

## Surfaces



### FALSE PROPHET OR SECOND BECOMING?

Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989)

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[See table of contents](#)

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## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **RICHARD RORTY'S *CONTINGENCY, IRONY, AND SOLIDARITY* FALSE PROPHET OR SECOND BECOMING?**

David Heinimann

**Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989).**

Picture the picture of Richard Rorty framed on his book, a rare sight in the aridity of philosophy. A virtual Eden surrounds him, a tree pushing through the image in phallic potency, a horizontal element (a fallen tree? accidentally?) intersecting. Christifying. Rorty mythologically white before it -- like God before Jesus? Or mocking the non-believers? *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, parable of logocentric contempor(in)an/e/ity, seduces from its cover. Put away not helping but feeling good about such a regard and a title with the humility of the lowercase, and see the arrogance and conceit -- say, possibly, the/his metaphysicians. He will also have, from first glance, his twelve.

His "Introduction", the first and the last (the least important -- the humility), the 13th, as He was: overviewing, foreseeing, foretelling, and sacrificed before the text's mission is complete. The sermon: "In my utopia, human solidarity... is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers" (xvi).

#### **PART I: Contingency**

Simon-Peter, rock the church was built upon. A rock beside Rorty's photo cross, also. Three contingencies are generated: of language, of selfhood, of a liberal community. A trinity (valorized, prioritized, as three chapters in three Parts). But tenuous, only liable to happen as an adjunct to another occurrence. A frame, then, with one side left open, to admit necessary intrusion, a curious invitation to contamination, though Peter's church succeeded with the incorporation of pagan ritual -- the winter solstice feast of rebirth becoming Christmas the most referentially productive of His desacralizing intent. What gifts does Rorty promise?

## 1 The contingency of language

The apostle John, author of Revelations, final word of the West's first and last document. Rorty's first and last issue: language, the problem of its use, what it creates -- or fails to create -- when used without regard for its contingency. Romantic idealism challenges Enlightenment rationalism to redefine the location of "truth". Rationalism located it external to consciousness, synonymous with "self-subsistent facts" (5) that are found with the aid of a vocabulary of "discovery" of the "intrinsic nature" of phenomena (4). Romanticism objects to the location: truth is made; its defence: "To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations" (5). Our vocabulary creates the world; the world does not create our vocabulary, an important reversal of the privileged binary to avoid the valorization of one language among many, the consequences of which we have been living so desperately and cruelly that we need the Romantic revelation that "human beings whose language changed so that they no longer spoke of themselves as responsible to nonhuman powers would thereby become a new kind of human beings" (7). The change was framed by the recognition that "anything could be made to look good or bad, important or unimportant, useful or useless, by being redescribed", that "speaking differently, rather than arguing well" (7) caused the necessary reinscription of what remains after the dismissal of unprofitable questions such as what are the natures of truth, man, and God. Piecemeal conceptual analyses of segregated theses must give way to holistic and pragmatic redescription (9) in which "We should restrict ourselves to questions like 'Does our use of these words get in the way of our use of those other words?'" (12).

The stricture, though, reflects too much certainty of the utility of redescription. The assumption that restriction will lead to salvation excludes the possibilities of possibility fundamental to holism. The claim that it would "de-divinize the world" (21) only clears the way for the re-divinization of the potency of comparing vocabularies.

## 2 The contingency of selfhood

James, the first martyr, death the ultimate signifier of self and belief. An opposition frames the martyrdom, has created the martyr by the exclusion of self: "an effort to achieve self-creation by the recognition of contingency and an effort to achieve universality by the transcendence of contingency" (25). The first historical irony for Rorty is the Antichrist Nietzsche making possible the contingent self -- Nietzsche his John the Baptist, who also lost his head trying to show the world the new way. He unmasked the pursuit of "truth", of "finding a single context for all human lives", abandoned the Platonic "fable" of a "true world" for the creation of "his own mind" with "one's own language", for "self- knowledge as self-creation" (27).

