

RORTY'S AMBIVALENT RELATIONSHIP WITH KANT

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Abstract

I argue that Kant is a key figure in understanding Rorty's work, by drawing attention to the fact that although he is ostensibly the principal villain of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, at the end of that book Kant provides the basis of Rorty's positive proposal that we view the world "bifocally". I show how this idea was re-worked as "irony" in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, and became central to Rorty's outlook. However, by allowing this Kantian influence into his thinking, Rorty made his position untenable. For Rortyan pragmatism undercuts the higher stance required by the concept of irony; and yet without this Kantian influence, Rorty would have been unable to justify his pluralism. Rorty could not live with Kant but could not live without him either.

Keywords

Rorty; Kant; Irony; Metaphilosophy; Pluralism

1. A Kantian crusade against Kant?

Rorty was above all else a critic of Western philosophy; and he did not think there was any other kind.¹ He took up some distinctive positions within philosophical debates, most notably his one-time adherence to eliminative materialism (Rorty 1965). But such allegiances always gravitated around his pragmatist critique of philosophy. Thus the motivation for his eliminative materialism was quite unlike that of Paul and Patricia Churchland, who think that developments in neuroscience have provided the potential for a significant advance in human understanding. Rorty's eliminativism, by contrast, was always just a metaphilosophical tactic.² He thought it would help dissuade philosophers from thinking of the mind as a subject matter about which they have special expertise; when he decided that it was unlikely to have this effect, he abandoned it (Rorty 1979, chapter 2). And this was his standard attitude to philosophical debates; he would take sides, but only for the purposes of discouraging further discussion. Rorty once said he had "spent 40 years looking for a coherent and convincing way of formulating my worries about what, if anything, philosophy is good for" (Rorty 1992, 11). He did not find much.³

¹ For a discussion of Rorty's curious denial of the existence of non-Western philosophy, see James Tartaglia, "Rorty's Thesis of the Cultural Specificity of Philosophy," *Philosophy East and West* 65 (2014): 1016-1036.

² For discussion of this point, see James Tartaglia, *Rorty and the Mirror of Nature* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 75-7. For a critique of Rorty's eliminativism, see James Tartaglia, "Rorty's Philosophy of Consciousness," in *A Companion to Rorty*, ed. Alan Malachowski (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming 2016); and for a defence (written from Rorty's perspective), see James Tartaglia, "Rorty and the Problem of Consciousness," in *Consciousness and the Great Philosophers*, eds. Stephen Leach and James Tartaglia (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2016).

³ For an argument that we should not take any of Rorty's apparently positive suggestions for the future of philosophy seriously, see James Tartaglia, "Did Rorty's Pragmatism have Foundations?" *International Journal of*

Now if one philosopher were to be singled out as the principal target of Rorty's critique of philosophy, it would certainly be Kant. Kant was a "mystery-monger" (Rorty 2010a, 194), while Rorty described himself as an advocate of "anti-Kantian naturalism" (Rorty 2000a, 25). Plato was another important "mystery-monger" who Rorty regularly targeted, but even Plato does not have the same kind of the significance for Rorty. This is because according to Rorty, Kant *invented* philosophy: he gave us our notion of philosophy as an independent academic discipline, and hence gave us the idea that ancient thinkers like Plato belong to a distinctively philosophical tradition. Without Kant, Rorty said, "Greek thought and seventeenth-century thought might have seemed as distinct both from each other and from our present concerns as, say, Hindu theology and Mayan numerology" (Rorty 1979, 149). As such, there is a clear sense in which Rorty's career was a crusade against Kant.

The centrality of Kant to Rorty's thinking is brought out well in an anecdote by Raymond Geuss (2008). Geuss recounts how Rorty once got excited about an idea he had for a new undergraduate course at Princeton, to be called "An Alternative History of Modern Philosophy". The idea was to teach the history of philosophical ideas from the Middle Ages to the 20th century without mentioning any of the canonical names. Rorty particularly liked the idea of missing out Descartes, of whom he had a very low opinion; he planned to talk about Petrus Ramus instead. Rorty disliked what he considered the unwarranted hero-worship which the canonical figures attracted. As he saw it, they had been unfairly alighted upon, and misattributed originality for popularising ideas which were "in the air" at the time; he wanted to debunk the "great man" theory of the history of philosophy. But Rorty eventually abandoned his idea for two reasons. The first was that he did not think Princeton would allow it. But the more interesting reason was that he did not think he could tell the story without mentioning Kant; and once Kant was brought in, the whole point of the exercise would be lost. Rorty hated what he called the "Kant-worship endemic among contemporary analytic philosophers" (Rorty 2000b, 124); but he could see a reason for it.

In this paper, I will try to clarify the complicated relationship Rorty had with Kant. This relationship has been neglected in the literature, but I think it sheds great light on Rorty's philosophy. It was a relationship which simultaneously pointed in opposite directions. For although Kant was almost always the enemy, explicitly stated or otherwise, Rorty's plan of attack made central use of Kantian ideas, and – as I shall argue – led him to Kantian conclusions. My conclusion will be that Rorty's failure to extricate himself from Kant ultimately undermined his position; but that if he had succeeded he would not have liked the result.

