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RORTYIAN HOPE

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Abstract: This is a paper about Richard Rorty's notion of hope, and the role that it plays in breaking down Rorty's public/private distinction, and connecting philosophy to politics. The argument that philosophy can be engaged in and with the social-political world is one that is coherent with Rorty's position if philosophy is understood as striving towards its goals with a sense of contextualism and fallibilism. Placing Rorty within the tradition of the classic pragmatists, James and Dewey, I will argue that pluralism can and should serve as a contextual foundation for liberalism. Through an examination and analysis of Rorty's liberal ironist and anti-foundationalism, I will explore how Rortyian hope can be understood as socially and politically transformative, transforming our conception of knowledge from one based on certainty to one based on fallibility.

Keywords: Rorty; hope; pragmatism.

Introduction

This paper will be about understanding hope as transformative. This sense of hope is inspired by some of Richard Rorty's later writings, including *Achieving Our Country* and *Philosophy and Social Hope*. This Rortyian hope can pave the way for a fertile understanding of the future possibilities for philosophy—a future understood through a hopeful belief in progress. This notion of progress is not based on teleological certainty, but rather on open-ended transformation, and is applicable to the social-political realm. The argument that philosophy can be engaged in and with the social-political world is one that is coherent with Rorty's position if philosophy is understood as striving towards its goals with a sense of contextualism and fallibilism.

I will begin by re-visiting Rorty's definition of the liberal ironist as explicated in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. I will then examine Rorty's anti-foundationalism, prevalent throughout his philosophical writings, and re-consider it. To this end I will place Rorty within the tradition of the classic pragmatists, James and Dewey, and argue that pluralism can and should serve as a contextual foundation for liberalism. Lastly, I will turn to some of the later developments in Rorty's thinking, namely the role that hope played, by examining Rorty's later books as well as some recent articles by others on the role of hope in Rorty's philosophy. Hope will be explored as a vital concept that can help break down Rorty's public/private distinction and connect philosophy to politics. Drawing upon Dewey's understanding of pragmatism and democracy, Rorty sees hope as socially and politically transformative in that it can be used to transform our conception of knowledge from one based on certainty to one based on fallibility. In the end, my goal in this paper is to use Rorty to help explicate a theory of hope which is

philosophically in line with the classic pragmatist tradition of James and Dewey, and connects liberalism, pluralism, and irony in a coherent and socially and politically, useful way.

Rorty's Liberal Ironist

In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Richard Rorty described his idea of the liberal ironist. His definition of a liberal is borrowed from Judith Shklar, who says that, "liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing that we do" (Rorty 1989, xv). He defined an ironist as "the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires—someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist enough to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance" (*ibid., xv*). A liberal ironist is then someone who would "include among those ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease" (*ibid., xv*). Rorty wanted to keep the liberal side strictly separated from the ironic side, by maintaining that liberalism was an idea relevant and applicable only to the public sphere, while irony was an idea relevant and applicable only to the private sphere.

For Rorty, one can be an ironist privately and a liberal politically, but there is no connection between them. Rorty's rejection of any connection between liberalism and irony stems from his fear of slipping into metaphysical foundationalism. He feared an all-encompassing absolutist view of society and therefore believed that it was crucial to keep the private aspects of one's life separate from one's public views. There is a profound and important element of truth in the impulse to resist an absolute connection between one's private and public views, but Rorty's strict dichotomy goes too far. There may not be a necessary connection between liberalism and irony, however the liberalism that Rorty favors would be aided by the irony he espoused. Taking irony seriously precludes an essentialist relationship between liberalism and irony or the public and the private, but it allows for a non-essentialist, fallible idea of *hope* to bring liberalism and irony together in a fruitful way.

