

Pluralism and Relativism in Richard Rorty's Liberal Utopia

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An Overview of Rorty's Liberal Utopia

Richard Rorty is one of the high priests of postmodernity in America. Once a leading analytic philosopher, Rorty abandoned the modernist quest for absolute truth and certainty, and cast in his lot in the company of those who affirmed a postmodernist world in which all truth is relative. Although Rorty does not evidence religious commitments, his relativist thought has provided a conceptual framework that is foundational for many contemporary religious pluralists and relativists.¹ Rorty articulates his perspective most thoroughly in his key work *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.² Rorty's central theses may be summarized in the following three affirmations:

1. Truth is relative; there are no objective truths or absolutes. There are no "metanarratives" or eternal truths. Postmodern thinkers assume that while there may be a real world out there, we can never know anything about it with certainty. They deny that truth is "out there" as something to be discovered, and claim that all truth is relative to the observer.

Richard Rorty is particularly concerned to deny or dismiss the truth of Christianity, asserting that we live in a "post-theological" age in which every "trace of divinity" is removed:

[The postmodernist doctrine of historicism] has helped free us, gradually but steadily, from theology and metaphysics—from the temptation to look for an escape from time and chance. . . . [T]he novel, the movie,

¹ For example, William Doty agrees with Lynda Sexson that "we must fabricate, make up our sacred stories as we go along. . . . [W]e do make/create ourselves. . . . we are indeed goddesses and gods insofar as we repeatedly determine the Enframings toward which and through which everyday realities are experienced and reenvisioned" William G. Doty, *Picturing Cultural Values in Postmodern America* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 28.

² Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

and the TV program have gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress.³

Utopian politics sets aside questions about both the will of God and the nature of man and dreams of creating a hitherto unknown form of society.⁴

[O]nce upon a time we felt a need to worship something which lay beyond a visible world . . . [Now] we try to get to the point where we no longer worship *anything*, where we treat *nothing* as a quasi divinity, where we treat *everything*—our language, our conscience, our community—as a product of time and chance.⁵

[The liberal utopia] would be one in which no trace of divinity remained, either in the form of a divinized world or a divinized self It would drop, or drastically reinterpret, not only the idea of holiness but those of “devotion to truth” and of “fulfillment of the deepest needs of the spirit.” The process of de-divinization . . . would ideally culminate in our no longer being able to see any use for the notion that finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings might derive the meanings of their lives from anything except other finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings.⁶

Rorty is cognizant, however, that earlier thinkers such as Nietzsche and Derrida were self-referentially inconsistent in asserting that they knew there was no truth. This is the relativist predicament—to affirm absolutely that all things are relative is to affirm that at least this one principle is not relative but absolute.⁷ Rorty’s solution for the relativist dilemma is to claim that he is relatively sure (but not positive) that all truth claims are relative. So while he asserts that “[t]ruth cannot be out there—cannot exist independently of the human mind,” he nonetheless maintains that “[t]o say that we should drop the idea of truth out there waiting to be discovered is not to say that we have discovered that, out there, there is no truth.”⁸ For Rorty, describing something as true is nothing more than “an empty compliment,” and thus “our purposes would be served best by ceasing to see truth as a deep matter, as a topic of philosophical interest”⁹

³ Ibid., xiii, xvi. The postmodern doctrine of historicism (or radical contingency) is essentially that all our present decisions are determined by prior events.

⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁵ Ibid., 22.

⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁷ Ibid., 8, 46.

⁸ Ibid., 5, 8.

⁹ Ibid., 8.

Rorty is a moderate postmodernist in that he believes that the French deconstructionists went too far in denying referential language. If terms did not have an abiding sense of meaning, we would not “get” the double entendres and plays on words of postmodernists. Rorty even acknowledges that the radical postmodern use of language is parasitic in that “[a] language which was ‘all metaphor’ would be a language which had no use, hence not a language but just babble.”¹⁰ But Rorty shares the postmodernist presupposition that all language consciously or unconsciously furthers some political agenda, and thus all truth claims are not objective but are driven by self-interested motivations.