The second irony is that Freud reincarnates Nietzsche to carry on the initiated desacralization, "as the moralist who helped de-divinize the self by tracking conscience home to its origin in the contingencies of our upbringing" (30). The credo worth dying for is the distinction "between a private ethic of self-creation and a public ethic of mutual accommodation" (34); "Render unto God..." Our capacity "for creating metaphors" (36) permits the view of "every human life as a poem" (35),

This makes us all capable of self-creation. But, already, sublime verse is distinguished from dross as generating effects, as metaphors that catch on. Sublimation -- re-divinization -- is inevitable in the metalepsis of this valorization of vocabularies. "To fail", for Nietzsche, "is to accept somebody else's description of oneself" (28); the uncreated self for Freud was the "failure to break free of [the] past rather than... failure to live up to universal standards" (33). The binary opposition inherent in each failure replicates that of the theo-trope and demonia-trope. De-divinization is re-divinization. The sermon is to be conducted by "substituting dialectic for demonstration" (20) and renouncing "the traditional philosophical, reductionist way" (39), but the Platonic heckler would mock "the final victory of metaphors of self-creation over metaphors of discovery" (40), protest that at the root of any dialectic is a first cause whose comprehension necessitates demonstration, as nothing precedes the first cause from which creation could occur. Nothing is created out of nothing.

"Metaphors are unfamiliar uses of old words, but such uses are possible only against the background of other old words being used in old familiar ways" (41). To exclude the possibility of utility from demonstration and metaphors of discovery in seeking to describe what is familiar is to privilege only a certain path to self-creation. "I am the way..." And yet, all paths are privileged if there are "no lives which are not largely parasitical on an un-described past and dependent on the charity of as yet unborn generations" (42). The path of the Luciferian universalist who attempted to transcend

contingency -- the first martyr for autonomy -- has been as important to Rorty's self-creation as has been the subservient host who remained in the clouds, knowing its place.

### 3 The contingency of a liberal community

Andrew, who worried about feeding the 5,000. Jesus maximized the economy of loaves and fishes; Rorty takes up the "traditional liberal claim" that cruelty is avoided "by maximizing the quality of education, freedom of the press, educational opportunity, opportunities to exert political influence, and the like" (66-67). Such maximization promotes "freedom as the recognition of contingency", that recognition "the chief virtue of the members of a liberal society" (46). The virtue discounts the "ridiculous" philosophical mediation between the traditional question "How do you know?" and the contingent "Why do you talk that way?", ridiculous because no "neutral ground" exists, as philosophy assumes -- there is only a "plurality of stand-points" (51). In this investment is evident in the italicization: "*A liberal society is one which is content to call 'true' whatever the upshot of such encounters turns out to be*" (52). The dividend is that the "justification of liberal society" is by "historical comparison with other attempts at social organization", with the rejection of "philosophical foundation" (53).

But is this currency tradable as we seek to sate our hunger? Liberalism could not argue its "Nazi or Marxist enemies" into admitting their moral inferiority but only see the attempt to do so as "one more vocabulary", another among the many "cultural artifacts" that are vocabularies in pluralism -- but, this pluralism, which "would take as its goal the creation of ever more various... artifacts" (53-54), also permits the Nazi and Marxist enemies their vocabulary. At some point, liberalism will have to meet them with a superior force if it wishes to continue; a vocabulary of force and violence may be necessary for preservation against another such, even if it is contingent. To ignore or deny that masks the brutishness Hobbes observed, the thesis, historically, to the unannounced antithesis that Rorty privileges, "J. S. Mill's suggestion that governments devote themselves to optimizing the balance between leaving people's private lives alone and preventing suffering" (63). Tracing that dialectic back to its origin leads us to the Eden Rorty photogenically occupies -- the chief metaphor. But if we are back in the Garden, we already participate in the scenario already enacted. What would Rorty have us eat?

## **PART II: Ironism and Theory**

When told of Christ, the apostle Bartholomew/Nathanael asked, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" A question we still ask, considering what has been done to the Nazarene. Rorty identifies the young Hegel, Proust, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida as antecedents to his presence -- various Saint Pauls and Augustines. What good has come of them?

#### 4 Private irony and liberal hope

The undogmatic James the Lesser, author of the Epistle of Saint James, on the practical value of devotion. Rorty's James the ironist who makes a virtue of doubt, fulfilling three conditions: she doubts her final vocabulary -- that "set of words" that are the limits of her language -- because other final vocabularies have impressed her; she knows that her vocabulary cannot resolve these doubts; she doubts that her vocabulary is "closer to reality than others" (73). Contingency is natural to her, as is liberals' belief that "cruelty is the worst thing they can do" (74).