In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* Rorty went out of his way to stress the importance of contingency and irony. With the publication of *Achieving Our Country* and *Philosophy and Social Hope*, he seemed more concerned with solidarity or at least clarifying what is meant by it and how to achieve it. He was not seeking an absolute ground for his belief in solidarity, but rather expressing the importance of hope for achieving it. In his definition of a liberal ironist, Rorty describes an ungroundable hope that is essentially social and public. It is a hope that is both ironic and liberal, and it is this notion of hope that I believe bridges the gap between liberalism and irony.

Rorty's definition of liberalism (borrowed from Shklar) goes beyond the basic definition of liberalism, which is fundamentally the belief in autonomy and the defense of civil liberties. For Rorty, a liberal believes that it is cruelty and not simply interference with one's autonomy or liberty that is wrong. The Rortyian liberal makes a strong ethical judgment about certain types of behavior. The caveat is that Rorty's liberal is also an ironist, and therefore she does not believe that an absolute ground for her beliefs is attainable. If Rorty's liberal ironist wants to put a stop to cruelty then she must attempt to convince others of the correctness of her ethical stance of non-cruelty by entering into a debate with others who do not share her view. Without recourse to absolute foundations, this debate must be entered into with hope, if it is to be entered into at all. That is to say that if one rejects reliance upon absolute foundations and wishes to effect change in people's opinions and practices, then one is left with the option

of doing what one can and being hopeful about the outcome. This hope is not merely wishful thinking. One can and indeed should have reasons for having hope, but these reasons are not absolute foundations, rather they are beliefs that propel one to hopeful action.

The Problem of Foundations

The problem with Rorty's belief that liberalism does not need a philosophical foundation is that he does not distinguish different types of foundations. There is an important difference between absolute ahistorical foundations that provide ultimate justification and metaphysical certainty, and contextual foundations that are fluid and can be used to explain one's beliefs in a provisional way. Absolute, ahistorical foundations, which have been the goal of much of Western philosophy, are not compatible with Rorty's liberal ironist. However, I contend that the liberalism espoused by Rorty's liberal ironist could and should have a contextual foundation of pluralism. I am defining a contextual foundation as a belief which contingently supports other beliefs, and I am defining pluralism as the belief that there is no one explanation for things, that many perspectives must be taken into account. In the sense that I understand it, pluralism is meaningful on both the metaphysical and social-political level, and there is a continuum between them.

The metaphysical pluralism I have in mind is described by William James in *A Pluralistic Universe* and in "The One and the Many" in *Some Problems of Philosophy*. In those writings, James defines pluralism in opposition to monism and absolutism and traces the dilemma to the problem of the one and the many, which is a metaphysical problem that is as old as philosophy itself. Such a problem would be the sort of problem that Rorty would think we might be better off getting rid of, but James thought differently. James thought that the problem of the one and the many or monism versus pluralism was a vitally important metaphysical question that has many practical and ethical consequences for philosophy. In fact he called it "the most pregnant of all the dilemmas of philosophy" (James 1977, 258). Monism maintains that reality exists collectively, i.e. that reality consists of a collective unity of things, that cannot be separated or distinguished in any meaningful way. Pluralism maintains that reality exists distributively, i.e. that reality consists of a distribution of individual things that can be understood individually and as connected with other things. Monism is an absolute and totalizing closed system, while pluralism is an open-ended one.

In order to resolve this dilemma James applies the pragmatic rule of 'what's the difference that makes a practical difference.' "Suppose there is a oneness in things, what may it be known as? What differences to you and me will it make?" (*ibid.*, 263) Based on the pragmatic rule, James accepts pluralism, and thinks that we should as well, because it is more practically useful for solving ethical problems. Pluralism allows us to deal more effectively with practical problems, because it coheres more with the world of science, common sense, and allows for free will.[1] For James the most important aspect of resolving this dilemma is that it demonstrates the importance of metaphysical issues to the problems of life, which leads into the ethical-political dimension of pluralism. Richard Bernstein echoes this idea when he describes pluralism as "part of the larger theme . . . of the one and the many . . . with endless variations" (Bernstein 1987, 519-520). He then goes on to discuss the importance of the "practical twist" that James, as well as Dewey and the other pragmatists gave to this theme (*ibid.*, 521).