In the next section, I shall tell the story of Rorty's attack on what he saw as the essentially Kantian edifice of professional philosophy, with particular emphasis on the complicating factors viz. his attitude to Kant. Then in Section 3, I will discuss a decisive Kantian influence on Rorty: namely that Kant is the inspiration for Rorty's positive suggestion that we view the world "bifocally". This suggestion, I think, was the basis of Rorty's later conception of irony. Since taking an ironic attitude to the world might well be considered Rorty's principal positive proposal in philosophy, this suggests a peculiarly ambivalent relationship with Kant: Kant was the principal target of Rorty's career, but the antidote to Kantianism he recommended was essentially Kantian. In the final section, I shall argue that Rorty made a

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big mistake in allowing Kant to creep into his thinking in this way, since it renders his position unstable. However I shall also argue that if he had consistently refused to embrace any Kantian influence, he could not have sustained the breezy pluralism which is essential to his pragmatist outlook.

2. Philosophy as Kant's misconceived discipline

A good way of understanding Rorty's revisionary history of philosophy, and Kant's pivotal place within it, is in terms of what Michael Williams has called his "emergence" and "projection" theses (Williams 2000). Rorty claims it was because of Kant that philosophy "emerged", and that it became possible for a unified set of philosophical concerns to be "projected" back onto previous thinkers. To take the emergence thesis first, Rorty argues that the foundations were laid for the notion for philosophy as an independent discipline in the 17th century, when Descartes and others took the side of the mathematical sciences in their struggle for hegemony against church doctrine. This is when the modern, representational notion of mind was invented, by drawing on the pre-existing metaphor of the mind as a mirror of nature. This metaphor was literalised, transforming the Aristotelian concept of the mind as an engine of thought into the new concept of the mind as a subjective arena of appearance in which the objective world is represented. Plato's notion of a phenomenal world reflecting transcendent ideas (or 'forms') had been internalised: the phenomenal world was now the mind, and ideas were contained within it. This innovation promised to lend authority to science, because the mind could now be portrayed as the ultimate arbitrator of claims to knowledge. Locke, for instance, could seek to trace the epistemic authority for all of our ideas back to their source. And since scientific claims could be traced back to careful observation and measurement of the world itself, their legitimacy was in principle secured. However this agenda was soon bogged down by metaphysical and epistemological problems; most notably the mind-body problem and external world scepticism.

The stage was then set for the emergence of philosophy as we know it, which was due to Kant. Kant entrenched the idea of philosophy as an *a priori* study of how our minds represent the world by drawing the analytic / synthetic and intuition / concepts distinctions, and tying these distinctions in with continuities in intellectual history. Kant presented himself as the culmination of a rationalist and empiricist tradition in philosophy, and with these distinctions in place, there seemed a clear continuity between the disputes between Kant's immediate predecessors and the dispute between Plato and Aristotle over the nature of the universal. This allowed nineteenth-century historians to project Kant's concerns back to construct a standard history of philosophy beginning in ancient Greece. Thus, rather than philosophy being an ancient subject dealing with perennial problems, in Rorty's story it turns out to be a modern project responding to the tension within the European Enlightenment between science and religion. Since this concern is now intellectually obsolete, in Rorty's view, his pragmatist conclusion was that to continue debating over the traditional problems of philosophy is a waste of time; a waste of time engendered by historical ignorance, the result of which has been to make philosophy as an area of culture irrelevant to the real problems we face today.

One of Kant's principal sins, as Rorty sees it, was that he professionalised philosophy. On a practical level, he did this by writing complex works that provided a "Fach" to build a professional way of life around (Rorty 1979, 136). On a theoretical level, this was achieved by conceiving philosophy as a "meta-criticism of the special disciplines" (ibid. 166) which was to proceed by analysis of the mind's *a priori* contribution to the world we experience,

and the *a priori* presuppositions for knowledge of that world. Philosophy could then be seen as an arbitrator of culture, looking down in judgement on the knowledge claims of other discourses. It could be pursued with the rigour of mathematics (Rorty 2003, 127) and adopt the “secure path of a science”. For this, strict analytic / synthetic and intuition / concept distinctions were required. For only if concepts, and more generally the *a priori* presuppositions of experience, were conceived as fixed data insulated from change, could philosophy justify making *a priori* claims about how the world must be. If the concept of mind is instead thought of as an ephemeral cultural product, then a more apposite approach to understanding it would be through historical and sociological studies. As Rorty put it, you can only formulate specific philosophical problems “if, with Kant, you think that there are concepts that stay fixed regardless of historical change rather than, with Hegel, that concepts change as history moves along” (Rorty 2004a, 144-5). Moreover, Kant’s conception of philosophy as an autonomous discipline required idealism: “Transcendental idealism was necessary to make sense of the notion that a discipline called ‘philosophy’ could transcend both religion and science by giving you a third, decisive view about the ultimate nature of reality” (Rorty 1981, 146). Only idealism, with its notion of our minds structuring the nature of reality in *a priori* discernible patterns, gives philosophy any right to preside over culture (ibid. 148).

