

1. *Introduction*

In what follows I shall highlight, and possibly release, a tension at the heart of a Rortian approach to ethics, which is but an instance of his wider metaphilosophical views about what, if anything, can philosophy contribute to life. The tension I have in mind is the one between our activities of description and redescription of ourselves and others, and the resistance to them by those involved or even by ourselves at later times. To what extent are we allowed, even encouraged, to find ever new terms and metaphors to account for ourselves and others? To what extent our redescriptions can be liberating and empowering or rather detrimental and debasing to the sense of self of the subjects associated with such vocabularies? If, in a post-metaphysical culture of the kind Rorty powerfully envisioned in his writings all long, there is nothing absolute in the world or in ourselves to be properly accounted for, how to adjust our words and expressions accordingly and at all? If you will, this is a standard concern having to do with the nature and place of normativity and normative considerations, which intransigent anti-foundational programs such as Rorty's need to address if they don't want to run the risk to slip themselves into authoritarian modalities of individual and social control. In order to avoid the cruelty and humiliation potentially involved in not taking people in their own terms, I shall claim, we should internally check, enrich, and eventually revise the ironist attitude and program.

2. *Linguistic Moral Beings*

In his moral and political writings, Rorty advanced a forceful criticism to the idea according to which, in learning how to treat ourselves and each other, we need to refer to some alleged essence shared by all the relevant «us» – which eventually got deposited in such notions as dignity or human rights. Rorty was rather skeptical of the use of universalistic notions across the board, and thought that we would be very much better

off dropping them altogether and start paying attention to the manifold microscopic relationships we are ever capable to establish with one another¹. Instead of such empty metaphysical placeholders, which force is merely psychological and to which hardly anything practical is attached – or at least not any more² –, Rorty invites us to rethink moral and political care as a matter of making the thousand little differences between us uninteresting. In *Ethics without Principles* he writes:

Pragmatists suggest that we simply give up the philosophical search for commonality. They think that moral progress might be accelerated if we focused instead on our ability to make the particular little things that divide us seem unimportant – not by comparing them with the one big thing that unites us but comparing them with other little things. Pragmatism thinks of moral progress as more like sewing together a very large, polychrome quilt, than like getting a clearer view of something true and deep³.

This shift from communality to particularity is facilitated by nurturing a sense of self as centerless and mobile, which would allow us and tempt us to inhabit alternative identities and communities. This anti-metaphysical stance is all the more effective when cashed out as the result of the acknowledgment that we, individually and collectively, cannot help but tell stories about who we are and keep updating them via redescriptions of what matters most to us and what bothers us in the first place. For Rorty, there would be nothing deep down in ourselves or in the world of which we should take notice at pains of being epistemologically and morally deficient, but rather there are more or less congenial ways of describing and redescribing our practical attachments and detachments. The vertical, «traditional metaphors of depth or height» are to be replaced with horizontal «metaphors of breadth and extent»⁴.

¹ See, for example, R. Rorty, *Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality*, in Id., *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 167-185; and Id., *Justice as a Larger Loyalty*, in Id., *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers, Volume 4*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 42-55.

² Rorty saves the Marxists and the Catholics as the only ones, in the West, still capable to genuinely attach anything to the idea of a larger framework making sense of their lives. Still, he has many reservations about the opportunity of both as they eventually externalize accountability, responsibility, and their very interests to agencies – the Church, the Party – making reference to non-human realities. See, for example, R. Rorty, *Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism*, in Id., *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, pp. 27-41.

³ R. Rorty, *Ethics without Principles*, in Id., *Philosophy and Social Hope*, London, Penguin, 1999, pp. 86.

⁴ *Ibidem*. Rorty adds that «this switch from metaphors of vertical distance to metaphors of horizontal extent ties in with the pragmatists' insistence on replacing traditional distinctions of kind with distinctions in degree of complexity» (*Ibidem*, p. 83).