2. There is no essential human nature; humans are the contingent products of time and chance. According to Rorty, there is no underlying human nature. For the most part, we are determined by our genetic, social, economic, and psychological background. Rorty asserts that “[O]ur language and our culture are as much a contingency, as much a result of thousands of small mutations finding niches (and millions of others finding no niches), as are the orchids and the anthropoids.”¹¹ Rorty recognizes that “[t]he very idea that the world or the self has an intrinsic nature—one which the physicist or the poet may have glimpsed—is a remnant of the idea that the world is a divine creation”¹² He joins those who deny “that there is such a thing as ‘human nature’ or the ‘deepest level of the self,’” and views discussions about “the nature of man” as “an unprofitable topic.”¹³

Rorty dares to extend this notion of radical contingency to biblical inspiration:

. . . for all we know, or should care, Aristotle's metaphorical use of *ousia*, Saint Paul's metaphorical use of *agape*, and Newton's metaphorical use of *gravitas*, were the results of cosmic rays scrambling the fine structure of some crucial neurons in their respective brains. Or, more plausibly, they were the result of some odd episodes in infancy—some obsessional kinks left in these brains by idiosyncratic traumata.¹⁴

Obviously, postmodernists such as Rorty do not take adequate account of the fact that not all knowledge claims come from fallible, contingent humans—in Scripture we have truth revealed by an omniscient God.

¹⁰ Ibid., 41.

¹¹ Ibid., 16. This quote manifests the doctrine of historicism referenced earlier in the paper.

¹² Ibid., 21.

¹³ Ibid., viii, 8.

¹⁴ Ibid., 17.

3. In the absence of absolute truth, moral absolutes, essential human nature, and Western logic, Rorty dreams of a liberal utopia with an ethic which maximizes freedom and human solidarity and minimizes pain.

If we are merely contingent products of time and chance, we can make no truly moral choices, and postmodernists cannot offer moral prescriptions. William Doty acknowledges that “one cannot preach ‘Just say no!’” if all values are contingent and transcendental ideals or deities are no longer thought to exist somewhere to give them birth.¹⁵ How can anyone be morally accountable when we are helpless pawns in the hands of chance circumstances? Rorty asserts that “the distinction between morality and prudence, and the term ‘moral’ itself, are no longer very useful.”¹⁶

Rather than imposing moral absolutes on people, Rorty urges us to simply re-describe terms repeatedly until we somehow achieve a sense of social solidarity. These re-descriptions should be understood as pragmatic compromises, however, not as moral absolutes. A Rorty-like postmodernist asks not, “What is right?” but “Why do you talk that way?”¹⁷ Endless discussion and persuasion take the place of deductive logic and the correspondence theory of truth.

The liberal utopia which Rorty envisions is a rather conflicting mixture of socialism with regard to national issues and libertarianism with regard to individual freedoms. Rorty endorses democracy, particularly because of his concern for those on the margins of society. But in fact his appeal is almost exclusively to the educated elite. While he speaks of using persuasion to achieve his political ends, his view of persuasion appears to be a one way street which does not allow for the possibility that he might be persuaded by conservative values. Rorty is among the postmodernists who appear to hold in contempt the mainstream, traditional values of “middle Americans.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Doty, 2.

¹⁶ Rorty, 48.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁸ For example, William Doty, a faculty member in a university in the Deep South, voices this contempt for middle American beliefs and values: “Traditional religious conservatives will surely reject such an approach, arguing from hierarchical perspectives such as medieval Christendom that only a single deity worshiped within a single parochial form of religiosity deserves worshipful attention. . . . [W]hile [we] operate in parts of the country where such perspectives still represent the majority viewpoint, [we] operate out of a much more open-ended, pluralistic, even occasionally polytheistic perspective” (Doty, 32). He delights in the fact that in professional academic meetings such as the American Academy of Religion, the views of religious studies professors would shock middle American religious beliefs: “The AAR’s annual meetings . . . offer such a gamut of presentations as might astonish middle-American assumptions about what ‘religion’ entails. Recently I have noted papers on spiritual aspects of male masturbation, gnostic recognition of feminine power, womanist reconstructions of

Rather than truth or morality, Rorty wants to make freedom “the goal of thinking and of social progress.”¹⁹ Rorty wants to maximize freedom especially for ironist poets who incarnate the highest ideals of his liberal utopia, while he desires socialism in the public arena. Rorty argues that individuals should be given the maximum amount of freedom to pursue their own individual fantasies. The only limit he puts on such fantasizing is when it carries over into actual acts of cruelty.