This Kantian conception of philosophy soon faded into insignificance with the rise of romanticism, which Kant himself pathed the way for; he was a transitional figure whose ideas both looked back to the scientific concerns of Locke, and forward to romanticism by relating science to art, morality and religion (ibid. 146). However it was revived in the twentieth century with the advent of analytic philosophy and phenomenology; Russell and Husserl were both neo-Kantian revolutionaries (Rorty 1979, 167). But analytic philosophy, in particular, soon deconstructed itself, showing clearly for the first time the untenability of the Kantian project. This occurred when the analytic / synthetic and intuition / concept distinctions were undermined by Quine and Sellars respectively.

Quine’s attack on the analytic / synthetic distinction suited Rorty’s anti-Kantian agenda perfectly. For it purported to show that a principled distinction could not be drawn between the experiential input which we passively receive from the world, and the conceptual sense we make of it; a distinction of the kind which would allow philosophy to definitely arbitrate on the legitimacy which the world provides to our statements about it. As Rorty sees it, Quine made an essentially Hegelian and pragmatist move (Rorty 1979, chapter 4). Concepts could now only be seen as changeable, historical artefacts, and their application to experience could only be determined through pragmatic considerations. No algorithmic, *a priori* determinable decisions could be made in light of the need to accommodate new experiential evidence; the conceptual import of this would have to be decided within society on the basis of usefulness.

Sellars’s attack on the intuition / concept distinction, however, is a more awkward influence for Rorty, since Sellars was a self-professed Kantian, whose critique of the “myth of the given” was specifically addressed to empiricism, and mirrors Kant’s own. On the face of it, it simply updates, for an analytic audience, the old Kantian point that intuitions without concepts are “blind”. Rorty glosses over this complicating factor in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, but we can see how he was thinking by looking back to his 1970 paper “Strawson’s Objectivity Argument”.

As Rorty puts it here, Kant revolted against the Cartesian notion of experience as “self-luminescent” (Rorty 1970, 252); as a subjective presence with its own built-in conceptual

significance. However it was a revolt that did not go far enough, making Kant a “half-way point between Descartes and Wittgenstein” (ibid. 256). Thus Kant grasped that knowledge is always “discursive rather than intuitive”, and hence requires both concepts and intuitions. The problem was that he remained wedded to the “mental-eye picture of mind”, and thereby thought of concepts as representations, rather than, with Wittgenstein, linguistic skills. Because he thought of concepts as representations, but realised that knowledge always requires both intuitions and concepts, he thought of concepts as a kind of unconscious representation: “unsynthesizing concepts” which needed to combine with another kind of unconscious representation, “unsynthesized intuition”, in order to yield knowledge (ibid. 254-5). This took him away from the Cartesian picture of the mind as known simply in virtue of being mental, but left him with ineffable representations for which there could be no test for their presence (unlike linguistic skills). Consequently, “the relations between these two sorts of unappreciable entities [became] the pseudo-subject of a pseudo-discipline, transcendental philosophy” (ibid. 255). What Kant should have said, with Wittgenstein, is that judgements are indecomposable; and hence that empty or blind representations were not really representations at all. Then he would not have sought knowledge by peering inside the mind, but by looking outwards at linguistic behaviour. This is the Wittgensteinian approach that Sellars pursues with his linguistic analysis of the concept of mind (Sellars 1956, 90-117). On closer inspection, then, we can see why Rorty thought Sellars had used a Kantian tool against Kantianism; Sellars’s Wittgensteinianism allowed him to go all the way.

The upshot of both Quine’s and Sellars’s innovations, for Rorty, is that knowledge cannot be taken out of the historically contingent arena of human conversation. So the notion of the representational mind, reflection upon which would allow philosophy to determine the degree to which our conversations derive from the objective truth, should be abandoned. That it has not been abandoned, and traditional philosophical problems continue to be worked on, shows that analytic philosophy is “stuck in Kant’s eternalisation of the intellectual scene of the 18th century” (Rorty 2010b, 13). And the continued “Kant-worship” which Rorty so despised, shows a failure to realise that Kant’s conclusion that the true nature of reality is unknowable was “a reduction ad absurdum of the subject-object problematic” (Rorty 2010c, 266).

Rorty’s criticism of Kant extends to his moral philosophy. Morality was Kant’s primary intellectual motivation, as Rorty sees it, since he wanted to save the unconditionality and necessity which moral claims had enjoyed within the religious world-view from the encroaching influence of Corpuscularian mechanics (Rorty 1994a, 67). He did this by saying that the world described by science is not the real world. As Rorty puts it, “Kant wanted to consign science to the realm of second-rate truth” (Rorty 1989: 4); the starry heavens above were only a *symbol* of the moral law within, which was isolated from time and chance (ibid. 30). He achieved this with a notion of conscience which “divinises the self” (ibid.), making morality a non-empirical matter to protect it from science. What Kant saw was that laws have traditionally been the most effective method humans have found for managing conflicting needs. His mistake was to then assume that the moral laws which bound his particular Christian upbringing were deep inside us, eternalised and immune from changing empirical conditions. However, history and biology show us that moral laws are not an *a priori* deliverance of reason, but rather a gradual, haphazard social development.⁴

⁴ For a similar analysis, albeit made from the perspective of cognitive science, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), chapter 20.