[1] Allowing for free will is crucial for James, because it demonstrates that pluralism is melioristic, which is a belief that requires hope in some sense.

Pluralism as understood by James and Dewey was a fact of life. There are many viewpoints or perspectives which are in conflict with one another and they must be debated. There is no final end to these debates, no complete resolution to these conflicts. As Dewey asserted, "the elimination of conflict is, I believe, a hopeless and self-contradictory ideal." He continued, "It is not the sheer amount of conflict, but the conditions under which it occurs that determine its value" (Dewey 1971, 210-211). I understand Dewey to be saying that agreements can be reached, but conflict always remains. The crucial task is to transform the conflict by transforming the situations surrounding the conflicts. The goal of philosophy for Dewey is to help us transform our experiences, and to this end we confront problems not in the hope of solving them once and for all, but with the hope of making them better in some sense. As Michael Eldridge (1998, 40) puts it, "for Dewey thinking was not an end in itself, but a means of transforming problematic situations into more satisfying ones".

This understanding of conflict resolution underscores the deep connection that Dewey saw between liberalism and pluralism. In *Liberalism and Social Action*, Dewey argues for a broad and rich understanding of liberalism. He traces the history of liberalism and claims that the classic liberalism of John Locke and others was mainly concerned with safeguarding individual liberties and protecting individuals from intrusions from the state. However in the second half of the nineteenth century the idea arose that "government might and should be an instrument for securing and extending the liberties of individuals" (Dewey 1991, 17). According to Dewey the task of liberalism becomes 'the mediation of social transitions" (*ibid.*, 54-55) and "directing social actions" (*ibid.*, 56). In other words, liberalism is equipped to mediate the different views and beliefs of various groups of people. The liberalism that guides this mediation is infused with an open-ended, fallible pluralism for Dewey. There is no final totalizing culmination, but rather, "liberalism is committed to an end that is at once enduring and flexible" (*ibid.*, 61). The hope for progress through resolving conflicts rests on a thorough-going pluralism, which is open to various (and opposing) viewpoints.

It is my contention that, as outlined above, pluralism can and should serve as a foundation of sorts for liberalism. It should be understood as what Timm Triplett calls a contextual foundation, which is an idea that, "suggests that what functions as a basic proposition varies with changing cultural, historical, or scientific conditions" (Triplett 1990, 100). Triplett cites Wittgenstein, Quine, and Sellars as sources of this form of contextual foundationalism and includes Rorty as a contextual foundationalist. Rorty as an avowed anti-foundationalist might take exception to this label, but I think Triplett's characterization is valid, and the point is not merely semantic or trivial. Triplett's definition of contextual foundationalism shows that Rorty's belief in contingency, understood as contextualism, can provide a foundation for beliefs. It is a contextually contingent foundation upon which one can support one's fallible and revisable beliefs.

This is a point that Richard Bernstein continually made in his long and congenial debate with Rorty. Bernstein agreed with the sentiment of Rorty's anti-foundationlist argument but insisted that there still must be some way of evaluating the strength or weakness of an argument that is not purely arbitrary or relativistic. According to Bernstein, social practices and community consensus must have some non-absolute standards.

> Sometimes Rorty writes as if any philosophic attempt to sort out the better from the worse, the rational from the irrational (even assuming that this is historically relative) must lead back to foundationalism and the search for an ahistorical perspective. . . . He keeps telling us that the history of philosophy, like the history of all culture, is a series of contingencies, accidents

> of the rise and demise of various language games and form of life. But suppose we place ourselves *back* into our historical situation. Then a primary task is one of trying to deal with present conflicts and confusions, of trying to sort out the better from the worse, of focusing on which social practices ought to endure and which demand reconstruction, of what types of justification are acceptable and which are not (Bernstein 1986, 49).

