

Antifoundationalism and the Commitment to Reducing Suffering in Rorty and Madhyamaka Buddhism

Stephen Harris

In his *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, Richard Rorty argues that one can be both a liberal and also an antifoundationalist ironist committed to private self creation. The liberal commitments of Rorty's ironists are likely to be in conflict with his commitment to self creation, since many identities will undercut commitments to reducing suffering. I turn to the antifoundationalist Buddhist Madhyamaka tradition to offer an example of a version of antifoundationalism that escapes this dilemma. The Madhyamaka Buddhist, I argue, because of his careful analysis into the unsatisfactory nature of existence, is motivated to adopt only identities that are committed to eliminating the suffering of self and others. Therefore, his compassion for others is not in tension with a commitment to private self-creation.

In his *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity (CIS)*, Richard Rorty argues that one can be both a liberal, and an antifoundationalist ironist committed to private self creation. In the first section of this essay, I highlight a tension implicit in Rorty's development of the liberal ironist. On the one hand, as a liberal, she is committed to reducing the suffering of others. On the other, as an ironist, she desires to recreate herself, a process requiring redescription of what Rorty calls our final vocabulary, the value terms we use to understand ourselves and our projects. Such redescription, I will argue, endangers the ironist's liberal commitment to removing suffering, since as Rorty himself acknowledges, redescribing another's final vocabulary can inflict the suffering of humiliation on others. Further, her commitment to refashioning her identity may often conflict with her commitment to liberalism, since some of the identities we might adopt may actually be committed to increasing the suffering of others.

In the second section of this essay, I examine how an antifoundationalist tradition committed to removing the suffering of others, that of Madhyamaka Buddhism, avoids this dilemma. Like Rorty, the Madhyamaka does not believe we can appeal to language independent reality as a way of deciding what values we ought to accept. Like Rorty, the Madhyamaka places great emphasis on

reducing the suffering of others. However, Buddhists would claim that Rorty's own analysis of pain is impoverished. If we pay close enough attention, we will see that all of our ordinary experience is a subtle form of suffering. As a result of this insight, for the Madhyamaka, the dilemma of Rorty's liberal ironist does not arise. This is because she is not tempted by the siren call of private self creation. The Bodhisattva is not tempted to adopt private identities conflicting with her commitment to removing suffering because she realizes all such identities would be permeated with suffering themselves.

1. The Divided Liberal Ironist

Throughout much of his writing, Rorty has argued that the idea of accurately describing essences, either of the world, or of human nature, is misguided. Rather, we should "become reconciled to the idea that most of reality is indifferent to our descriptions of it, and that the human self is created by the use of a vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary" (*CIS*, 6). Truth is made rather than found, since "languages are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences" (*CIS* 6). Investigating the nature of truth is unprofitable (*CIS* 30). Rather, we should accept that "anything could be made to look good or bad, important or unimportant, useful or useless, by being re-described" (*CIS*, 7).¹

Although language does not describe language transcendent reality, Rorty claims that every human has his own set of what he calls final vocabulary, "a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives" (*CIS* 73). Our final vocabulary, words like "true", "good", "right", "beautiful", "decency", "kindness", "progressive", "rigorous", "creative", are used to explain and evaluate our world (*CIS* 73). They are final "in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse" (*CIS* 73). The terms of our final vocabulary, then, are the bedrock we hit, beyond which inquiry can go no further.

Our final vocabulary does not accurately represent the world, and the world will never act as mediator among various final vocabularies. (*CIS* 9) A final vocabulary is anchored in societal institutions, and is restricted only by our interactions and conversation with other humans. Rorty, however, is insistent that passionate commitment to our values does not require a belief that these values correspond to mind independent reality. Even if we acknowledge that our ideas of justice and virtue are socially constructed, Rorty believes, we can care about them with enough passion to die for them. In his own writing, Rorty often defends two commitments one gets the sense he would be willing to die for. First, he affirms the Romantic tradition's emphasis on the importance of creation of one's own idiosyncratic identity, a process which requires modifying the final vocabulary one has inherited. I will refer to this as the goal of autonomy. Second, he affirms the liberal values of reducing cruelty and increasing personal freedom. I will refer to this as the goal of liberalism.

Closely tied to the goal of autonomy is Rorty's conception of the ironist. An ironist "has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses," and "she realizes that arguments phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts" (*CIS* 73). She accepts that there is no metavocabulary to mediate between final vocabularies, and "does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others" (*CIS* 73). Ironists accept that "anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed", and are never able to take themselves seriously, since they are aware "the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change" (*CIS* 73–74). Essentially, an ironist realizes that all terms of value, including the ones she has adopted, might be made to look bad by redescription.

Irony is essential to the goal of autonomy, because being autonomous, for Rorty, means choosing one's own final vocabulary, and this requires escaping from the final vocabulary one inherits. Rorty invokes Coleridge in suggesting that an ironist seeks to "create the taste by which he will be judged" (*CIS* 97). Ironists "are afraid that they will get stuck in the vocabulary in which they were brought up", so they recreate themselves by experimenting with alternate final vocabularies, redescribing their situation by playing one final vocabulary off against another "to make the best selves for [themselves] that [they] can" (80). To the extent that she accepts the terms of an inherited final vocabulary, then, the ironist will give them a radically new sense. She is the revolutionary who reconfigures the past to conform to her own idiosyncratic fantasies. Rorty invokes figures like Heidegger, Nietzsche, Derrida, and Hegel as prototypical ironists, persons who radically reconceptualized the history of Western thought.² Irony is essential to the goal of autonomy, then, because creating a new final vocabulary requires rejecting or reconceiving the final vocabulary one inherits. If Picasso had not doubted his inherited artistic norms, he would not have developed Cubism. If the ancient Athenians were not ironic about their inherited government, Democracy would not have developed.