An Evaluation of Rorty's Ethic

I have spent much of my adult life ministering as a pastor and hospital chaplain to people of diverse ethnic, religious, and economic backgrounds in the grip of pain, suffering, and unspeakable tragedy. At least the contingencies of my experience lead me to agree, then, with Richard Rorty when he asserts that we should see “traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation.”²⁰ All humans are appropriate objects of moral concern. I affirm all other persons as fellow sufferers, and abhor discrimination which leads to pain for anyone. Rorty's description of the Christian rejection of ethical ethnocentrism expresses well my own beliefs:

It is part of the Christian idea of moral perfection to treat everyone, even the guards at Auschwitz or in the Gulag, as a fellow sinner. For Christians, sanctity is not achieved as long as obligation is felt more strongly to one child of God than another; invidious contrasts are to be avoided on principle.²¹

Of course, this ideal of eliminating cruelty is often not realized in the real world.

But although we may agree about the ideal end of eliminating pain and humiliation (and, for that matter, who but a sadomasochist would not?), I want to raise six concerns with Rorty's account: (1) its inappropriate proposed means, (2) its lack of a clearly-defined motive, (3) its lack of conceptual clarity, (4) its internal inconsistency, (5) its anthropological confusion, and (6) the vagueness of its practical application.

African-American literature, and gay/lesbian spirituality At least in professional academic religious studies, the sky's the limit, and nothing remains taboo any longer” (Doty, 16).

¹⁹ Rorty, xiii.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 192.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 191.

1. The Means to the End of Solidarity. The means Rorty suggests to achieve solidarity seem quite problematic. Rorty appears to want his cake and eat it too; for while he rejects religious and secular ethical universalism, he also urges us to “try to extend our sense of ‘we’ to people whom we have previously thought of as ‘they’”—indeed, he describes this imperative as being “characteristic of liberals.”²² Rorty is both affirming and denying ethical universalism, rejecting the ideal of ethical universalism and yet urging us to live by it. This appears to be very confused, if not contradictory.

Perhaps we could rescue Rorty by asserting that the “we-group” method is but a pragmatic means to achieve the ideal of ethical universalism. Rorty is right, I believe, in recognizing that we do in fact often take more seriously the pain of our own in-group. An earthquake in our hometown rivets our attention, while an earthquake in another area of the world where we know no one may evoke only nominal interest from many of us. So Rorty may be descriptively correct when he asserts that we tend to build we-groups from the bottom up. We may indeed be more likely to feel solidarity when we say, “No American should live without hope,” than we would if we said, “No human should live without hope.”²³ But we should deplore this ethnocentrism rather than exalt it. Such a circuitous move seems to me to be a self-defeating methodology, like going from Chicago to China in order to get to Houston. Why not simply make Houston our goal, and set out toward it (rather than in the opposite direction)? That is, why not confront ethnocentrism and proclaim ethical universalism forthrightly? Will the means of ethical ethnocentrism lead to ethical universalism? Probably not. The best means toward our shared goal would seem to be a means consistent with our shared end.

2. The Motive for Avoiding Cruelty. We may share Rorty’s concern that mere reason or duty (i.e. Kantian motives) are incomplete motives without a corresponding sense of solidarity or benevolence. Without love or compassion, our motive is not pure. But what motive does Rorty offer us to feel solidarity with those who suffer? I could not find a clearly stated motive. But Rorty explicitly rejects what would appear to be his most obvious ally and a powerful motive against cruelty, the Judeo-Christian ethic of love (and its secular corollary, Kantian ethical universalism)—that all persons have inherent value and that the pain of one of us hurts us all. Rorty acknowledges that from a Christian perspective, an ethnocentric ethic is “deplorable,”²⁴ but Rorty is not willing to call this imperative of ethical universalism a moral obligation

²² *Ibid.*, 192.

