

Two faces of irony: Kant and Rorty

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1) Introduction

Kant is not generally appreciated for his ironic style. In a discussion of Kant's transcendental idealism, the contemporary British philosopher and Kant scholar, P.F. Strawson, obviously with a fair amount of irony, considers the possibility that Kant might deny the existence of 'things as they are in themselves'. Strawson rejects this interpretation, however, since it would imply that the doctrine of transcendental idealism was "generally expressed with a misleading excess of irony" whereas "irony, except of a cheerfully obvious kind, is not characteristic of Kant." (1966 35). Schopenhauer seems to voice the received view about Kant's style, when he observes that it is of a 'splendid aridity' [glänzende Trockenheit], like Aristotle's, except for the former's obscurity. (1818 507).

As Kant's biographer Vorländer observes, this aridity is a feature of Kant's, what he calls 'new style', that was adopted in the first *Critique*. Kant realised that this 'new style' was "widely different from the tone of the genius" (R4989, 18.53; cf. Vorländer 1924 99). However, it is not a feature of Kant's precritical writings, for which popular writers were his examples (98-99). Even less so of his historical and polemical writings of the 80s. And to say that his minor political works of the 90s are dull and dry would amount to a lack of literary taste. In particular, his essay on perpetual peace is marked by a display of ironic wit.

This feature has not remained unattended by his contemporaries. Fichte notices the "jauntiness and pleasantness of its discourse, and the unpretending way in which the sublime, all-embracing ideas therein, are laid down." (1796 427). And Schlegel praises the open-mindedness and candour of the discourse, which is pleasantly "spiced with well chosen witticisms and witty cheer (1796 51). At the end of the next century, Lemonnier, a champion of the International Peace Bureau, an initiative that paved the way for the League of Nations, the predecessor of the United Nations, underscores the irony, even pleasantry of its diplomatic format. This, he highly appreciates as a characteristically German caprice (1880 iii).

Vorländer does not deny Kant's critical style its humour and ironic wit altogether. As an example, he mentions Kant's usage of metaphor (e.g. B784; in 1924 110). Nevertheless he deplores the deficiencies of the critical style and is eager to look for an explanation. This he finds in Kant's unconditional truthfulness and objectivity. The difference between the critical style on the one hand and the popular style of the precritical writings and the ironic style of the polemic, historical and political writings on the other can, so Vorländer, be explained by their respective purposes. The former are aimed at convincing the reader of an insight; the latter

purport to persuade her of an opinion. (1924 102). He even goes so far as to discuss Kant's political writings under the heading "Kant as politician" (210 ff.).

This explanation presupposes that Kant used irony, e.g. in *On Perpetual Peace*, as a persuasive device, a device he left largely unemployed in his critical style. It also suggests that in his political writings, Kant was less concerned with unconditional truthfulness and objectivity than in his critical work. If therefore, as Strawson noticed, Kant's critical work is unlikely to carry a misleading excess of irony — to the extent of the notion of the 'thing as it is in itself' to be a mere phantasm — this could be different in the political philosophy, at the expense of its truthfulness and objectivity. This could cause the reader to receive the idea of a perpetual peace as a mere phantasm. Fichte seemed to be aware of this danger as he observes that the reader could by the stylishness of *On Perpetual Peace* be betrayed to underestimate the importance of this discourse, and take its ideas as merely a pious wish, and be entertained by it (1796 427). His qualifying the ideas Kant expressed in this essay as sublime and all embracing shows, however, that he did not follow Vorländer's suggestion that Kant as a politician was deficient in truthfulness and objectivity.

Therefore, Vorländer's inquiry into the reasons for the 'inner clarity' (1924 111) of Kant's critical style might as well be replaced, or complemented, by an inquiry into the reasons for his use of irony, in particular in this political essay, and its relation with the genuine philosophical ideas that are its subject-matter. What, then is the function of irony in this text, in respect with the ideas that are exposed in it? To answer this question, I recall that whereas irony is a trope in Kant's political philosophy, it is a key concept in Rorty's. In *Irony, Contingency and Solidarity* Rorty sketches a figure whom he calls a 'liberal ironist' (1989 xv). The liberal ironist is the prototype of the edified post-modern individual who has overcome liberal metaphysics. In his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty had already settled with Kant's metaphysics of nature. The liberal ironist is supposed to settle with the metaphysics of morals. Ironism just is viewed as an answer to all forms of political foundationalism.

Irony, therefore, might be a clue to the differences, and, perhaps, in contrast with Rorty's distancing himself from Kant, similarities between their respective political philosophies. A comparison of Kantian with Rortian irony might reveal continuities and discontinuities in political thought between the European Enlightenment and American post-modernism. It, therefore, might help to better understand our time.

Hence, I propose to carry out a contrastive analysis of these two faces of irony. I will do this along the lines of the opposition Rorty elaborates between his liberal ironist and the liberal metaphysician. The political dimension of the two faces of irony we are discussing is illustrated by an account of the different ways Kant and Rorty deal with the private-public split in their respective political philosophies, and of the way they view solidarity. I will begin with the liberal ironist (section 2a). Next I will try to find out in what respect the irony Kant displays as a

politician differs from the attitude of the liberal ironist (section 2b). I will conclude with a plea for putting style on the philosophical agenda (section 3).