Rorty's goal of liberalism, by contrast, requires accepting some final vocabulary with little modification. Rorty follows Mill in holding the purpose of government is to balance preventing suffering with leaving people alone to live their private lives. (*CIS* 63)³ However, liberal institutions depend upon a subset of a final vocabulary to function, terms like "justice", "liberty", "human rights", "impartiality", and a liberal conception of what it means to be prosperous.⁴ An ironist realizes the liberal final vocabulary is socially constructed, and her quest for autonomy tempts her to redescribe these terms. For liberal values to prevail, then, the ironist must be prevented from redescribing such vocabulary in ways that would undermine the functioning of liberal governments. However, being autonomous requires redescribing inherited final vocabulary. Rorty's commitments, it seems, preclude each other.

Rorty acknowledges the potentially corrosive effects of irony on public institutions.

I cannot go on to claim that there could or ought to be a culture whose public rhetoric is ironist. I cannot imagine a culture which socialized its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialization.⁵ (*CIS* 87)

Rorty's solution is to suggest "that the ironist's final vocabulary can be and should be split into a large private and a small public sector" (*CIS* 99–100). The public sector contains the final vocabulary relevant to the welfare of others, including the vocabulary necessary for the functioning of a liberal democratic government. Such vocabulary is off limits to any redescription which would inhibit its effectiveness at promoting the liberal goals of reduction of cruelty, and personal liberty.⁶ The rest of a person's final vocabulary, what is grouped under the larger private area, is up for grabs. An ironist artist, for instance, may reconceive the meaning of terms like "beauty" and "harmony" however she sees fit, and the ironist novelist may reinterpret norms of narrative structure.⁷

Let us pretend that Thomas Jefferson was an ironist, and believed that nascent American ideals arose as a result of historical contingencies. As an ironist, Jefferson would possess lingering doubts about whether his final vocabulary of "rights," "liberty," and "equality," would really prove better than alternatives at promoting worthwhile human lives. Nevertheless, the ironist Jefferson would believe such values provide the best shot we have at founding a worthwhile society. In asking the ironist Jefferson to privatize his irony, Rorty is pointing out that we cannot interweave public self doubt into our political institutions without inhibiting their ability to function. Consider the beginning of the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Imagine if Jefferson had supplemented these lines with a moment of public irony, adding, "but of course we can't be sure that these values will turn out to be worthwhile in the long run, and besides our nascent democracy will probably end up marginalizing a lot of people." Instead of a declaration upon which a country may be founded, we would have an ineffectual piece of waffling. In the same way, ironist poll workers must not turn away voters from the polls as a result of lingering doubts about the final vocabulary of universal suffrage. Privatizing irony is motivated by an acceptance that certain liberal rhetoric is necessary to enable governmental functioning. If we affirm values like the reduction of cruelty promoted by liberal democracies, then we must be willing to protect liberal final vocabulary from irony that would undermine its effectiveness.⁸

A number of critics have argued that dividing our final vocabularies into public and private realms is unrealistic. Nancy Fraser, for instance, claims

Rorty's position is flawed, since "it stands or falls with the possibility of drawing a sharp boundary between public and private life" (Fraser, 264). However, this is impossible. "Many cultural developments that occur at some remove from processes officially designated as political are nonetheless public." Further, "cultural processes help shape social identities which in turn affect political affiliations" (Fraser, 264).⁹

Fraser is correct in pointing out that private experience can influence public policy. Attending a liberal church may make one more likely to expand voting rights to marginalized persons. Likewise, reading a biography of a lesbian may make us more likely to advocate gay rights. However, it is implausible to interpret Rorty as conceiving of the public private divide as an airtight line that must never be crossed. According to Rorty, the public final vocabularies of liberal governments were themselves the result of past private idiosyncratic fantasy. Political revolutionaries, for Rorty, are strong poets who found "words to fit their fantasies, metaphors which happened to answer to the vaguely felt needs of the rest of the society" (CIS 61).¹⁰ Public final vocabulary, then, is private final vocabulary that catches on with a society.¹¹

For this reason, I think it better to conceive of the distinction between public and private as a boundary protecting certain final vocabulary, including that upon which the functioning of liberal governments depends, from the effects of corrosive ironic redescription. Moreover, Rorty need not deny that private creation can help us modify our liberal final vocabulary. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the writing of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, for instance, helped us see that our conception of human rights and suffrage was impoverished, and needed to be expanded.¹² However, these core liberal commitments of kindness and toleration themselves should not be subjected to public irony; rather, we should modify concepts like freedom and dignity to more closely align with them.

A related complaint often brought against Rorty is that the private public distinction will not do the work it is introduced to do, because there are some private identities that are simply incompatible with liberal values. Rachel Haliburton, for instance, suggests Rorty's claim that we can be "Nietzsche in private and J.S. Mill in public" is "both bizarre and implausible" (Haliburton, 61). If we adopted some Nietzschean attitudes, Haliburton points out, we would presumably act on them, thus undermining our commitments to public liberalism. (Haliburton, 61) In a similar vein, Robert Foelber argues that one could not "be both a private Dahmerian torture ([or] rabid anti-Semite racist) and a good liberal democrat" (Foelber, 34).¹³

Such objections are similar to a complaint against his position Rorty himself considers:

[This] is a suggestion that the public-private split I am advocating will not work: that no one can divide herself up into a private self-creator and a

public liberal, that the same person cannot be, in alternate moments, Nietzsche and J. S. Mill (*CIS* 85).