²³ *Ibid.*, 190-91.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 191.

in any meaningful sense. Rorty cannot even agree with the humble proposal of Bernard Williams that moral obligation is not merely the invention of philosophers but the “outlook, or, incoherently, part of the outlook, of almost all of us.”²⁵ Rorty suggests that moral obligation is an urge primarily felt only by sophisticated Westerners, and that even for us it is merely one obligation among others, with no automatic priority over our private lives.²⁶ Perhaps he fears to acknowledge this universal obligation because he rejects any essential human nature.

I assert that delimiting moral obligation to Western culture is the grossest form of elitism, reflecting a paternalistic attitude toward non-Western cultures (which in most cases are shocked by the immorality of Western culture). Further, making moral obligation as one obligation among others which can be easily dismissed in private life is simply to make it something it is not. Rejecting moral first principles, such as making the Ten Commandments into ten suggestions, is simply to confuse what they are. To treat a snarling tiger as you would your own pet cat would be a huge category mistake, and so is ignoring objective ethical imperatives.

At any rate, what rational or affective motive does Rorty have to offer to convince Sartre that hell is really not other people, or to convince Nietzsche that he should rethink his cruel will to power? Why arbitrarily dismiss the most obvious reason for human solidarity—that we all share an essential humanity? Rorty's assertion that there is no core essence of humanity or personhood, but we are only victims of the contingencies of our lives, leaves little room for an inherent value of persons. Why value that which has no inherent value? Without a strong compelling motive, there will be no solidarity.

3. Lack of Conceptual Clarity regarding Cruelty. If Rorty understands the principal imperative of solidarity to be the elimination of cruelty, which in turn is defined as the elimination of pain and humiliation, there would seem a conceptual problem about the precise definition of cruelty. From a strictly logical perspective, the only way to guarantee the elimination of pain and humiliation is suicide. Could Rorty be borrowing from the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, in which to exist is to suffer, and the only way to avoid suffering is to go out of existence?

Presumably, Rorty is not recommending mass suicide. But just when would he advocate pain and humiliation? Might there be situations in which inflicting pain and humiliation is justifiable? Undergoing a surgery involves both pain and humiliation, but it has a good end. Benching the star football running back might humiliate him, but it might bring out his best effort in the next game. What about the sadomasochists

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 193-94.

who have purported pleasure in the pain they seek in the torture chambers of San Francisco? And what of cases when pain and humiliation stand against each other, such that to avoid pain is to cause humiliation, and to avoid humiliation is to cause pain? Rorty may argue that his end is not the elimination of pain and humiliation, but of cruelty. If so, it would seem that at least he has a lot of work to do in defining just what cruelty is. One person's cruelty is another person's kindness, and sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind.

4. Internal Consistency regarding Human Nature. The concern about logical consistency arises from Rorty's persistent rejection of a human essence or a human nature. Despite Rorty's admission that the religious vision of all persons as children of God has "done an enormous amount of good,"²⁷ he is eager to jettison this misdirected benevolence. His principal reason for rejecting the contributions of Christianity and the Enlightenment is that they commit the great sin of clinging to beliefs about the existence of truth and an underlying human nature. Rorty goes so far as to claim to recognize no essential difference between a person, a dog, and a robot.²⁸ He seems quite ready to sacrifice arguably the greatest source of benevolence in human history on the altar of his ideology.

But does Rorty really believe his denial of any human nature or essence? If there truly is no difference in essence between persons, dogs, and robots, then to what might these terms refer? Such natureless, essenceless beings would seem to be too amorphous to recognize when we saw them. Obviously, there are clearly defined differences (at least in chemical makeup) between these three entities. If persons have no essence, how can we know with whom to have solidarity or on whom to show compassion? Or, for that matter, how can the *self* of each of us have solidarity with other selves if *selves* do not exist? Rorty creates an anthropological dilemma for himself similar to that of Buddhism in which we are urged to feel compassion for those who suffer, while at the same time denying in the doctrine of *anatta* that any such suffering being really exists.