In order to fit morality into his system of idealism, Kant needed to make it a product of reason alone, thereby detaching sentiment from moral considerations; this left Kant's nonempirical moral self as a "calculating psychopath" (Rorty 1994b, 77). The result was to "impoverish the vocabulary of moral philosophy and to turn the enrichment of our vocabulary of moral reflection over to novelists, poets, and dramatists" (Rorty 1986, 156). Moreover, Kant's contrast between the objectivity of physics and morality inadvertently had the opposite effect to that which he intended, since once the scientific world-view started to take hold in the 19th century, and the influence of idealism waned, the split remained entrenched, but now it was morality rather than physics which was held to be the preserve of second-rate truths.⁵ Any such split is anathema to Rorty's pluralism, since he thinks that once representationalism is abandoned, moral and scientific discourses have the same status; quarks and human rights are ontologically on a par, for instance (Rorty 1998, 8), because their legitimacy is determined only by their social usefulness. Since morality has nothing to do with ontology, and equally nothing to do with *a priori* psychology – Kantian moral philosophers exhibit "the philosopher's special form of bad faith" in attempting to substitute "pseudo-cognition for moral choice" (Rorty 1979, 383) – Rorty concludes that philosophy has no special privilege within moral conversations. The only thing that moral philosophers have which others do not is "a much greater willingness to take seriously the views of Immanuel Kant" (Rorty 2004b, 186).

3. Rorty's Kantian notion of irony

The verdict Rorty casts on philosophy in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is universally damning. The whole discipline is based on a confusion of causation with justification; of thinking we can determine the justificatory force of the causal impact of the world upon our sense organs through *a priori* reflection on the nature of mind; or later in the 20th century, through *a priori* reflection on language. Kant complicated and thereby concealed this basic confusion by telling "an imaginative story about how ineffable intuitions – which are produced by the non-causal interaction of the thing-in-itself with the self-in-itself – get whipped into spatiotemporal shape by the transcendental ego" (Rorty 2007, 116). But shaping is a causal metaphor, so the confusion is still there: the only justification for our beliefs, Rorty thinks, is to be found in how they relate to other beliefs within culturally-bound conversations. Rorty distinguishes "systematic philosophy", which tries to continue the Kantian dream of philosophy as an *a priori* science, from "edifying philosophy", which aims to disrupt systematic philosophy by redescribing it (Rorty 1979, 367-372). The latter tries to stem the progress of the former by bringing in complicating factors, generally based on historicist or holist considerations. Since edifying philosophy is inherently reactive against the systematic philosophy which Rorty wants to discontinue, however, this was clearly not a positive proposal for the future of philosophy. Edification itself, which Rorty does value, is simply imaginative redescription, which drives progress, and frees us from the "bad faith" of thinking that any of our current descriptions capture the "true" nature of the world. But Rorty sees no useful place in society for a specifically *philosophical* form of edification; philosophy as it exists today is simply a Kantian idea that has proved an obstacle to edification.

Rorty does make other apparently positive suggestions for the future of philosophy at the end of his book, since he was keen not to be seen as an "end of philosophy"-type philosopher; this

⁵ A sense in which science is the sole preserve of "first-rate" truth was always implicit in Kant, since he held that we can have objective knowledge only of the empirical world; with the waning influence of his idealism, this sense came to the fore.

reading annoyed him (Rorty 2010b). But they were half-baked. He suggested that philosophers could become all-purpose academics who provide a bridge between different disciplines (Rorty 1979, 393); but gave no reason why philosophers should be especially well-suited to this role. And while he conceded that the great works of philosophy will continue to be read, he urged that new, imaginative ways of reading them be sought (ibid.). He was particularly keen on Derrida in this regard, especially when Derrida treats works of philosophy as simply inspiration for his private fantasies (Rorty 1989, chapter 6). But this literary treatment of philosophy has little to do with the discipline as commonly understood, and again, Rorty can provide no reason why philosophers should do a better job of it than anyone else.

However, Rorty does have one idea which might be construed as a positive philosophical proposal. And surprisingly enough, it comes from Kant. This arises when Rorty is endorsing physicalism, but worrying that this might be construed as exactly the kind of bad faith – thinking that one kind of description is endorsed by the world itself – which he has set himself against. After all, Rorty is opposed to any form of essentialism, scientism, or attempt to capture the objective truth, and so seems a very unlikely advocate of physicalism; to be a physicalist is to think that physical descriptions capture the nature of the real world – this is certainly what the average physicalist thinks – but to be free of Rortyan bad faith is to deny that any kind of description can do this, and recognise instead that redescription is always possible. To resolve this tension, Rorty looks to Kant.