Opposed to the ironist is the "metaphysician", who thinks that his final vocabulary suffices, that "a single permanent reality" exists, and who "does not redescribe but, rather, analyzes old descriptions" (74). The dogma of a program binds the metaphysician; fact and Truth exist and can be found, with the right questions asked. Their pursuit privileges "logic", "inference", and "proposition"; he dismisses "dialectic" as useless, a "species of rhetoric", but the ironist founds her argument on Hegelian dialectic, sees logic as only "ancillary to dialectic", and takes a vocabulary, rather than a proposition, as her "unit of persuasion", involving the skill of switching "from one terminology to another" (78). An ironic truth results: "We ironists treat people not as anonymous channels for truth but as abbreviations for a certain final vocabulary and for the sorts of beliefs and desires typical of its users" (79). The similes in each case -- "as anonymous channels", "as abbreviations" -- are prosopopoeic: people, if treated as anything but people, are less than human. The fetish of "redescription" and "recreation" valorizes the ability to do so, not the person who does it.

Is Rorty caught in a dogma of his own, a final sufficient vocabulary that avoids rather than recreates? Reversing his earlier claim, he states, in apparent realization that the practice is inherent in human activity, "The metaphysician also redescribes, even though he does it in the name of reason rather than in the name of the imagination. Redescription is a generic trait of the intellectual, not a specific mark of the ironist" (90). Having to qualify his description of the metaphysician, he is still incapable of redescribing himself in the metaphysician's vocabulary, a useless task to him anyway, but in privileging imagination over reason, he practices fraud on his investment in pluralism and free and open discussion. There appears to be

no free and open discussion, only the discussion permitted by the prevalent dogma -- no matter how undogmatic. In the gap between dogma and its supposed absence is the gesture that would write the closure. All vocabularies are dogmas.

## 5 Self-creation and affiliation: Proust, Nietzsche, and Heidegger

The Zealot Simon, zealous for Mosaic law, a theory found on a burning bush, a metaphor of reason, the logos. Rorty's zealots: again the young Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida (but not the franciscan Proust), who, ironist theorists, seek not a "theory of ironism" but are "attempting autonomy" in redescribing the dominative past of the "Plato-Kant canon" so as to be able to say "thus I willed it" (97). The zeal of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger -- but only at a *certain* point in their careers -- was for "the idea that something (history, Western man,... ) has exhausted its possibilities" and that "all things must be made new" (101). But the flames blind them to "the problem of ironist theory": "how to finitize while exhibiting a knowledge of one's own finitude.... of how to overcome authority without claiming authority" (105). Respect for God interfered with the desire to overcome God. Jesus put God into His place -- "Render unto Caesar..." -- and privileged man; Rorty achieves autonomy from the zeal for the canonical law in privileging the franciscan.

The Proustian novelist privileges man. The "invention of a larger- than-self hero" -- Hegel's "World-Spirit", Nietzsche's "Europe", Heidegger's "Being" -- distinguishes theorists from novelist: "people who are looking at something large, rather than constructing something small" (100). The ironist novelist redescribes his past "in a way which had not occurred to the past" rather than with the "apocalyptic novelty" the ironist theorist demands so as to escape the Bloomian anxiety over his predecessors (101). Crucial to the distinction, though, is how newness differs from one scene to the other; Rorty nails no message to the cross, cannot, because the hammer is metaphysical. Hung on a cross of his own making -- as Jesus saw the necessity of his sacrifice? -- he too feels forsaken, constructs a moral based on an unannounced syllogism: "The lesson I draw... is that novels... are safer... than theory for expressing one's recognition of the relativity and contingency of authority figures"; novels are about people and do not tempt us to adopt "an attitude toward *every possible* sort of person", whereas "books which are about ideas... look like descriptions of eternal relations" (107). The mute syllogism, mutely: ideas are vocabularies; vocabularies are people; ideas, then, are people. Indeed, Rorty mistakes Proust for the Father; were he, Rorty would have written a novel.

## 6 From ironist theory to private allusions: Derrida

Matthew. The least likely apostle, as tax collector and publican? Rorty willingly pays the toll.

Derrida's initial project is a value-added tax, a desire to continue Heidegger's business of "how to combine irony and theory" (122) and of finding "words which express the conditions of possibility of all previous theory... words which have force apart from us and display their own contingency" (123). Yet the tax was prohibitive; buyers stayed away. The shelter of the performative was needed; Derrida finances the problem of the "Heideggerian 'we '" and the attempt to "affiliate with or incarnate something larger than himself" with an investment that "privatizes" his thinking: "He simply drops theory... in favor of fantasizing" (125). Privatizing and streamlining (but even possibly evasion?) are Rorty's way to profit: "private fantasy is the only solution to... the problem of how to distance one's predecessors without doing exactly what one has repudiated them for doing", and Derrida, having ventured, is valorized for giving up "the attempt to unite the private and the public" (125).