He suggests this objection is identical to the following:

[It] is psychologically impossible to be a liberal ironist – to be someone for whom “cruelty is the worst thing we do,” and to have no metaphysical beliefs about what all human beings have in common. (*CIS* 85)

However, these objections are distinct. The second is the claim that it is impossible for an individual to be committed to liberal values unless she believes there is transhistorical support for these values. According to this objection, one could not be psychologically committed to removing pain unless one believed, not only that all humans suffer, but also that by nature all humans ought to care about the suffering of others. *CIS* as a whole may be taken to be Rorty’s response this charge. Rorty’s claim, in brief, is that one can believe one’s values are contingent upon historical circumstances, and still be willing to die for them.¹⁴

The first objection, which is essentially the one made by Haliburton and Foelber, highlights the tension of affirming both the goal of autonomy and the goal of liberalism. Autonomy, for the ironist, means redescribing yourself in terms that reject the final vocabulary you have inherited. Autonomy means creating a new private identity for yourself. However, some of these identities will be incompatible with liberal values. A Neo-Nazi rejects the final vocabulary of equality for a fantasy of ethnic superiority. Above, I suggested we view the public private distinction as marking a boundary around liberal final vocabulary that should not be subjected to irony. Here, it becomes apparent that some private identities provide no reason to respect this boundary. If the Neo-Nazi’s private identity is committed to the overthrow of liberal democratic government, then he will want to make public liberal final vocabulary look as ridiculous as he can.

These objections, then, point out that some private identities will be incompatible with public liberal final vocabulary. This does not mean autonomy is incompatible with liberalism. There are many private identities that one may create for oneself, and many idiosyncratic fantasies one may pursue, that would not interfere with one’s liberal commitments. However, a commitment to liberalism acts as a constraint on our pursuit of autonomy. If we want to keep our liberal commitments, there are simply some identities we cannot choose.¹⁵

How then does the liberal ironist choose when her commitment to private self creation interferes with her commitment to liberalism? Rorty believes there are no non question begging reasons that can be given to choose one position over the other:

[Liberal Ironists give] up the idea that liberalism could be justified, and Nazi or Marxist enemies of liberalism refuted, by driving the latter up against an argumentative wall – forcing them to admit that liberal freedom has a “moral privilege” which their own values lacked. (*CIS*, 53)

Further, there is no causal explanation of why we have the values that we do that will give us moral ground over our opponents.

We cannot look back behind the processes of socialization which convinced us twentieth-century liberals of the validity of this claim and appeal to something which is more “real” or less ephemeral than the historical contingencies which brought those processes into existence. (*CIS*, 198)

Moreover, Rorty acknowledges that there will be times when private attempts at self creation conflict with our public obligations. In such cases, our commitments to liberalism have no automatic priority over self creation.

Another central claim of this book, which will seem equally indecent to those who find the purity of morality attractive, is that our responsibilities to others constitute only the public side of our lives, a side which competes with our private affections and our private attempts at self-creation, and which has no automatic priority over such private motives. Whether it has priority in any given case is a matter for deliberation, a process which will usually not be aided by appeal to “classical first principles.” Moral obligation is, in this view, to be thrown in with a lot of other considerations, rather than automatically trump them. (*CIS* 194)¹⁶

The liberal ironist, then, must negotiate between her desire to recreate herself and her desire to remain a good liberal.¹⁷ Moreover, her ironist urges may tempt her to recast her liberal values. Nietzsche, for Rorty, provides the epitome of a commitment to private self creation.

To fail as a poet – and thus, for Nietzsche, to fail as a human being – is to accept somebody else’s description of oneself, to execute a previously prepared program, to write, at most, elegant variations on previously written poems. So the only way to trace home the causes of one’s being as one is would be to tell a story about one’s causes in a new language. (*CIS* 28)

These causes that must be retold, presumably, would include inherited liberal values. The urge for self creation, then, would provide a constant temptation to redescribe the inherited values of social progress, justice and liberalism¹⁸.

In this section, I have shown that Rorty's conception of the liberal ironist who divides her vocabulary into public and private domains is not incoherent, but is dangerously unstable. On the one hand, her commitment to liberalism entails that she protect the final vocabulary upon which liberalism depends from ironic redescription. On the other, her desire for autonomy tempts her to reject her identity as a liberal and reconceive all inherited vocabulary. The liberal ironist, then, teeters on the edge of a precipice.

One way to rescue the liberal ironist from her dilemma would be to return to metaphysics, to attempt to locate a transhistorical non question begging ground which she may appeal to as justification for her liberal commitments. This, of course, is a solution Rorty would never accept. Further, it is not the only solution to her dilemma. In the concluding section, I will examine the case of the antifoundationalist Bodhisattva, the ironic saint of Madhyamaka Buddhism, who both rejects intrinsic essence of reality, and remains firm in his conviction that the elimination of suffering is the only thing worth striving for.