We should consider physicalism as a “moral” choice, Rorty says, which will not lead us to bad faith if we make Kant’s distinction between the empirical and moral (or more generally, practical) standpoints. In “The Canon of Pure Reason”, Kant listed three questions: “What can I know?”, “What ought I to do?”, and “What may I hope?” (Kant 1787, A805 / B833). Kant takes himself to have already answered the first question by this late point in the first *Critique*, and uses this section to broach the second two as a prelude to his subsequent work. He argues that knowledge alone will not answer questions about what we ought to do with our lives or what significance we ought to read into them; questions for which Rorty provides his own colloquial equivalents, such as “What is the point?” (Rorty 1979, 383). Nevertheless, we can still have genuine and even necessary beliefs about such matters from a moral standpoint, so long as our theoretical knowledge does not conflict with our moral beliefs. Thus we can believe we are free, or that God exists, on the practical but nevertheless rational grounds that having such a belief is a presupposition of our moral choices. I cannot say “It is morally certain that there is a God, etc.”, Kant argues, for there is no fact about empirical reality which impresses this belief upon me. But I can say “I am morally certain, etc.” if I am inclined to this belief, it is able to structure and guide to my actions, and there is nothing theoretical to be said against it (Kant 1787, A829 / B857).

Kant’s idea that knowing objective facts about the world will not determine the significance we find in it, is for Rorty an application of his own leading idea that justification must be strictly separated from causation. The world will not tell us how to interpret it, and hence will not tell us what practices of justification to adopt; it can only cause us to hold beliefs after we have adopted such a practice. Adopting a new practice is a matter of moral choice in the sense that we are deciding to accept an “unjustifiable but unconditional moral claim” about how we ought to act (Rorty 1979, 384). As Rorty sees it, however, the Kantian view that freedom cannot be reduced to nature means only that at certain times there is a lack of consensus about which practices of justification should be adopted, and that we consequently have to make our own consensus; we have to create new discourses for describing the world

and agree to abide by the norms they generate. This is not an agreement with the world, but an agreement between human beings designed to govern the future interactions of those who adopt the practice. We are, however, always free to choose new practices, and the sense in which this is a *moral* choice sheds new light on Rorty's catchphrase "re-describing ourselves is the most important thing we can do" (ibid. 358-9).

To commit philosophical bad faith is to make an attempt at "straddling the gap between description and justification" (ibid. 385) by trying to find an algorithm for moral choice. The Kantian antidote is to view our normal discourses "bifocally" (ibid.), that is, as both practices we believe in, and as practices which were adopted for contingent reasons. Thus we can accept the facts discovered in science with a clear conscience, so long as we bear in mind that scientific practice is just one way of making sense of the world that was chosen for contingent historical reasons, and that the facts delivered by natural science are on a par with those of any other normal discourse.⁶ Art criticism could in principle tell us facts of no lesser status than those discovered in physics (ibid. 322). Once this is seen, there is no reason for philosophers who recognise the bad faith inherent in objectification to reject physicalism. For physicalism, as Rorty construes it, is a moral choice, one which helps to keep bad faith at bay by removing any temptation to think of human beings as metaphysically unique, and hence isolated from the possibility of re-description.

Now Rorty later expressed regret at the "overly fervent physicalism of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*" (Rorty 1993, 45), though he does not explain what he now considered "overly fervent", and later in the same article insists that physicalism should not be considered in a "realistic, scientific, reductionist way", but simply as a pragmatic suggestion which promises to leave us with "fewer philosophical problems on our hands" (ibid. 48); which is just what he had said in the first place. It is not clear that he changed his mind, then.⁷ And neither did he change his mind about his Kant-inspired idea that we should look at the world "bifocally", so far as I can see it. This idea was quite prominently placed in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, though more or less completely overlooked within the critical reception of the book; but Rorty made sure this did not happen with his second major work – the one he considered his best (Rorty 2010b) – where it is centre stage throughout. However in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, the idea that we should look at the world "bifocally" has been rebranded in terms of "irony". If I am right that this is basically the same idea, then it seems the ultimate irony that the idea which Rorty put most store in was an idea which he self-consciously adopted from Kant.

Rorty defines an "ironist" as someone who fulfils three conditions (Rorty 1989, 73). Firstly, they have doubts about the vocabulary they use to describe the world, because they are aware

⁶ Rorty understands "normal discourse" in the Kuhnian sense of working within an agreed paradigm; a discourse not mired in controversy, but rather achieving consensus against generally agreed criteria. It is interesting to contrast Rorty's notion of a bifocal view with Sellars's "stereoscopic" one, which Rorty probably had in mind; see Wilfrid Sellars, *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1963), p. 4. Rorty sees "no need to subsume the two [components of the view] in a higher synthesis" (Rorty 1979, 386), while Sellars thinks philosophers "cannot shirk the attempt to see how they fall together" (Sellars 1963, 5).

⁷ It is not clear that he changed his mind about very much at all over the course of his career. See the introduction to *Mind, Language, and Metaphilosophy: Early Philosophical Papers*, eds. Stephen Leach and James Tartaglia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); see also James Tartaglia, *Rorty and the Mirror of Nature* (London: Routledge, 2007), chapter 1.

of and have been impressed by others.⁸ Secondly, they realise that they cannot establish the superiority of their vocabulary by framing an argument within that vocabulary. This is because any such attempt would presuppose the legitimacy of the very vocabulary that the alternative puts into doubt; on realising this, the ironist is forced to recognise their own “unsupported natural confidence”, as Thomas Nagel puts it in his own, surprisingly similar account of the reasons why we should take an ironic attitude to life (Nagel 1971, 19).⁹ And thirdly, the ironist does not think their vocabulary has greater attachment to objective reality than any other, because the ironist, like Rorty, does not believe in objective truth.