This is a consequence, among other things, of the linguistic turn Rorty enthusiastically endorsed and contributed to popularize, according to which language is pervasive and goes all the way down ourselves and the world⁵. According to this picture, there would not be faithful or inaccurate ways of accounting for how things really are, but rather only vocabularies which work for a particular purpose and at given times and those which do not, or at least not anymore. Rorty calls for a reconfiguration of philosophical and moral investigations across the board: the metaphysical «what is?» question gets replaced with the practical «what if?» question, with language embodying the best tool through which we can imagine and foretell the consequences of such hypotheses. Experience – first-hand or mediated alike – has the tendency to, and runs the risk of, hardening and stiffening into dogma in its seemingly conclusive reference to what is felt, even when reworked through psychoanalysis or critical theory. Language is, according to Rorty, less prone to such petrification, as per its inbuilt social and shared nature⁶. As we shall see, the danger of, and with, language might rather turn to be the opposite one of moral distance and violence.

Still, philosophers put a magic spell on such notions as rights, principles or obligations for us to rely on, even if the latter often proved to hinder rather than facilitate our moral lives when severed from the whirl of human activities they were supposed to be promoting in the first place. Rorty claims that there is nothing in our moral philosophies that we ordinary beings did not put ourselves through strokes of experimentations, thus rehearsing Dewey's idea that principles and theories are at best reminders we have elaborated at earlier times and which we should keep from solidifying into stable and unquestionable algorithms⁷. Rorty speaks in this

⁵ See the three editorial introductions by Rorty to the landmark volume *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method, with Two Retrospective Essays*, edited by R. Rorty, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1992, pp. 1-39, 361-374. For an two equally informative accounts of Rorty's Wittgensteinian and Brandomian primacy of the linguistic, see his *Representation, Social Practice, and Truth*, in Id., *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume 1*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 151-161; and *Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the Reification of Language*, in Id. *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers Volume 2*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 50-65.

⁶ A subtle criticism of Rorty's priority of the linguistic is C. Koopman, *Rorty's Linguistic Turn: Why (More Than) Language Matters to Philosophy*, in «Contemporary Pragmatism», 8 (2011), no. 1, pp. 61-84.

⁷ See, e.g., J. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, in Id., *The Middle Works of John Dewey, Volume 14: 1922*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois Press, 1983, pp. 164-170. For a sympathetic correction of the Rortian impression that this shift would eventually put moral philosophy (as we knew it) out of business, see J. Schneewind, *Rorty on Utopia and Moral Philosophy*, in Randall E. Auxier and Lewis E. Hahn (eds.), *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, Chicago, Open Court, 2010, pp. 477-505.

respect of a Cartesian fallacy affecting our philosophical picture of norms and rules, consisting in the «seeing of axioms where there are only shared habits, of viewing statements which summarize such practices as if they reported constraints enforcing such practices»⁸. Moral philosophy would then consist of a set of historically tested tools and devices in need of a continuous update, and not in a resting place where to find metaphysical or rational comfort. Rorty writes:

To say that moral principles have no inherent nature is to imply that they have no distinctive source. They emerge from our encounters with our surroundings in the same way that hypotheses about planetary motion, codes of etiquette, epic poems, and all our other patterns of linguistic behavior emerge. Like these other emergents, they are good insofar as they lead to good consequences, not because they stand in some special relation either to the universe or to the human mind⁹.

In this post-foundational, conversational context, key moral issues become questions about the practical identity one is ready to assume and commit to, rather than a matter of moral directives or punishments according to more or less fixed codes. If this is the case, then, philosophy's task should not be that of sorting out which one morality one should be endorsing by referencing to such alleged codes, but rather to illustrate how different identities are live options for us and our community, showing the consequences of their endorsement. According to this picture, a literary as opposed to a metaphysical culture offers us suggestions of what we might have been, what we might become, and what might have gone wrong all along.