2. Why the Ironic Bodhisattva is not Divided

Central to Rorty's conception of liberalism is his insistence that for a liberal, cruelty is the worst thing you can do. Pain, for Rorty, is nonlinguistic, and the ability to experience pain is shared amongst humans and animals. (*CIS* 88, 94,177) However, human beings have our own distinctive kind of pain, which Rorty calls humiliation. Humans can be "humiliated by the forcible tearing down of the particular structures of language and belief in which they were socialized (or which they pride themselves on having formed for themselves)" (*CIS*, 177). Rorty offers the example of a small child who takes delight in his toys, but then realizes his possessions look ridiculous next to those of a rich child. (*CIS*, 89) Humiliation occurs when our final vocabulary is made to look ridiculous by another's redescription.

All humans and animals, then suffer, and humans can suffer from the distinctive pain of humiliation. However, there is no transhistorical reason why we must infer from this fact that we ought to care about the suffering of others. For Rorty, "feelings of solidarity are necessarily a matter of which similarities and dissimilarities strike us as salient, and ... such salience is a function of a historically contingent final vocabulary" (*CIS* 192). One is a liberal, then, because one has adopted a final vocabulary which recognizes the suffering of others as important to us, words such as "equality" and phrases like "universal human rights." However, we could have focused on other similarities as being the morally significant ones. Romans, for instance, focused on Roman citizenship as the distinguishing factor for who was worthy of legal protection. Foreigners, by contrast, might be fed to lions without moral compunction.¹⁹

As we have seen in the last section, the liberal ironist's commitment to reducing suffering must also compete with her desire for private self creation. Irony requires redescrbing final vocabulary, and redescrbing final vocabulary

of other persons often humiliates them. Further, some private identities require inflicting physical and psychological pain on others. Not only the sadist and the boxer, but also the comedian and satirist inflict pain and humiliation on others for their own satisfaction.

The Madhyamaka Buddhist, like Rorty, would affirm both that pain is nonlinguistic experience, and that there is no transhistorical essence that can be appealed to as grounds for our ethical commitments. However, a Buddhist would claim that Rorty's analysis of pain is impoverished. For the Buddhist, if we pay close enough attention, we will see that all of our ordinary experience is a subtle form of suffering. As a result, for the Madhyamaka, the dilemma of the liberal ironist does not arise. This is because she is not tempted by the siren call of private self creation. The Bodhisattva is not tempted to adopt private identities conflicting with her commitment to removing suffering because she realizes all such identities would be permeated with suffering themselves.

I next briefly analyse Madhyamaka antifoundationalism, and then pass to a more detailed treatment of the Buddhist analysis of suffering, and finally to an account of how this analysis undercuts the desire for private self creation.²⁰

3. Madhyamaka Antifoundationalism

One of the most famous Madhyamaka arguments against essence (*svabhāva*) is given by the 7th century Buddhist master Candrakīrti. In the argument, Candrakīrti argues a chariot has no essence, or intrinsic existence (*svabhāva*), that is it does not exist independently of its relations with other things. Instead, it exists only as a result of conceptual labeling by a mind in accordance with its purpose for human affairs. The conclusion is that chariots have no independent essence; "chariot" is merely a term we label a certain configuration of chariot parts that serves our purposes. This result is generalized to all other objects, including persons.

6: 151

We cannot claim a chariot is other than its parts,
Nor that it is their owner, nor identical with them.
It is not in its parts; its parts are not contained in it.
It's not the mere collection of the parts nor yet their shape.

6: 158

Thus this sevenfold reasoning reveals,
In ultimate or worldly terms, that nothing is established.
But if phenomena are left as found, unanalyzed,
They are indeed imputed in dependence on their parts.
(Padmakara, 89–90)

The underlying assumption of Candrakīrti's analysis is that if an object has an essence (*svabhāva*), we should be able to locate it under conceptual analysis. Another way of stating this point is to claim that there must be sufficient and necessary identity conditions of being a chariot. However, no such essential nature of the chariot can be located. Candrakīrti makes this point by considering the relation between the chariot and its parts. If an object had an intrinsic identity/essence, then we should be able to state the relation between this essence and its parts. However, he argues, this is impossible.

Verse 151 considers the seven possibilities, assumed to be exhaustive, of the relation between the chariot and its parts. First, we cannot claim a chariot is other than its parts, for then the chariot would exist independently of its parts, which is absurd. Nor does the chariot own the parts, nor is it identical to them. If it owned the parts, there would have to be something that could be named "chariot" that stood apart from its parts as their possessor. However, no such item can be located. If the chariot were identical to its parts, then when a part was removed, the chariot would cease to exist. But this obviously is not the case. If the chariot was contained in its parts, then it could be located somewhere amongst the parts, but on analysis no such chariot can be found. Nor can the parts of the chariot be contained in the chariot, for we can identify no independently subsisting chariot in which chariot parts are locatable. The chariot cannot be said to be simply a collection of chariot parts, for simply throwing the requisite chariot parts in a heap does not create a chariot. Finally, the shape of the chariot is not the chariot, since a cutout of a chariot also has the shape of a chariot.²¹

If the chariot had an essence, a whatness that it was independently of our purposes, then we should be able to specify its relation to its parts. However, such a relationship cannot be specified. In verse 158, Candrakīrti draws his conclusion. Logical analysis reveals the objects of our everyday world have no intrinsic essence. However, such phenomena continue to function in everyday life. We should conclude, therefore, that such phenomena are merely imputed in dependence upon their parts, as an aid to our practical activity in the world. The term "chariot" names a useful configuration of chariot parts that may be used to engage in the function of rapid movement. Moreover, each of the chariot's parts can be subjected to a similar analysis. The relation between the wheel of the chariot and its spokes and hub, for instance, cannot be specified, and therefore the term "wheel" also is merely a useful designation to label an arrangement of parts that has a useful function. The argument by which the inherent existence of the chariot was deconstructed could be applied to any other entity, including persons. All entities exist only by convention, in dependence on their parts, and conceptual labeling motivated by pragmatic purposes.²²