Now so far, being an ironist clearly cannot be equated to taking a “bifocal” view of the world. To get to this, we need to add the third concept from the title of Rorty’s book: solidarity. We already have the irony and contingency; it is by recognising the contingency of your own way of describing the world that you become an ironist. However Rorty thinks that if the ironist is a liberal, then they should show solidarity with others through potentially unmitigated public commitment to their vocabulary. They may realise in their private reflective moments that their beliefs that, for instance, physicalism is true and abortion should be legal, are simply contingent beliefs to which there are alternatives. But when they step into the public arena, this should not lessen their commitment to those beliefs; showing solidarity means defending beliefs as forcefully as would someone who thought they had the objective truth on their side. The fundamental premise of his book, Rorty tells us, is that a belief “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” (Rorty 1989, 189). And once we add this final part of the picture, it seems clear that the liberal ironist – the kind who shows solidarity with others – is simply viewing the world “bifocally”. Privately they see the contingency of their beliefs and consequently have doubts about them, but publically they show them absolute commitment.

Rorty’s conception of irony cannot be neatly mapped onto Kant’s distinction between the empirical and practical employments of reason, of course. To make a practical commitment to moral precepts for Kant is not to entertain lingering, unresolvable doubts about them. But the connection is nevertheless close enough for us to see Rorty’s idea as essentially Kantian, especially since Rorty was candid about taking the idea of a “bifocal” view from Kant; and his later notion of irony is clearly just a development from this. The ironist makes a practical, moral commitment to his or her vocabulary, but realises that this cannot be justified from an empirical standpoint. Whereas Kant denied knowledge to make room for faith in God, Rorty denies knowledge to make room for faith in ... physicalism, human rights, or anything else we commit ourselves to in the public arena. The difference is that whereas Kant did not think we could have objective knowledge of anything apart from the empirically known world, Rorty does not think we can have objective knowledge at all.

4. The higher stance of irony

⁸ Rorty says “final” vocabulary. His account of what this qualification amounts to is loose, but the basic idea is that some elements of our vocabularies are more basic than others, such that we can justify a non-basic belief to someone who shares our final vocabulary: we can just say that x is “good”, or in accordance with “professional standards”, and our interlocutor will agree. However irony arises when we recognise that we cannot justify our final vocabulary. Since the justification for our entire vocabulary rests on our final vocabulary, nothing turns on this complicating factor; so I omit it for ease of exposition.

⁹ Surprising, because Rorty saw his own viewpoint as diametrically opposed to Nagel’s; see, for example, Richard Rorty, “Daniel Dennett on Intrinsicity,” in *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers Volume Three* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 98-121 (esp. p. 121).

The problem with embracing this Kantian idea, from Rorty's perspective, is that it depends on a contrast which he is unable to consistently make. Kant secures religion and morality by making it non-empirical. In doing so, we might say, he recommends a kind of Rortyan irony. That is, he thinks we can show full commitment to morality, even though we cannot make a knowledge-claim about it. This thought was emblematic of the Enlightenment: morality becomes something which we each have to bear personal, rational responsibility for, rather than having it foisted upon us by an external agency such as the Church.

Rorty sees himself as advocating something like a second enlightenment. The first was incomplete, because although it taught us to turn our backs on supernatural guidance in the moral sphere, it still left us beholden to another form of supernatural guidance: that of reason, and the objective truth about the natural world that reason can lead us to (Rorty 1996, xxvii). Scientists took over the cultural role of priests as privileged conveyers of objective truth, as Rorty sees it. To complete the process which the first enlightenment set in motion, then, Rorty thinks we need to abandon all vestiges of the notion of objective truth, and realise that human beings are responsible for *everything* they believe. None of our beliefs are a direct deliverance from the world; to think this is inevitably to confuse causation with justification. And that is why it is not good enough to simply be ironic about morality and religion: we must be ironic about everything.¹⁰ But Rorty insists that this need not diminish our commitment to our beliefs, just as waning belief in God did not diminish our moral commitment.

The problem I want to press Rorty on here is specific to the concept of irony. For it seems to me that this concept requires a contrast to be made between those things you take seriously and those you do not. Irony can be a refreshing attitude to take when there are things you cannot avoid doing, but which you do not want to take seriously. It allows a certain detachment which helps you to avoid being drawn into a mind-set you want to avoid. For example, we may approach certain kinds of mindless bureaucracy with irony; we have to go through the motions, but we retain our sanity through the process with a lofty and amused detachment. Or to take a different kind of example, people sometimes claim to listen to music ironically when they like it but know better than to take it seriously; they point out that they are listening ironically in order to remind people of their superior musical tastes, which reveal to them the inferiority of the music, despite the fact that they are "ironically" enjoying it at the moment.

Without this contrast between what you do and do not have a reason to take seriously, the notion of irony makes no sense.¹¹ Kantian irony makes sense (if we think of the practical / empirical distinction in this Rortyan way), because Kant can distinguish empirical knowledge from faith; he can be ironic about the latter because he is non-ironically committed to the former. But once Rorty removes the contrast between things you can have factual knowledge of and things you cannot, there is no longer any room for irony. If all our beliefs are contingent, and equally susceptible to redescription, then he has no standpoint from which to ironise them. Rorty cannot justify taking an ironic stance to our moral beliefs on the grounds that they are not objectively true, for instance, if he thinks that nothing is objectively true; for

¹⁰ I pass over Rorty's elitism here, which would restrict this 'we' to 'intellectuals'. See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 87.