The Importance of Hope

The notion of hope played a vital role for Rorty in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, and *Achieving Our Country.* In *Achieving our Country*, Rorty claimed that the "stories about what a nation has been and should try to be are not attempts at accurate representation, but rather attempts to forge a moral identity" (Rorty 1998, 13). Rorty wants to derive our moral identity, "at least in part, from our citizenship in a democratic nation-state, and from leftist's attempts to fulfill the promise of that nation" (*ibid.*, 97). Ethan J. Lieb (2004, 196) sees Rorty's national constitutive stories as "a bridge from the private to the public". Lieb claims, "what is noteworthy in *Achieving Our County* is Rorty's recognition that institutional reform will often depend on romantic imaginings, precisely the kind of dependency which he so discouraged in his early days of radical separation of the public and private" (*ibid.*, 197).

Rorty sees these romantic imaginings as potentially politically and socially transformative, and here *hope* plays a key role. In hope there is a tension between desire and expectation, and it is this tension that helps make hope transformative. Hope affects one's choices but extends beyond one's control. As Elizabeth Cooke states, "hope extends beyond the scope of one's agency and often beyond the scope of one's expectations" (Cooke 2004, 92). Hope involves a notion of uncertainty in that it influences one's actions despite the fact that the results of those actions are uncertain. It engages one with the world and can be contextually foundational for acting without the requirement of certainty.

In *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Rorty altered his earlier position and admitted that there is a connection between philosophy and politics, specifically between pragmatism and democracy. "Dewey was not entirely wrong when he called pragmatism the 'philosophy of democracy'. What he had in mind is that both pragmatism and America are expressions of a hopeful, melioristic, experimental frame of mind" (Rorty 1999, 24). Hope indeed played a vital role in Dewey's understanding of democracy. According to Stephen Fishman, "Dewey chose democracy as his ultimate hope" (Fishman, McCarthy, 17). Dewey favored democracy because he believed that it enabled people to grow individually and communally. However concerning a justification for favoring democracy, Dewey, sounding Rortyian, had this to say,

> Can we find any reason that does not ultimately come down to the belief that democratic social arrangements promote a better quality of human experience, one which is more widely accessible and enjoyed, than do non-democratic and anti-democratic forms of social life? . . . Is it not the reason for our preference that we believe that mutual consultation and convictions reached through persuasion make possible a better quality of experience than can otherwise be provided on any wide scale? . . . I do not see how we can justify our preference for democracy and humanity on any other ground (Dewey 1988, 18).

Rorty interpreted Dewey's understanding of democracy as suggesting that, "we can, in politics, substitute *hope* for the sort of knowledge that philosophers have usually tried to attain" (Rorty 1999, 24). Rorty claimed that to replace knowledge with hope is to say that "one should

stop worrying about whether what one believes is well grounded and start worrying about whether one has been imaginative enough to think up interesting alternatives to one's present beliefs" (*ibid.*, 34). The idea of replacing knowledge with hope is an interesting one, but it is one that perhaps goes too far. What does Rorty mean by not being concerned with one's beliefs being well grounded? One can consider one's beliefs to be well grounded and not mean that they appeal to some absolute foundation. In his formulation, Rorty places 'knowledge' within the confines of traditional, foundationalist philosophy when it is not clear if or why this needs to be done.

Altering Rorty's suggestion slightly, my suggestion is that hope can be used to transform our conception of knowledge. If one understands knowledge as fallible and revisable, then hope can be a crucial component of knowledge. Hope can help to re-constitute knowledge as not merely fallible and revisable but also as socially and politically transformative.[2] This move can be aided by connecting liberalism and irony. In *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Rorty seemed willing to do this to some degree, granting that one understands liberalism and irony as they have been defined by American pragmatism.

> Willingness to accept the liberal goal of maximal room for individual variation, however is facilitated by a consensus that there is no source of authority other than the free agreement of human beings. This consensus, in turn, is facilitated by the adoption of philosophical views about reason and truth of the sort which are nowadays thought of as symptoms of 'postmodern scepticism' but which I think of as just good old American pragmatism (*ibid.*, 237).