A comprehensive evaluation of the similarities and differences between Madhyamaka and Rortian antiessentialism is beyond the scope of this essay. However, we can briefly note that Candrakīrti joins Rorty in insisting that any

view of language mapping onto a mind independent universe is ill conceived. Instead, Candrakīrti insists language is used only for pragmatic effect:

Words are not like policemen on the prowl: we are not subject to their independence. On the contrary, their truth lies in their efficacy (*śakti*); they take their meaning from the intention of the one using them. (Sprung, 38)

Like Rorty, then, for Candrakīrti arguments do not attempt to obtain a translinguistic truth, but rather are used for practical purposes.

The wise do not give a reasoned account of the everyday experience of the ordinary man. Rather, adopting for the sake of enlightening others, and as a means only, what passes for reasoning in the everyday world, they work for the enlightenment of the ordinary man. (Sprung, 50–51)

Madhyamakas like Candrakīrti, then, are antifoundationalist about language in holding the universe will not mediate between competing truth claims. Rather, language is used as a tool to convince others of one's own views. So like Rorty, the Madhyamaka claims no transhistorical essence of humans or the universe need be appealed to as grounds for our ethical commitments.

Further, like Rorty, the Madhyamaka is passionately committed to the welfare of other beings. Rorty's humanism takes the form of political liberalism, a commitment to reducing suffering and increasing individual liberty. By contrast, the Madhyamaka does not focus on individual liberty, and as a monastic order, places relatively little emphasis on social reform. However, like Rorty, the Madhyamaka emphasizes the importance of removing suffering. In fact, the Madhyamaka's commitment is much more radical than that of Rorty. Consider two of the concluding verses of the 8th century Madhyamaka, Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*:

10: 55: For as long as space endure and for as long as the world lasts, may I live dispelling the miseries of the world.

10: 56: Whatever suffering there is for the world, may it all ripen upon me. May the world find happiness through all the virtue of the Bodhisattvas. (Wallace and Wallace, 144)

The Bodhisattva is a Buddhist saint who is reborn countless times, working to lead all other sentient beings from suffering. In verse 55, Śāntideva prays to take rebirth until all suffering is eliminated. In verse 56, he strengthens his conviction, asking to take on all suffering of all sentient beings. Sentient beings for the Buddhist include all animals.²⁵ So the Bodhisattva radicalizes Rorty's liberal commitments. Rorty wants to raise sensitivity to the suffering of

others as a means of reducing cruelty. The Bodhisattva wants to do this as well, but she is sensitive to the suffering of all living beings, commits to removing all suffering whatsoever, and accepts an expansive view of human potential, including the possibility of multiple rebirths in which this can be done.

Of course, Rorty would not share the Buddhists belief in rebirth, nor her optimism that suffering may be completely removed. However, Rorty would certainly endorse Śāntideva's commitment to increasing our sensitivity to the suffering of others.

8: 90: One should first earnestly mediate on the equality of oneself and others in this way: "All equally experience suffering and happiness, and I must protect them as I do myself." (Wallace and Wallace, 100)

Here, Śāntideva urges us to open ourselves to the realization that the pain experienced by other persons is like our own, in feeling negative. Rorty might well add the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* to the list of texts he affirms as being efficacious in sensitizing us to the suffering of others.

I concluded the first section of this essay by highlighting the precarious position Rorty's liberal ironist finds herself in. On the one hand, she is committed to the goal of liberalism, including reducing suffering. On the other, she affirms the importance of irony, of redescribing one's inherited values and conceiving one's identity anew. The ironist's desire for autonomy, I suggested, will tempt her to abandon the final vocabulary upon which liberalism depends.

Like the liberal ironist, the Madhyamaka Bodhisattva is an antifoundationalist; she realizes her final vocabulary, terms like compassion (*karuṇā*), liberation (*nirvāna*), and altruistic intention to liberate others from pain (*bodhicitta*), are adopted for pragmatic purposes, and are not grounded in the transcendent nature of the universe. The ironic Bodhisattva, however, is not tempted to abandon her commitment to freeing others from pain by temptations to indulge in personal self creation. This is because her analysis of suffering runs much deeper than does Rorty. The Buddhist understands the nature of ordinary human experience to be suffering; idiosyncratic private fantasies are not alluring to her, for she realizes any such desire merely continues the unending cycle of pain. For the Madhyamaka Buddhist, the only identity worth affirming is one in which the public and private come together: that of the spiritual saint working tirelessly to eliminate the suffering of all beings.

4. The Buddhist analysis of Suffering (*duhkha*)

The Sanskrit word *duhkha* is often translated suffering, but this is somewhat misleading, since *duhkha* can also refer to much subtler unsatisfactory experience.

The traditional Buddhist analysis of *duhkha* (suffering) is divided into three types. First, there is the suffering of suffering (*duhkha duhkha*), intense

physical or mental pain, the kinds of experiences we generally refer to as suffering. Second, there is the suffering of change (*viparinama dukkha*), the suffering we experience as a result of losing something we care about. In this sense, even things experienced at the moment as joyful are also unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), since they are the conditions for suffering in the future. Ice cream tastes good, but it can lead to cavities. Close relationships bring joy, but such happiness is unstable, since all relationships must end in separation, or ultimately death.