Despite his denials, however, Rorty seems to have something essential clearly in mind when he references human life. He defines humanity as pain experiencers, so being sensate must be at the essence of personhood. He describes humans as capable of fantasy, so imagination

²⁷ Ibid., 195.

²⁸ Specifically, Rorty argues that his proposal "is incompatible with the idea that there is a 'natural' cut in the spectrum of similarities and differences which spans the difference between you and a dog, or you and one of Asimov's robots—a cut which marks the end of the rational beings and the beginning of the nonrational ones, the end of moral obligation and the beginning of benevolence." Ibid., 192.

must be an element of personhood. He speaks of preserving private freedom, so will or freedom must be included in the essence of personhood. He speaks of feelings of benevolence, so emotion and/or conscience must be essential to personhood. Although Rorty criticizes those who assert that rationality is essential to personhood, his writing utilizes reason and requires reason to be comprehended—so rationality must indeed be an essential characteristic of at least some persons. He asserts that reading novels will curb those who fantasize in private from acting out their fantasies; thus he apparently has an incredibly optimistic view of human nature. So Rorty seems to be talking about humans as sensate, imaginative, free, emotional, rational beings with an optimistic view of human nature not unlike that of Rousseau. How much more essence would anyone want? There appears to be a logical inconsistency in that his viewpoint presupposes the very reality he consistently denies.

5. Anthropological Confusion. Besides the anthropological confusion caused by Rorty's denial of an essential human nature, there appears to be an irresolvable conflict in his thought between viewing humans as contingent (with their choices radically determined by their genetic, economic, social, and psychological circumstances) and as radically free. How can we be both free and contingent? Rorty, like many liberals, is burdened with an overly optimistic view of human nature in which people will do right if they are properly educated or persuaded. Such an optimistic anthropology does not take adequate account of human sinfulness.

The philosophy of government which Rorty proposes for his liberal utopia also appears to present an irresolvable tension between maximizing personal freedom on the one hand and maximizing government control on the other. Can people be maximally free in a socialist society? This public-private tension is a fissure which runs through Rorty's system.

6. Impracticality of Application. Rorty's proposals are sketched in such a broad outline that it is difficult to imagine precisely how they would carry over into any given ethical issue. When we attempt such a pragmatic maneuver, we often get unsatisfactory results. One of Rorty's principal aims is to secure private fantasy without causing public cruelty. He recommends reading novels such as *Lolita* and *1984* to facilitate private fantasies without leading to public acts of cruelty. We could all hope that requiring sexual predators to read novels would stop them from acting out their fantasies, but we all know that it will likely not turn out that way. A woman who is the object of a man's private fantasies can sense this in his gaze, even if he does not consciously and overtly act out his fantasy. Is it reasonable to think that he can keep his fantasies to himself, or is it not more probable that his obsession will carry over into

practice? If a clinically diagnosed pedophile ex-convict who lived next door began befriending Rorty's young daughter, would he be content to give his neighbor a copy of *Lolita*, or would he attempt more stringent means? Obviously, Rorty has proposed an ethic that simply will not work in real life.

Just how pragmatically effective does Rorty's rather vague concept of solidarity play out in real ethical issues? It would be interesting to observe how Rorty would apply his principles on the bioethics committee of the urban hospital on which I serve. How would his principles apply in the case of a conscious quadriplegic who desires to have his life support system removed? Would he favor abortion and euthanasia because they reduce pain and humiliation? If Rorty is unclear about the difference in essence between persons, dogs, and robots, how could he possibly make such decisions? I believe that Rorty might profit from having to struggle with such real life bioethics issues. Such experiences might bring him down from his fantasies of a liberal utopia into the real world.

If Rorty's relativist thought is this unworkable and unrealistic with regard to ethics, it is not a sound foundation for religious pluralism. Relativism is the logical foundation of pluralism, and it is fundamentally flawed. With a cracking logical foundation, religious pluralism cannot stand the tests of time or truth.