But the budget is inflationary. Having learned from Heidegger that "the problem is... to create a style so different as to make one's book incommensurable with those of one's predecessors" and that paring down language was "futile", Derrida "proliferates" and "takes pains never to say the same thing twice" (126). Rorty finds value in the "marginal" business Derrida now does in evading "problems about how to end books, to escape self-referential criticisms that one has done what one has accused others of doing" (1313, but his investment has a rider attached, one that suggests he might be pursuing majority shares. Derrida, as a philosophy professor, "has trouble getting away with" not playing "by the rules of somebody else's final vocabulary", which a novelist or poet can get away with "because of the numinous haze that surrounds the 'creative artist'" (133). Rorty's irony toward the befogged writer dissipates when he urges that "we enfold Derrida in this nimbus by seeing his purpose as the same autonomy at which Proust and Yeats aimed" (133). Does a fog envelop Rorty, though, when he cannot see the basic difference between Derrida's writing and Proust's and Yeats', a difference prior to any other consideration? Whereas Proust and Yeats masked others' vocabularies in their own, Derrida unmask and intentionally contaminates his with others', regardless of the *différance* and the gap that exists between them, or the new mask he puts on them, or puts on himself. Rorty's strategy may be to have philosophy taken as fiction, but the unpredictable market has already over-priced the paradigmatic commodity, the Lord's prayer, in not reading the fine print Matthew added to the product.[\[1\]](#)

### **PART III: Cruelty and Solidarity**



Philip, diplomatic intermediary between Christ and the gentiles, pragmatist demanding to be shown the Father -- and reprimanded for it. Here, Rorty mediating between ironists and metaphysicians, who do not understand irony, to convince metaphysicians of the "value of books... warning us against the tendencies to cruelty inherent in searches for autonomy" (144). The binary dispute of cruelty and solidarity to be settled for the synthesis of solidarity, in absence of the anti/thesis to cruelty (kindness? indifference?). If solidarity is the synthesis, does it force kindness and indifference to cohabitate with cruelty? A metaphysical question. But negotiation requires the consideration, at the risk of another Versailles, metaphor of disastrous treaties. Or, to drop the metaphor, another cruxifiction.

## 7 The barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on cruelty

Thomas, paradigm of doubters, forcing the dialectic for reassurance and receiving the most explicit of Christ's divinity. The apostles' struggle: the incorporation of a radically new final vocabulary, one that made all others redundant -- and as vocabularies incarnate, their users too. An understandable fear of sacrificing oneself, a sacrifice that threatened uselessness with the incarnation of the *telos* determined to sacrifice Himself.

Nabokov's vocabulary of aestheticism troubles Rorty: it "runs together literary with personal immortality" in attempting to support his morals metaphysically (151), with his attempt to convince himself that "time and causality were hoaxes" muddling metaphysical "Platonic atemporalism" and anti-metaphysical "anti-platonic sensualism" (159). The muddle makes him "unable to tolerate the reality of suffering" (155) and incapable of feeling "social hope" (156). Incapable of conceiving of neither a state "with no equality and no authorities" nor one "in which cruelty will no longer be institutionalized" (156), he could only doubt the possibility of their existence. To reassure, Rorty draws Nabokov's vocabulary into his own, rather than forcing his into Nabokov's. The effect, nonetheless, is the same.

Nabokov's aestheticism -- "the copresence of 'curiosity, tenderness, kindness, and ecstasy'" (158) -- as an "inverted Platonism" in which there is "no distinction between the aesthetic and the moral", does create the "liberal aesthete" for whom good action is "noticing things that most other people do not notice" (159). Not alienating Nabokov, Rorty casts aside the metaphysician, who mistook good action as "grasping a general idea" rather than "sensing what matters to other people" -- that "The tender, curious artist... has time for other people's fantasies, not just his own" (159). His further distinction means to reassure further: the attempt to separate

language from the "mortal contingencies" of the author, especially his notion of "goodness", "is the root of 'aestheticism' in the bad sense of the term, the sense in which the aesthetic is a matter of form and language rather than of content and life" (166-67). The reassurance privileges "content and life" over "form and language", but the valuation opens doubt: nothing in "form and language" makes them antithetical to "content and life" -- they are only indifferent. As indifferent, they become the missing anti/thesis to cruelty -- but, if antithetical to "content and life", we have the surprise of "content and life" as cruelty. A doubt not dispelled in a turn, with the ironist theorist Hegel's necessary antithesis, that privileges the anti/thesis: "We are more likely to notice the joys or the sufferings of one person if our attention is directed to it by the surprising indifference of another person" (165).