The final type of suffering, *sankhara dukkha*, is the most subtle. Often translated as the suffering of conditioned existence, this is the unsatisfactory condition of existing in a universe that is transient and unstable.²⁴ This is the sense in which, for a Buddhist, all existence is suffering (*sarva dukkham*). Consider this verse from the early Pali canon:

555: It's only suffering that comes to be
Suffering that stands and falls away
Nothing but suffering comes to be,
Nothing but suffering ceases.
(*Samyutta* 230)²⁵

Our experience of the world is one of objects that serve our needs. However, ultimately the elements which make up these objects are all unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), because they are unstable and give way. This is true of all the events, persons, and objects that we naively believe bring us joy.

25: It is as with a hungry dog who gnaws a bone;
Thought tasted, never give they satisfaction.
Since they are thus a mass of dry, old bones
Who, self-possessed, would take delight in sense-desires?

29: Gained at the price of many bitter efforts,
They are destroyed here often in a moment.
Since thus they are mere dream-enjoyments,
Who, self-possessed, would take delight in sense-desires?
(Conze, 85–86)

We think pursuing empirical enjoyments will bring satisfaction, but the nature of existence is that temporary satisfaction will always give way to future craving. To use a modern example, ordinary beings are like heroin addicts. When she has the drug she needs, an addict goes through periods of bliss and rapture (*viparinama dukkha*) followed by the agony of withdraw from the drug (*dukkha dukkha*). However, from an outside perspective, the whole series of seeking and taking the drug all shows up as a horribly impoverished way of existing (*samskāra-dukkha*). Likewise, all of our experience is contaminated by

a subtle clinging towards inherently transient elements of experience that can never bring real satisfaction.

The ironic Bodhisattva, then, is not tempted to indulge in private self creation, because she knows that acting out novel identities will be saturated by suffering. The only project that is truly worthwhile is that of removing suffering. The Madhyamaka author, Śāntideva often explicitly invokes the inevitability of death and the unsatisfactory nature of human existence as ways of undercutting motivation to undertake any project other than those conducive to liberating oneself and others from suffering.

2: 60: What of value has remained with me from earlier experience which have disappeared, and engrossed in which I neglected the counsel of spiritual mentors?" (Wallace and Wallace, 30)

6:59: Even though I have acquired many possessions and have enjoyed pleasures for a long time, I shall depart empty-handed and naked as if I had been robbed." (Wallace and Wallace, 68)

Pleasure and satisfactions experienced are transient, and do not bring lasting joy. Further, death, always, approaches.

8: 33: A person is born alone and also dies alone. No one else has a share in one's agony. What is the use of loved ones who create hindrances? (Wallace and Wallace, 93)

In the following verses, Śāntideva asks us to imagine ourselves in a charnel ground, contemplating the rotting corpse of our beloved.

8: 46: Jealous one, why do you not protect what was guarded from the glances of others, as it is being eaten now?

8: 51: You had this passion for it even when it was covered, so why do you dislike it when it is uncovered? If you have no use for it, why do you caress it when it is covered?

8: 52: If you have no passion for the impure, why do you embrace someone else, who is a skeleton of bones tied by sinews and smeared with a mire of flesh?

Rorty claims that humans are susceptible to a certain type of pain, humiliation. We are humiliated when the final vocabulary we have inherited, or chosen, is made to appear worthless. (CIS 90) The final vocabulary of most humans includes terms like romantic love, marital fidelity, and passion. Here, Śāntideva offers a redescription of romantic love intended to humiliate us, in

Rorty's sense. Romantic love is seen as a farce, since it is conducted between two beings that will soon perish. Putting our happiness in social institutions like marriage, Śāntideva points out, is relying on bodies and minds that will soon be eaten by worms in a graveyard. Although such humiliation causes suffering, Śāntideva is trying to humiliate us to reduce our pain in the long run. It is only when we accept that the desires of ordinary existence can bring no lasting happiness that we can focus on the Buddhist path to salvation which can remove all pain.

Rorty and the Madhyamaka both accept that pain is nonlinguistic experience. However, for Rorty, the fact that we suffer offers relatively little constraint on the final vocabulary we can adopt. Pain experienced is balanced out by the pleasure of privately pursuing idiosyncratic fantasies. By contrast, the Madhyamaka understands all ordinary experience to be pervaded by suffering. Such an understanding humiliates, in Rorty's sense; it strips away the significance of most of the final vocabulary upon which private pursuit of satisfaction depends. His understanding of suffering, then, constrains the Madhyamaka in the final vocabulary he accepts. Only terms relevant to eliminating this pervasive suffering, terms like compassion and desire for liberation, can be seen as worthwhile once the unsatisfactory nature of our experience has been understood.

We can understand, now, why, unlike the liberal ironist, the Bodhisattva is not divided. She does not alternate between her commitment to the welfare of others, and desires for novel self creation, because she understands all such indulgences take place within the cycle of suffering characterized by continual birth and death. The only private identity worth affirming, for the Bodhisattva, is the public identity of working to remove the suffering of all sentient beings. Rorty can respond that the Buddhist account is nihilistic, overestimating the unsatisfactory nature of existence, and underestimating the aesthetic joy of ironic redescription. Candrakīrti and Śāntideva, in turn, will reply that Rorty has not paid enough attention to suffering, that belonging to others and his own.

NOTES

1. See *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* for a detailed description of how Rorty came to accept these views.