In *Redemption from Egotism: James and Proust as Spiritual Exercises*, Rorty praises novels – fictional and non-fictional alike – alongside with ethnographic work, journalism, as well as intellectual history for giving us ever new occasions to encounter human possibilities as opposed to non-human reality. These imaginative and descriptive activities

let us know how people quite unlike ourselves think of themselves, how they contrive to put actions that appall us in a good light, how they give their lives meaning. The problem of how to live our own lives then becomes a problem of how to balance our needs against theirs, and their self-descriptions against ours. To have a more educated, developed and sophisticated moral outlook is to be able to grasp more of these needs, and to understand more of these self-descriptions¹⁰.

⁸ R. Rorty, *Solidarity or Objectivity?*, in Id., *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 26.

⁹ R. Rorty, *Kant vs. Dewey: The Current Situation of Moral Philosophy*, in Id., *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, p. 192.

¹⁰ R. Rorty, *Redemption from Egotism: James and Proust as Spiritual Exercises*, in «Telos», 3 (2001), no. 3, pp. 248.

Rorty then draws a distinction between literary texts and religious and philosophical ones – where the latter is, of course, the representative of the philosophical culture he aims at displacing –, suggesting how it is the former which is best suited for making us aware of the contingency of the position we currently occupy and from which we deliberate. This is a matter of self-description – and hence of identities-building – and, as such, it involves our own imaginative capacity to review the sense of what is relevant for us at a particular time, which we can indeed fail by our own lights and eventually disown. The opposite stance, that is the one vindicated by those whose self-descriptions are taken as definitive and optimal, bothers Rorty inasmuch as it portrays our moral standpoints as a given to unearth rather than as a result of a work of the self on the self. Says Rorty:

People read religious scriptures and philosophical treatises to escape from ignorance of how non-human things are, but they read novels to escape from egotism. «Egotism», in the sense in which I am using the term, does not mean «selfishness». It means something more like «self-satisfaction». It is a willingness to assume that one already has all the knowledge necessary for deliberation, all the understanding of the consequences of a contemplated action that could be needed. It is the idea that one is now fully informed, and thus in the best possible position to make correct choices¹¹.

Taking literature as a model of redemption from this unfortunate crave for certainty, the very axis of concern of moral philosophy would better shift from truth-seeking to path-opening, and the privileged direction along which Rorty cashed out this alternative picture was the emphasis on imaginative redescription as a key moral activity: that is, the ironic idea according to which we can (and should) start talking about ourselves and the world in ever new ways so to endow us with radically different energies from those granted to us by the environment, institutions, and hence inherited vocabularies we currently live by. This is, in fact, the road to any viable and desirable moral progress, as it replaces, in good pragmatist fashion, the search for the ultimate ground with a quest for unbroken renovation.

In the widely discussed *Feminism and Pragmatism*, Rorty reinforces the point by relating moral progress to the open quest for redescription, insisting on the opportunity to get rid of the egotistic presumption:

Taking seriously the idea of as yet unrealized possibilities, and of as yet unrecognized moral abominations resulting from failure to envisage those possibilities, requires one to take seriously the suggestion that we do not presently

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 250.

have the logical space necessary for adequate moral deliberation [...]. But this means to revising our conception of moral progress. We have to stop talking about the need to go from distorted to undistorted perception of moral reality, and instead talk about the need to modify our practices so as to take account of new descriptions of what has been going on¹².

Moral and political discourse, on this score, becomes a matter of ethnocentric appeals to the communities with which we identify via historical narratives instead of appeals to «skyhooks» transcending and bypassing ordinary encounters with fellow humans.

3. *Irony and Metaphysics*

Identities-shaping and redescription, I have been claiming, are depicted by Rorty as primary moral activities, and yet, on a closer look, we should not underestimate the tension and hence the trouble inbuilt in their coupling. If in fact, on the one hand, we should replace the foundational rhetoric of principles and rights with practical redescrptions of our self-identities, on the other the latter redescriptive activities can indeed hurt the delicate balance out of which we arrive at defining who we are. Redescription being an attempt at definition, it can be resisted by those who get redescrbed, that is defined.

