.... She cannot claim that adopting her redescription of yourself or your situation makes you better able to conquer the forces which are marshaled against you. On her account, that ability is a matter of weapons and luck, not a matter of having truth on your side, or having detected the 'movement of history' (Rorty 1989, 90-91).

Rorty uses this notion of humiliation to link the ambitions of the ironist with those of the liberals. He considers Foucault to be a good example of an ironist who is interested in the pursuit of private perfection. When Foucault was confronted with attempts to build a philosophy around the needs of a democratic society (attempts made by liberals like Dewey and Habermas), his method consisted in pointing out

the drawbacks of this society, the ways in which it does *not* allow room for self-creation, for private projects. Like Habermas and Sellers, he accepts Mead's view that the self is a creation of society. Unlike them, he is not prepared to admit that the selves shaped by modern liberal societies are better than the selves earlier societies created (Rorty 1989, 63).

The conflict between Foucault and Rorty arises around these needed restraints. Foucault was good at

showing how the patterns of acculturation characteristic of liberal societies have imposed on their members kinds of constraints of which older, premodern societies had not dreamed. He is not, however, willing to see these constraints as compensated for by a decrease in pain.... My disagreement with Foucault amounts to the claim that this decrease does, in fact, compensate for those constraints (*Ibid.*).

How this compensation manifests itself will now be dealt with.
Rorty's ironist

thinks that the *only* redescriptions which serve liberal purposes are those which answer the question, 'What humiliates?', whereas the metaphysician also wants to answer the question, 'Why should I avoid humiliating?' The liberal metaphysician wants our *wish to be kind* to

be bolstered by an argument, one which entails a self-description which will highlight a common human essence, an essence which is something more than our shared ability to suffer humiliation.... [T]he liberal ironist just wants our *chances of being kind*, of avoiding the humiliation of others, to be expanded by redescription (Rorty 1989, 91).

This means that solidarity will not be found "out there" some where, but rather it must be created.

She thinks that recognition of a common susceptibility to humiliation is the *only* social bond that is needed. Whereas the metaphysician takes the morally relevant feature of other human beings to be their relation to a larger shared power--rationality, God, truth, or history, for example--the ironist takes the morally relevant definition of a person, a moral subject, to be 'something that can be humiliated.' Her sense of solidarity is based on a sense of common danger, not a common possession or a shared power (*Ibid.*).

On her conception, human solidarity is not a matter of sharing a common truth or a common goal, but of sharing a common selfish hope, the hope that one's world--the little things around which one has woven into one's **final** vocabulary--will not be destroyed (Rorty 1989, 92).

This is a very powerful and creative redescription of the historical contingencies presented to Rorty. Liberals want social justice. Ironists want private perfection. When one considers the power of humiliation, the sort described by Rorty involving language and final vocabularies, one can see that the constraints placed on a liberal society are no doubt beneficial. For those restraints (which Foucault was so against), if they actually decrease humiliation, allow each and every person the chance to redescribe him/herself in their own terms. Solidarity thus becomes the common hope that people will not be humiliated, will not be redescribed in a way which leaves them practically void of identity, feeling powerless, worn out, or obsolete. This allows autonomy to flourish as well, for with the elimination of humiliation, people are able and encouraged to redescribe themselves, to create their own final vocabularies. That is why Rorty says,

the liberal ironist needs as much imaginative acquaintance with alternative final vocabularies as possible, not just for her own edification, but in order to understand the actual and possible humiliation of the people who use these alternative final vocabularies (Rorty 1989, 92).

Conclusion

This paper began with an examination of Timothy Cleveland's argument against Rorty. From his perspective it appeared that without an argument based on the use of logic, reasons, criteria, foundations, etc., Rorty could not plausibly make a distinction between persuasion and force. Based on this problem, Cleveland went on to conclude that the most plausible ironist is actually a Fascist ironist. I hope that my defense of Rorty has highlighted the limits of Cleveland's argument. It should now be clear that he is working from the very tradition which Rorty is redescribing, and that he clings to notions of reason and relativity which are not a threat to Rorty's redescription. Further, he fails to display an understanding of the notion of contingency and hence places a negative value on words like 'arbitrary' or 'unjustifiably biased.' Finally, he fails to see that Rorty's redescription involves a notion of solidarity which links the two historical contingencies of irony and liberalism.

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