2. Although Rorty is not explicit about this, it's helpful to identify two levels of the goal of self creation. For many people in a liberal society, this means for the most part, choosing amongst identities offered to one by society. A student might study to become a lawyer, or a teacher, and in his free time might take up established recreational activities like bowling or going to the movies. Generally, such persons would not be ironists, and would not pursue the goal of autonomy, since to a large extent they accept the final vocabularies they inherit. Such persons would still benefit from the liberal's commitment to allowing persons to choose their own identities. The ironist, by contrast, is not content with fitting into the mold she has inherited; she creates a new mold for her

identity. This distinction allows us to make sense of Rorty's claim that "in the ideal liberal society, the intellectuals would still be ironists, although the nonintellectuals would not" (*CIS*, 87).

3. Another major influence on Rorty's conception of Liberalism is Judith Shklar, whose definition of liberals as "people for whom cruelty is the worst thing" he cites with approval. See *CIS*, 74.

4. Rorty's commitment to the value of personal self creation, and his commitment to the liberal values of democracy are tightly linked. Liberalism is a means of ensuring everyone has the opportunity to develop their identities as they choose, constrained only by an agreement to let others also develop as they choose. "The social glue holding together the ideal liberal society described in the previous chapter consists in little more than a consensus that the point of social organization is to let everybody have a chance at self-creation to the best of his or her abilities, and that that goal requires, besides peace and wealth, the standard "bourgeois freedoms" (*CIS*, 84–85).

5. Rorty goes on to claim "Irony seems inherently a private matter." (*CIS*, 87) For reasons that will become apparent as we progress, I think this must be interpreted as an overstatement. For the liberal ironist, irony needs to remain a private matter, but there is no reason it cannot be applied to the public sector.

6. As Rorty puts it, "What binds societies together are common vocabularies and common hopes." What characterizes modern liberal societies is "the hope that life will eventually be freer, less cruel, more leisured, richer in goods and experiences, not just for our descendants but for everybody's descendants" (*CIS* 86). The ironist realizes these hopes can be made to look bad by redescription. Nietzsche offered descriptions wherein lessening cruelty was a sign of humanities retrogression, rather than its progress. A liberal ironist, then, must ensure her redescriptions do not corrode public liberal hope.

7. Rorty offers Proust as the prototypical example of the private ironist. See *CIS*, 98–103.

8. In *CIS*, Rorty places great emphasis on Mill in support of his belief that liberal government should be concerned with reducing cruelty and respecting private freedom. Therefore, it would be easy to assume that Rorty intended, by the public sphere, the sphere of politics. Nancy Fraser, amongst others, has taken this to be his meaning. See Fraser (1988). However, in later works, he explains that by public he means anything "having to do with the suffering of other human beings." (Rorty 1998, 307–308, footnote 2). I think that such a broad understanding of the public realm is problematic, since it would seem that most ironizing would, to some extent, contribute to the suffering of other humans. Rorty's exemplar of privatized irony, Proust's novel *Remembrance of Things Past*, might well have created considerable suffering amongst those who felt humiliated by their depiction within. Privatizing irony, then, would be, for the most part, impossible. Perhaps the most charitable way of viewing Rorty's proposed distinction, is to hold that we ought to minimize the suffering our ironizing does to others. This means that final vocabulary important to others should be respected, to the extent this is possible. This would, as I have argued in this essay, mean that a liberal ironist would not undermine socially useful political final vocabulary.

9. See also Koopman (2007), O'Neill (2000), and Marsonet (1996) for similar complaints.

10. Cf. *CIS* 77. "[The ironist] thinks of final vocabularies as poetic achievements rather than as fruits of diligent inquiry according to antecedently formulated criteria."

11. Cf. *CIS* 37–38.

12. Likewise, Rorty conceives of the writing of Nabakov and Orwell as serving to sensitize us to the suffering of others. See *CIS* chaps. 7–8.

13. Cf. Marsonet, 395.

14. See here especially *CIS* chaps. 3 and 4. One of Rorty's arguments for this view is that abandoning our belief in God has done nothing to corrode our liberal commitments. Our metaphysical beliefs, presumably, could also be abandoned without ill effect. See *CIS* 85–88. Although I am sympathetic to Rorty's views in this regard, it is not the purpose of this essay to evaluate them. Rather, I am interested in the tension arising between Rorty's merely historically contingent commitments to both liberal ideas and private Romantic self creation.

15. Rorty makes this point by developing the contrast between the private ironist novelist, and the ironist theorist. The ironist theorist wants "the sublime and ineffable, not just the beautiful and novel – something incommensurable with the past, not simply the past recaptured through rearrangement and redescription." They are not satisfied with "the effable and relative beauty of rearrangement," but instead desire "the ineffable and absolute sublimity of the Wholly Other; they want Total Revolution." The ironist theorist will reject the final vocabulary upon which liberalism is founded. By contrast, the ironist novelist is "content with mere difference." They realize that "private autonomy can be gained by redescribing one's past in a way which had not occurred to the past. It does not require apocalyptic novelty of the sort which ironist theory demands" (*CIS*, 101). For the sake of liberal values, then, Rorty asks ironists to take the ironist novelist as an exemplar, and refrain from the corrosive public irony of the theorist.

16. See also *CIS* 197.

17. Also helpful here is Rorty's account in "Trotzky and the Wild Orchids" in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, esp. 12–13.

18. See also *CIS*, 73–74. "The ironist spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game. She worries that the process of socialization which turned her into a human being by giving her a language may have given her the wrong language, and so turned her into the wrong kind of human being."