¹¹ For discussion of this point within a much wider context, see James Tartaglia, *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), chapter 8 (esp. p. 175; see also chapter 2 for an analysis of the roots of Rorty's position and others like it).

in that case they are as good as any other kind of belief. In short, Rorty's position uncuts the higher stance required for irony.¹²

Rorty's notion of irony closely resembles Nagel's, as previously mentioned. Nagel thinks that we should take an ironic attitude to life because we have no way to justify the seriousness which we take to it. Thus he says that if we view ourselves "as if from a great height", our concerns begin to seem trivial, as we form an objective conception of ourselves as a "small, contingent, and exceedingly temporary organic bubble in the universal soup" (Nagel 1986, 210). However Nagel realises that such considerations cannot provide the basis for a sound argument to show that we should not take life seriously. After all, the universe does not consider us unimportant on account of our smallness. Rather, Nagel's reason for describing our lives in this way, he says, is that he thinks that our "sense of absurdity finds its natural expression in [such] bad arguments", for the reason that our "small size and short lifespan" are metaphors for the "backward step" we take from life in order to view it in detachment from its everyday significance (Nagel 1971, 21). When we do this, we find that we cannot provide a non-circular justification for the seriousness we take to life, and the appropriate response is the judgement that life is absurd; something we should take an ironic attitude towards. So irony in this case is not a product of a detachment from life rooted in our awareness of something else that should be taken seriously, according to Nagel, but rather comes from our recognition that nothing should be taken seriously, despite the fact that we cannot help taking it seriously.

It seems to me, however, that Nagel is confused. For in the claim that nothing should be taken seriously, "should" implies a norm that the world is not living up to. We might ask: what would justify us in taking life seriously? Perhaps the religious ideal of an intrinsically meaningful universe: from this basis we might hope to provide a non-circular justification of life, and if we failed – because God considers us unimportant – then we might reasonably conclude that life is absurd. If this is the idea in the back of Nagel's mind, as I think it is (see Tartaglia 2016, chapter 2), then the only difference between his irony, and ordinary cases such as my bureaucracy and music examples, is that the paradigm of what we should take seriously is something Nagel does not think exists; we are ironic, because we have an ideal for seriousness that the world does not measure up to. But then Nagel's irony is simply a product of religious disillusionment, rather as Camus's concept of the 'absurd man' explicitly was (Camus 1942).

Rorty's irony seems to me to be in even worse shape. For in his view, the only possible justification for our beliefs is supposed to be social and conversational; Nagel does at least believe in an objective truth. Rorty cannot claim that we must be privately ironic about our beliefs because we recognise that we cannot non-circularly justify them and thereby show they are objectively true, because he rejects the concept of objective truth. He says that the ironist is aware of and has been impressed by alternative beliefs. But this cannot give ironists a reason to be ironic about their own beliefs if we take a purely social and conversational

¹² I think the conception of irony I am outlining accords both with common usage and the original sense of the word; the *eirôn* in Old Comedy spoke from a higher stance to indicate to the audience which claims should not be taken seriously. It also ties in well with Kierkegaard's contention that Socrates was an ironist; the higher stance Socrates spoke from was that of recognising his ignorance, in contrast to his interlocutors, who were unaware of their own ignorance. See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, trans. and eds. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989 (orig. 1841)); for this interpretation of Kierkegaard, see Harold Sarf, "Reflections on Kierkegaard's Socrates," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44 (1983): 255-276.

approach to justification, unless the ironist thinks the alternative beliefs are better, or at least that they might be. But if they do think this, then rather than being ironic, it seems that a more appropriate response would be to try those beliefs out and see whether they really are better; in the sense of more socially useful. So from the exclusively social perspective Rorty insists upon, it seems that if there are no viable alternatives which we think might be better than our own beliefs, then we have no reason to be ironic. The existence of traditional, scientifically discredited systems of medicine, for example, surely provides no reason to be ironic about Western medical science. But if we do think there are viable alternatives, we should investigate them, rather than simply acquiesce in our own beliefs with a lethargic sense of irony; for that would be thoroughly unpragmatic.

The problem, in short, is that Rorty thinks we should be ironic about all our beliefs – the ironist cannot accept that anything they believe is simply true – but this removes any basis for irony. He concedes that there are beliefs for which nobody has thought of any reasonable alternatives (Rorty 1989, 47), but insists that a lack of conversational alternatives should not lead us to infer objective truth (Rorty 1979, chapter 7, §§3-4). But then if we accept that justification is exclusively social and pragmatic, we have no reason for irony about beliefs for which there are no reasonable conversational alternatives. And where there do seem to be reasonable conversational alternatives we have no reason for irony either, for if we are pragmatists we will see this as a spur to investigate them. Rorty might perhaps be able to justify a temporary irony about the latter kind of beliefs, when we know there are good alternatives but have simply not got around to investigating them yet. But in this temporary state of uncertainty, we could hardly have good reason to defend our views to the death within the public arena.