## 8 The last intellectual in Europe: George Orwell

Remain faithful before the wicked -- the message of the Epistle of Jude-Thaddaeus. The wicked, for Orwell: totalitarianism; for Rorty: "commentators" who claim that Orwell taught us to reject the idea that "truth is not 'out there'", that it is "a function of the vocabulary you use", who read Orwell as a "realist philosopher, a defender of common sense against its cultured, ironist despisers" (172). The commentators are "made nervous" by Orwell's "second accomplishment" (the first, "redescribing Soviet Russia") in *Nineteen Eighty-four*, O'Brien, dismiss it as a corrupt ending that his "goodness" can excuse (171-72). What they miss is that Orwell "was the first to ask how intellectuals... might conceive of themselves, once it had become clear that liberal ideals had no relation to a possible human future" (171). The conception of O'Brien shows that what "made human equality technically possible might make endless slavery possible" because "nothing in the nature of truth, or man, or history was going to block that scenario" (175). O'Brien is Orwell's warning about a possible, dangerous future. We can infer that Rorty warns the commentators that they are potential O'Briens, intellectuals who, if negligent or dismissive of his program, may seek their pleasure in the analogue of their "'Art for art's sake' or 'Truth for its own sake'": in the words of O'Brien, "'The object of torture is torture'" (180). They become the "optimistic Roman intellectual" who is "appalled by the psychological implausibility and moral degradation of a figure /pp. 15-16/ called 'Jesus'", who doubts "an imaginative friend" who says that the influence of this figure might one day permeate empires larger than Rome's and more benevolent (184). A curious analogy, given that Rorty now doubts the power of the imagination he has valorized: "I do not think that we liberals can now imagine a future of 'human dignity, freedom and peace.' That is, we cannot tell ourselves a story about how to get from the actual present to such a future" (181-82). He frames such a story with his text; what is a liberal ironist but someone with a vision, no matter how befogged, of "a utopia" in which "human solidarity" is "achieved not by inquiry but by imagination" (xvi)?

## 9 Solidarity

The ultimate irony for solidarity: the necessary betrayal of Judas Iscariot. Rorty's solidarity, in irony, the redemption of Judas, chose by Christ to betray Him, driven to it by a realization of the historical necessity, then driven mad (John 13:21-31, Matthew 27:3-5). Not betrayal, then, but complicity. Rorty takes the mask off the betrayal to show the death Judas saw: "The fundamental premise of [my] book is that a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance" (189). God gave two sons, but we have yet to weep for the second.

The logos of the final vocabulary Judas died incorporating slides in Rorty's exegesis of solidarity -- as it must have for Judas. Again, the fetish for the exclusive group, a twelve: "our sense of solidarity is strongest when those with whom solidarity is expressed are thought of as 'one of us,' where 'us' means something smaller and more local than the human race" (191). The two problematic paradigms of solidarity for Rorty are the Christian and the Kantian. Christians deplore the "tendency to feel closer to those with whom imaginative identification is easier"; their solidarity is "to treat everyone... as a fellow sinner" (191). For Kant, we should feel solidarity with another because she is "a rational being" (191). Yet Rorty himself makes a universalist claim: though solidarity is a matter of "similarities and dissimilarities that strike us as salient" and "a function of a historically contingent final vocabulary", his position "is not incompatible with urging that we try to extend our sense of 'we' to people whom we have previously thought of as 'they'" (192). His claim then veers toward an unannounced, *ironistic* Christian universal, away from the metaphysical Kantian: he affirms a "moral progress... in the direction of greater human solidarity" as "the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with the similarities with respect to pain and humiliation" (192). Far from disavowing the Christian universal, he valorizes it with a contemporary redescription. After Orwell, we can imagine a future in which his redescription would make us weep for him.

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[Surface Page d'Accueil/Home Page](#)

[1] Matthew 6:5-8, instructions on how to pray, have this central injunction: "But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen *do*; for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking." The Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) has become one such vain repetition.