He further admitted that philosophy, of a pragmatic bent, is relevant to politics:

> The reason this kind of philosophy is relevant to politics is simply that it encourages people to have a self-image in which their real or imagined citizenship in a democratic republic is central . . . This sort of philosophy, so to speak, clears philosophy out of the way in order to let the imagination play upon the possibilities of a utopian future (*ibid.*, 23-239).

Hope is also central to Rorty's praise for Western society and culture. Over the years, Rorty has lauded the ideas and values of the West and the United States in particular. He has claimed that the ideas of liberalism, democracy, equality, pluralism and tolerance are Western ideas, and that these ideas were the best that the world has had to offer. It is my contention that these ideas are connected in a manner which provides a contextual foundation upon which to argue for them. Liberalism relies on pluralism and irony, if it is understood as upholding the principle of equality and promoting tolerance and open and ongoing debate. Liberalism is compatible with pluralism when it is committed to the idea that conflicts are neither necessarily resolvable nor necessarily irresolvable, that is to say when liberalism is ironic.[3] I am referring to irony in the way it was spelled out by Rorty in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, as facing up to one's own contingency. An ironic pluralist recognizes that disagreements may always (but not necessarily) persist. They may hope for the resolution of conflicts and can try to bring these resolutions about, but they understand that one must always be open to other sides of an argument. The ironic liberal pluralist is a meliorist who is hopeful for and believes in progress, but understands progress as open-ended.

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[2] I believe that this idea is in line with what earlier pragmatists (James and Dewey) had in mind, as Colin Koopman points out in (2006, 111).

[3] The important idea here is that resolving conflicts does not negate differences. This is a part of the argument that Michael Eldridge makes in (2005, 120).

(An Open-Ended) Conclusion

Rorty's notion of hope is tied to the notion of progress. Rorty has hope for the future because he believes in progress, the progress of the West in general and the United States in particular. Rorty takes the Enlightenment notion of progress very seriously, and he thinks that in certain postmodern critiques of it something vital has been lost. Rorty, I believe, correctly derides the loss of hope in philosophy as "an inability to construct a plausible narrative of progress" (Rorty 1999, 232).

It is crucial to believe in progress, but not in its inevitability. The rejection of the idea of progress results in a loss of hope, because the idea of hope is contingent upon at least the possibility of progress. A Rortyian pragmatist believes in an open-ended future, both in the sense that she holds the belief that the future is indeterminate, and in the sense that she will stake a claim of hope in the future and what it will bring. We need hope because we do not know how things will turn out. There is no certainty of progress, just a hope in and for progress. In other words, it is a notion of progress that is not tied to teleology. Rorty says that this lesson was learned from Darwin: "after Darwin it became possible to believe that nature is not leading up to anything—that nature has nothing in mind" (*ibid.*, 266).

Rortyian hope can help pave the way for an understanding of philosophy that can move forward into the open-ended future. Previously, Rorty had offered unsatisfying suggestions for what philosophy should become or be called, such as "kibitzing" (Rorty 1979, 393). However with "hope," he struck upon a vibrant and fecund idea that can describe the task of philosophy. "Hope—the ability to believe that the future will be unspecifiably different from and unspecifiably freer than the past – is the condition of growth" (Rorty 1999, 120). Growth requires hope and so does philosophy. Philosophy without hope withers away, but philosophy with hope can evolve.

Rortyian hope is a melioristic, pragmatic hope, in other words, a hope that draws from the classical pragmatist tradition of James and Dewey. In line with this pragmatic tradition, Rortyian hope can help engage philosophy with social-political concerns. Despite Rorty's efforts to keep liberalism and ironism separated, Rortyian hope is both liberal and ironic. It is a hope for a better future, following liberal principles (understood as flexible and pluralistic), and it has no absolute, but rather only a contextual, foundation to rest on. In this way, Rortyian hope is a hope for philosophy to continue to evolve in pragmatic ways.

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