In order to profitably handle this issue, Rorty insists on quite different modalities of redescription and definition. If the goal to be in touch with reality is but a desire to escape language, the significant difference, for Rorty, becomes between those – the metaphysicians – who think that their vocabulary is *final*, as in referring to the something which has a real essence, and those – the ironists – who take their vocabulary as helplessly *contingent*, as it voices the felt importance of the day:

The metaphysician is still attached to common sense, in that he does not question the platitudes which encapsulate the use of a given, final vocabulary, and in particular the platitude which says there is a single permanent reality to be found behind the many temporary appearances. He does not redescrbe but, rather, analyzes old descriptions with the help of other old descriptions [...]. Common sense [...] is the watchword of those who unselfconsciously describe everything important in terms of the final vocabulary to which they and those around them are habituated. To be commonsensical is to take for granted that statements formulated in that final vocabulary suffice to describe and judge the beliefs, actions, and lives of those who employ alternative final vocabularies.

¹² R. Rorty, *Feminism and Pragmatism*, in Id., *Truth and Progress*, p. 206.

The ironist spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game. She worries that the process of socialization which turned her into a human being by giving her a language may have given her the wrong language, and so turned her into the wrong kind of human being. But she cannot give a criterion for wrongness. So, the more she is driven to articulate her situation in philosophical terms, the more she reminds herself of her rootlessness¹³.

While the stories that the metaphysician tells herself about herself and others aspire to be final, the ones of the ironist are admittedly tentative, almost provocative. By advising the opportunity of the ironist sensibility and approach, Rorty prevents redescriptions from turning into impositions, and yet it runs the opposite risk of eroding the efforts at self-definition of those who are struggling to redefine themselves for the good. The point, here, is to what extent this rootlessness goes all the way down, and to what extent can we be living – and living *together* – with this ironic sense of self and identity¹⁴.

Rortian irony, it has to be noticed, is not simply contingency, but rather the acknowledgment that one might be equally impressed by alien possibilities she does not endorse – but which she eventually might. The ironist not only considers herself and her own vocabulary as contingent and mobile, but she is also radical and ever dubious about how to best account for herself, given her fascination with alternative ones which cannot be resolved through the reference to any neutral meta-language¹⁵. This translate into the impatience with sedimented vocabularies, and the sitting uncomfortably with what Kuhn called «normal discourse»¹⁶. So, there would then more to irony than contingency – that is the simpler and less radical idea according to which we change and shift point of view given to historical and personal conditions and conditionings –, and this more is indeed what can turn out to be problematic in our redescriptive activities.

¹³ R. Rorty, *Private Irony and Liberal Hope*, in Id., *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 75.

¹⁴ Let me notice, in passing, a further, related tension, in the Rortian approach to moral matters, between the praising of, and reservations for, the common and the communal. It is an open question if Rorty's concern for the methodological individualism at the heart of contractualism – quintessentially represented by the Rawls of *A Theory of Justice* (1971) and later revised if not abandoned in his *Political Liberalism* (1994) – is convergent with the «communitarian» emphasis on shared practices and upbringing. See R. Rorty, *The Priority of Democracy over Philosophy*, in Id., *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 175-196.

¹⁵ For a finest account, criticism, and use of Rortian irony, see R. Bernstein, *Ironic Life*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2016, pp. 25-53.

¹⁶ The influence of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) on Rorty's understanding of changes in vocabulary pervades Rorty's masterpiece *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) and remained a key reference throughout his work.