The only superior epistemic standpoint that would make sense of Rortyan irony, I think, would be one from which it is grasped that no beliefs can be justified in terms of an objective truth. And this is a belief, of course, that Rorty showed complete commitment to throughout his career, only apparently lessening his commitment (by classifying it as an experimental social proposal) when challenged on the self-referential integrity of his thought.¹³ For this reason I conclude that Rortyan irony is an indirect product of the very concept – that of objective truth – which he asks us to abandon. Whereas Kant thought that objective truths can only be discovered in the empirical world, and that as such we should be ironic about religion and morality, Rorty thought that since nothing is objectively true, we should be ironic about everything.

Louis Sass's fascinating discussion of the prevalence of irony among schizophrenics sheds some interesting light on Rortyan irony (Sass 1992, 110-115). As Sass explains, schizophrenics often take a deeply ironic attitude to life both to insulate themselves from its perceived threat, and because they think they have discovered some secret – typically one connected with their own inner life – which undercuts the seriousness with which it is treated by ordinary people. This irony allows them to feel important, and also serves to rationalise, and thereby disguise, their madness. Rorty's irony seems to have much in common with this.

¹³ See Richard Rorty, "Hilary Putnam and the Relativist Menace," in *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers Volume Three* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 57. For critical discussion of this response, see James Tartaglia, "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" in *A Companion to Rorty*, ed. Alan Malachowski (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming 2016); see also James Tartaglia "Did Rorty's Pragmatism have Foundations?" *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 18 (2010): 607-627, and James Tartaglia, "Does Rorty's Pragmatism Undermine Itself?" *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 4 (2012): 284-301.

It is supposed to be an entirely private affair. As such, Rorty cannot adopt his typical tactic of justifying it in the social arena: he cannot be suggesting that we become ironists because this might turn out to be socially useful, since it is public commitment, rather than private irony, that is socially useful. So the root of Rortyan irony, just like that of the schizophrenic, must be something that has been privately grasped; something which undercuts non-ironic private commitment. And it is hard to see what else this could be except that the ironist has grasped that nothing is objectively true; this is Rorty's equivalent of the schizophrenic's belief that they have grasped some inner secret with cosmic consequences. But if Rorty's proposal that nothing is objectively true is supposed to be a social proposal to abandon a concept that has not served us well in the past, then he cannot lay claim to this conceit.

It seems to me, then, that Rorty's proposed second enlightenment is just as beholden to the notion of objective truth as the original one. But suppose Rorty had not let Kant influence him, and had consistently abandoned the notion of objective truth. He would then say, as indeed he did, that the justification for all discourses is conversational, and that nothing else is required to back up our commitment to them. However he would not then seek to justify his pluralistic conviction that all discourses are on a par, on the grounds that none of them are objectively true. Yet without this claim, it does not seem that he can justify his pluralism at all. For once we restrict justification to the social, conversational level, it becomes clear that we have considerably more reason to be committed to some of our beliefs than others; which is not the pluralist conclusion Rorty wanted. For the conversational justification for some discourses is evidently much better than others; morality comes out worse than physics and mathematics when it comes to conversational consensus. There is a massive lack of conversational consensus on some central moral issues; take abortion for example. And given this lack of consensus, there is a similar lack of agreement on what it is useful to believe. There are areas of physics and mathematics, by contrast, in which all interested parties can agree.

The conclusion Rorty wanted was that once we clearly distinguish causation from justification, then all discourses are on a par; none are backed up by the objective truth, and so we should abandon what he considered the thoroughly reprehensible notion that science can be objective, whereas moral judgements can only be a matter of opinion. However, this conclusion is not possible unless Rorty inconsistently allows himself to appeal to a Kantian 'bifocal' view. For on a purely conversational criterion of justification, we end up with much the same split between our discourses as that typically provided by those who employ the criterion of objective truth. In fact, unless we enter into the kind of philosophical attempts to show the objectivity of moral judgements which Rorty abhorred, it seems that a certain irony might be appropriate to some of our moral beliefs. That is, we might show complete commitment to our pro-life or pro-choice beliefs in the public arena, for instance, while privately recognising that these beliefs do not deserve to be taken as seriously as our beliefs about mathematics, given the lack of conversational consensus surrounding the former but not the latter. Rorty might reply that all discourses have equal potential for consensus, but without the metaphysical claim that there is no objective truth to back this up – or the alternative metaphysical claim that there are objective truths in all domains of discourse – this reply does not look remotely plausible.

I conclude that Rorty should not have allowed himself to absorb a Kantian idea, because it leaves him ironic about everything, and hence still in the spectre of the objective truth. But without Kant – and with a consistent rejection of objective truth – Rorty would need to abandon his pluralism and privilege some vocabularies over others. And to do so has the

added disadvantage, from his point of view, of pointing back to the notion of objective truth: for without this notion, the fact that more conversationally definitive justifications are available in some areas rather than others is left unexplained. Rorty could not live with Kant, but he could not live without him either. If Rorty was right that philosophy is essentially Kantian, then perhaps his cardinal error was to try to be a completely anti-Kantian philosopher.

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