19. This, also, provides the answer to the objection sometimes made that Rorty contradicts his anti-essentialism by construing the ability to experience pain and humiliation as the essence of humans. For Rorty, all humans do experience pain, but it is merely a result of historical contingencies that we focus on this fact as being morally significant. Saying there is no essence to being human, for Rorty, does not mean there are no features all (or almost all) humans share. Rather, it means there is no transcultural reason we must focus on any one of these shared features as being particularly significant. See Garland, 212–213 and Haber, 70, for versions of this objection.

20. Rorty acknowledges that there will be some persons "for whom the search for private perfection coincides with the project of living for others" (*CIS*, 49). Rorty's own example is that of the Christian saint. However, the Christian saint is not an antifoundationalist: he grounds his commitments to others in the transcendent. The Bodhisattva, by contrast, is an antifoundationalist. One purpose of this section, then, is to illustrate how one's private and public lives may be unified, even without resorting to foundationalist assumptions.

21. Candrakīrti and Rorty are alike in rejecting the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic properties. As Rorty puts it, we need to reject the "distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic – between the inner core of X and a peripheral area of X which is constituted by the fact that X stands in certain relations to the other items which make up

the universe. . . For pragmatists, there is no such thing as a nonrelational feature of X, any more than there is such a thing as the intrinsic nature, the essence, of X. So there can be no such thing as a description which matches the way X really is, apart from its relation to human needs or consciousness or language.” (Rorty, 1999, 51). To say an entity has no nonrelational features is to say, with Candrakīrti, that it has no intrinsic existence (*svabhāva*).

22. The Madhyamaka, therefore, is antifoundationalist. However, it is not clear that a Madhyamaka is an ironist exactly in Rorty’s sense. For Rorty, the ironist must have continuing doubts about the effectiveness of his final vocabulary. A Bodhisattva, certainly, seems to have no doubts about whether her commitment to liberating all beings from suffering is a worthy goal. Nevertheless, as already argued, the Madhyamaka does not think the terms of her final vocabulary correspond to any mind independent reality. Further, she is willing to adopt alternate final vocabulary when to do so will help liberate other beings. The Buddha, for instance, is held to have offered teachings contradicting core Buddhist tenets as a skillful means for the sake of his audience. See Hungtington (1989) for a Rortian inspired reading of Candrakīrti.

23. Rorty points out that humans share with animals the ability to feel pain. He suggests that we can either extend moral vocabulary to cover animals, or identify a distinctive kind of human pain to act as the morally relevant factor. Rorty chooses the second option, identifying humiliation as a kind of pain experienced only by humans. Buddhists, in contrast, choose the first, extending moral vocabulary to cover animals. See *CIS* 92 and 177.

24. On the three types of suffering, see *Dīgha Nikāya* (iii, 217).

25. Much of what follows draws upon sources from the early Buddhist canon. Early Buddhists were not necessarily antifoundationalist; however, the early Buddhist analysis of experience as being pervaded by suffering has been accepted by the Madhyamaka.

REFERENCES

- Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. 2000. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (Samyutta Nikāya)*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Cāndrakīrti. 2004. *Madhyamakāvātara*. Padmakara Translation Group, trans. Boston: Shambhala.
- Cāndrakīrti. 1979. *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way: The Essential Chapters from the Prasannapadā of Candrakīrti*, trans. Mervyn Spring and T. R. V. Murti. Boulder, Col.: Prajñā Press.
- Conze, Edward. 1956. *Buddhist Meditation*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Foelber, Robert E. 1994. “Can an Historicist Sustain a Diehard Commitment to Liberal Democracy? The Case of Rorty’s Liberal Ironist.” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 32: 19–48.
- Fraser, Nancy. 1988. “Solidarity or Singularity? Richard Rorty Between Romanticism and Technocracy.” *Praxis International* 8: 257–272.

- Garland, William. 1996. "Private Self-Creation and Public Solidarity: A Critique of Rorty's Vision of Human Life." *Southwestern Philosophy Review* 12: 207–215.
- Haber, Honi. 1993. "Richard Rorty's Failed Politics." *Social Epistemology* 1: 61–76.
- Haliburton, Rachel. 1997. "Richard Rorty and the Problem of Cruelty." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 23.1: 49–69.
- Huntington, C. W., Jr., with Geshé Namgyal Wangchen. 1989. *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Mādhyamika*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Koopman, Colin. 2007. "Rorty's Moral Philosophy for Liberal Democratic Culture." *Contemporary Pragmatism* 4.2: 45–64.
- Marsonet, Michele. 1996. "Richard Rorty's Ironic Liberalism: A Critical Analysis." *Journal of Philosophical Research*. 21: 391–403.
- O'Neill, Shane. 2000. "Private Irony and the Public Hope of Richard Rorty's Liberalism." In *Public and Private*, ed. Maurizio Passerin and Ursula Vogel. London and New York: Routledge.
- Rorty, Richard. 1998. *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, Richard. 1999. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin Books.
- Rorty, Richard. 2008. *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, Richard. 2009. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 39th anniversary edn. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Śāntideva. 1997. *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life (Bodhicaryāvatāra)*, ed. Vesna Wallace and Alan Wallace. Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications.
- Walshe, Maurice, trans. 1995. *The Long Discourses of the Buddha (Dīgha Nikāya)*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

Stephen Harris
PhD candidate, Department of Philosophy
University of New Mexico
MSC 03 2140
Albuquerque, NM 87131
United States