4. *Private Redescriptions and Public Identities*

Rorty maintains, as we have been seeing, that one's identity and sense of self should be a matter of personal redescription, giving up in this way banisters imposed from without, and yet the idea of a context, background, and community of reference is central to the kind of redescription that we give of ourselves. According to Rorty, the shaping of one's identity and sense of self is deeply entwined with the way we account for ourselves, and this is often a collective effort of moral and political significance. It is indeed a quest for a «community without commonality», as we might say. This is the working idea behind Rorty's equation of identities-formation with the activity of moral redescription. Rorty presents feminism – that is one among the most important embodiments of social struggle for recognition of the past and present century – as hinged on the task to securing accounts of oneself which are representative with the sense of self-identity. He writes that

To find one's moral identity in being a X means being able to do the following sort of thing: make your Xness salient in your justification of important uncoerced choices, make your Xness an important part of the story you tell yourself when you need to recover your self-confidence, make your relations with other X's central to your claim to be a responsible person [...]. What a human being is, for moral purposes, is largely a matter of how he or she describes himself or herself. We have to take seriously the idea that what you experience yourself to be is largely a function of what it makes sense to describe yourself as in the languages you are able to use¹⁷.

Rorty stresses the importance of getting semantic authority over oneself, which can be acquired through the inventive participation to a shared practice. Successful such practices would eventually break into recognition so to legitimize and strengthen their associates. Talking about how oppressed groups might secure a language and hence a sense of themselves, Rorty interestingly opposes a realist picture of self-constitution to a pragmatist one:

Someone who takes the passage I quoted from Dewey seriously [«In philosophy, "reality" is a term of value or choice»] will not think of oppressed groups as learning to *recognize* their own full personhood and then gradually, by stripping away veils of prejudice, leading their oppressors to confront reality. For they will not see full personhood as an intrinsic attribute of the oppressed, any

¹⁷ R. Rorty, *Feminism and Pragmatism*, p. 219. For the many, strong reactions to this strategy coming from feminist quarters, see M. Janack (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Richard Rorty*, Philadelphia, Penn State University Press, 2010.

more than they see human beings having a central and inviolable core surrounded by culturally-conditioned beliefs and desires – a core for which neither biology nor history can account. To be a pragmatist rather than a realist in one's description of the acquisition of full personhood requires thinking of its acquisition by blacks, gays, and women in the same terms as we think of its acquisition by Galilean scientists and Romantic poets. We say that the latter groups invented new moral identities for themselves by getting semantic authority over themselves. As time went by, they succeeded in having the language they had developed become part of the language everybody spoke. Similarly, we have to think of gays, blacks and women inventing themselves rather than discovering themselves, and thus of the larger society as coming to terms with something new¹⁸.

On a Rortian score, then, self-constitution would not amount to anything like self-discovery, but rather become the expression of self-invention. Now, if this very activity of self-creation through redescription, when successful, empowers us and actually requires us to get together in a community without commonality, yet, when performed from without, it endangers us and turn out to be a violent and debasing practice. The very same members of the redescriptive group might disagree over the extent to which they can and should be redescribed, or over the particular vocabulary employed in so doing. We might, in fact, ask what to do about those who do not want to be so redescribed, but rather want to be taken in their own terms, even if those redescriptions have been originally thought of as emancipatory ones. Who are we to choose which description to give, say, when accounting for a subject as either a father or parent 1, a woman or a lawyer, a squatter or civil-right activist?

The problem here is that, by redescribing others in ironic ways, we might present what they take to be important as only fleeting and accidental, and, in so doing, demeaning it (hence their advocates) in value. The ironist can indeed be cruel. In *Private Irony and Liberal Hope*, Rorty voices this very concern:

Ironism, as I have defined it, results from awareness of the power of redescrptions. But most people do not want to be redescribed. They want to be taken on their own terms – taken seriously just as they are and just as they talk. The ironist tells them that the language they speak is up for grabs by her and her kind. There is something potentially very cruel about that claim. For the best way to cause people long-lasting pain is to humiliate them by making the things that seemed most important to them look futile, obsolete, and powerless. Consider what happens when a child's precious possessions – 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

¹⁸ R. Rorty, *Feminism and Pragmatism*, p. 225.

possessions are made to look ridiculous alongside the possessions of another, richer, kid [...]. 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 humiliates¹⁹.

Our ironic redescrptions can harm in the measure in which they do not promise – but rather mock the very idea of – a progression towards more faithful accounts of one's identity, which would make such redescrptions empowering (at least in principle) by conferring a sense of being «corrected» for the good. Rather, ironic redescrptions look and feel like being arbitrary «reprogrammed», and hence not taken seriously, or only derogatorily so. Irony can humiliate as long as our identities are made radically contingent, ever tentative, and always in the making, while we might want them to consist in little steps towards better and more fully human lives and identities. This is exactly the reassurance the ironist *cannot* guarantee, as per her distrust of the idea that the internal readjustments of the sense of who we are through redescrptive activities would *by themselves* count as occasions for growth. As we saw, the ironist is portrayed by Rorty not only as a contingentist and historicist, but also as a skeptic about her own effort as self-constitution through redescription – almost systematically unimpressed by the effectiveness of her own transformative activities, and fascinated by alternative, alien ones. As Rorty concludes, then, «what the ironist is [truly] blamed for is not an inclination to humiliate but an inability to empower»²⁰. And this is because, *pace* Rorty, the feeling of empowerment is associated with an ideal of self-constitution as a progress towards more free, autonomous selves.

Rorty's way out of this conundrum consists in the reformulation of his rather infamous private/public divide: that is the distinction between private irony – that is an unbroken exercise in rescriptions – and liberal hope – consisting in the ending of suffering, *included* those caused by redescrptions. The distinction is infamous in the measure in which Rorty has been attacked for his odd cocktail of dandyism and social concern²¹.

¹⁹ R. Rorty, *Private Irony and Liberal Hope*, pp. 89-90.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 91.

²¹ The list is rather long. For some selected friendly fire, see R. Bernstein, *Rorty's Liberal Utopia*, in Id., *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity*, Boston, The MIT Press, 1992, pp. 258-292; J. Conant, *Freedom, Cruelty, and Truth: Rorty versus Orwell*, in Robert Brandom (ed.), *Rorty and His Critics*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000, pp. 268-342; J. Horton, *Irony and Commitment: An Irreconcilable Dualism of Modernity*, in M. Festenstein and S. Thompson (eds.), *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*, Cambridge, Polity, 2001, pp. 15-28; D. Owen, *The Avoidance of Cruelty: Jostling*

Not only, it has been claimed, this combo is highly problematic from a moral point of view – as it opens a hardly reconcilable gap between individualistic plans and social needs –, but each option has been also portrayed cynical in its not seeking integration between our personal and associate selves. My hunch, instead, is that the distinction makes sense in its challenging us to reconciling our best Nietzschean and Millian pulls, once given up the metaphysical glue once granted by Platonic and Kantian anthropologies alike. Rorty himself was more than conscious about the difficulty involved in this task, for example when he ponders about «how to equalize opportunities for self-creation and then leave people alone to use, or neglect, their opportunities»²². Yet, by portraying such integration as a quest rather than as a solution, Rorty highlighted a particularly significant tension at the heart of our contemporary self-image as post-metaphysical selves and citizens – one to be experimented with and eventually resolved by strokes of practice rather than of theory²³. As Rorty remarks in his reply to Schneewind, «maybe *nobody* is going to take us beyond Mill. Maybe moral philosophy has gone about as far as it can go»²⁴ – where Mill here represents someone who was able to keep together the concern for self-fashioning and that for social improvement under a single unitary philosophical picture.

Rorty's signature strategy for releasing the tension between redescription and identities-formation is that of decoupling irony from solidarity, so to eventually reconciling the two via a particular mixture of their ingredients. Rorty, in fact, notes how one can indeed be an ironist without being a liberal (e.g. Nietzsche), and, conversely, one can be a liberal without being an ironist (e.g. Kant). Now, in order to be able to keep the best of the two options, that is being a liberal ironist, we should put redescription at the service of solidarity, and hence learning to discriminate between occasions of irony which will likely issue in humiliation and those which do not. And this is not, according to Rorty, a piece of moral reasoning guided by principles, but rather a matter of imaginative sensibility:

Rorty on Liberalism, Scepticism and Ironism, in M. Festenstein and S. Thompson (eds.), *Richard Rorty*, pp. 93-110; and R.M. Calcaterra, *Knowing Ourselves and Recognizing Others*, in Id., *Contingency and Normativity: The Challenged of Richard Rorty*, Leiden, Brill, 2018, pp. 88-108.

²² R. Rorty, *Private Irony and Liberal Hope*, p. 85.

²³ On the disregard of the need for a philosophical solution to this tension, see R. Rorty, *Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism*, in Id., *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 197-202. On the feasibility and opportunity of this disregard, see the contribution by Piergiorgio Donatelli to the present *Symposium*.

²⁴ R. Rorty, *Reply to J.B. Schneewind*, in Randall E. Auxier and Lewis E. Hahn (eds.), *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, p. 507.

The liberal ironist...[says] that we need to distinguish between redescription for private and for public purposes. For my private purposes, I may redescribe you and everybody else in terms which have nothing to do with my attitude toward your actual or possible sufferings. My private purposes, and the part of my final vocabulary which is not relevant to my public actions, are none of your business. But as I am a liberal, the part of my final vocabulary which is relevant to such actions requires me to become aware of all the various ways in which other human beings whom I might act upon can be humiliated. So 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 vocabularies²⁵.

If this is the case, then, not only it makes sense to distinguish one's private from one's public life. But this distinction shall eventually affect both in the measure in which private irony would help us recasting the way in which we understand suffering and humiliation – as a matter of being unheard rather than miss-described –, and in turn social hope suggests us ways of redescribe ourselves and other which would be more attentive to the consequences of such critical recasting – rather than avoiding it altogether.

5. *Conclusion*

In this text I have highlighted a tension between private irony and public solidarity internal to a Rortian approach to moral matters, suggesting how its solution – or rather dissolution –, far from making us fall back into a metaphysical culture and frame of mind, complicates our picture of how to account for, and take care of, those whose life-forms is under philosophical and ethical scrutiny – in this case by adjusting the focus and balance of the ironic redescriptive activities. Perhaps, Rorty would have said, this is no limitation on irony, but rather the acknowledgment that, to a certain degree, we are still attached to the quest for self-definition through which empowering our contingent sense of self and of community²⁶. Perhaps, once and if self-fashioning will be detached from the attempt to have oneself defined – in one's own terms, or rather in someone else's –, and be a free-standing private *and yet* public enterprise, we would be less scared of, and scarred from, alternative understandings

²⁵ R. Rorty, *Private Irony and Liberal Hope*, pp. 90-1.

²⁶ On Rorty's distinctive understanding of romantic irony, and hence of the way in which projects of self-cultivation can still be possible (and indeed encouraged) within an ironic culture, see N. Lavagnino, *On the Very Idea of Romantic Irony*, in «Contemporary Pragmatism», 11 (2014), no. 1, pp. 131-142.

or misunderstandings of whom we happened to become. That would be a situation farthest removed from metaphysical concerns – one which Rorty would have likely felt as more attuned to his own ironic sensibility and liberal politics. A moral utopia for which we might not still be ready as of yet, but for which Rorty longed in, and through, his works.

Irony and Redescription

The issue of the advantage or rather dangerousness of redescriptive activities motivated Rorty's landmark private/public divide, and yet, upon closer inspection, the divide itself needs to be rethought precisely in the light of the possibility that the ironist attitude can jeopardize the quest for public solidarity by frustrating one's fellow beings in their tentative activities of identities-formation. It is no chance that Rorty eventually recurred to a reconciliation of the private with the public sphere through the figure of the «liberal ironist», for whom redescription is always in the service of social cooperation, rather than getting in the way of it. What is detrimental to moral growth, private and public alike, is then the overlooking of the practical consequences of our own ironic activities, for which no algorithm is indeed possible nor welcome.

Keywords: Irony, Contingency, Identity, Cruelty, Progress.

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