2) The liberal ironist and the liberal metaphysician

Rorty sketches his liberal ironist in opposition with the liberal metaphysician. Liberal metaphysics, of which Kant's 'residual Platonism' (1989 35) in his political philosophy is a good example, is committed to an "idea of rationality (that) centers around the idea that we need to bring particular actions under general principles if we are to be moral." (33). The arguments to sustain this idea are produced within a, what Rorty calls 'strategy of metaphysics', which is the paradigm of rationality. This strategy consists in spotting "an apparent contradiction between (...) two intrinsically plausible propositions and then propose a distinction which will resolve the contradiction". (77) Kant's claim concerning the compatibility of politics with morals according to a transcendental concept of public law (1796 381), fits, of course, well in this strategy.

In contrast, the ironist manifests a "willingness to face up to the *contingency* of the language we use" (Rorty 1989 9; orig. emph.). A liberal ironist fulfils the supplementary condition that she thinks that "cruelty is the worst thing we do". Rorty stresses that there is no neutral (197) "noncircular theoretical backup" for this basic belief. An ironist only includes among her ungroundable desires her own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease. (1989 xv).

a) *Irony and solidarity*

Let us now see how the liberal ironist deals with politics. Rorty describes the ironist as "the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires — someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance." (xv). An ironist also accepts the contingency of selfhood, that is, since Freud, the centered self and the I as a central faculty have vanished. Whereas Kant "splits us into two parts, one called 'reason', which is identical in us all, and (...) empirical sensation and desire (...) which is a matter of blind, contingent, idiosyncratic impressions" (...), Freud treats rationality as a mechanism which adjusts contingencies to other contingencies". (32-3). Finally, an ironist accepts the contingency of her community since she has "a sense of the contingency of (her) language of moral deliberation, and thus of her conscience." (61). In sum, ironists are imaginative people who are "never quite able to take themselves (as well as the world and truth) seriously. That is to say, they never take themselves too seriously. (Rorty 1989 73-4).

As Rorty recalls, metaphysical attempts to fuse the public and the private, "to unite a striving for perfection with a sense of community", are made in the history of western philosophy from Plato onwards. He thinks that these attempts "require us to acknowledge a

common human nature” (cf. 1989 xiii). Rorty drops the demand for a theory that unifies the public and the private. Instead, he makes a ‘firm distinction’ between both spheres. Rorty associates the public with human solidarity and ‘duty to others’, the private with the demands of self-creation and ‘duty to self’. (xv; 120). He views both as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable. (xv).

Due to this incommensurability both spheres have their own vocabularies. The vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange (xiv). In fact, the opposites ‘self-creation’ and ‘social responsibility’ “can be combined in life but not synthesized in theory”(1989 120). They can be combined in life—it is possible for a single person to be an ironist and a liberal—by distinguishing public from private questions, that is questions about whether you and I share the same vocabulary from the question whether you are in pain (198).

Rorty states that the desire to be autonomous must be confined to the private sphere. Thus, irony seems inherently a private matter (87). His advice to the liberal ironist is to privatize the Sartrean-Nietzschean-Foucauldian attempt at authenticity and purity “in order to prevent (herself) from slipping into a political attitude that will lead (her) to think that there is some social goal more important than avoiding cruelty.” (65)

Cruelty is diminished by an expansion of solidarity. For Rorty, solidarity is not grounded on principles. It is “to be achieved by the “imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers.” It is not “discovered but created (...) by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people.” (xvi). Rorty wants to disengage human solidarity from philosophical presuppositions such as Kant’s emphasis on rationality and moral obligation as the motives for it (192-3).

b) *Irony in Kant’s On Perpetual Peace*

Let us now find out how Kant’s display of irony in *On Perpetual Peace* fits in this picture. There is an abundance of ironical moves in *On Perpetual Peace*. It comes in various forms. Constraints of time restrict me to just mention some instances of irony that will provide enough material for a comparison of Kantian and Rortian irony, in order to assess whether Kant fits in Rorty’s picture of the metaphysical liberal.

We do not have to proceed very far for this. The transfer of the sarcastic motto “Towards perpetual peace” from a sign-board of a Dutch inn on which a cemetery was painted, to the title of his essay, in which less earthly substance is negotiated, is an ironism in itself (Kant 1795 343). I also recall Lemonnier’s qualifying as ironic the diplomatic format of the essay, with preliminary and definitive articles, together with their elucidation, supplements, and appendixes. The irony here is conveyed by the allegorical presentation of a philosophical treatise about the conditions of the possibility of eternal peace as a constitutive diplomatic document. The impact of this irony is enhanced by the subtitle of this ‘document’: a philosophical draft. Here, Kant plays

ironically with the contrast between the juridical and the philosophical format. The preface of the essay, or, if you prefer, the preamble to the draft constitution, continues this ironic tone as it associates the ironic ambiguity of picture and text in the sign-board of the Dutch inn with mankind in general, the bellicosity of heads of state and the sweet dreams of the philosophers respectively. Thus, the inn serves as a metaphor for the theatre of the world. This is followed by an ironic appeal to the vanity of the theorist and the invulnerability of the statesman for his speculations as a ground for the exculpation for all he has to say onwards (343). Here, irony functions as a safeguard against the judicial power of the statesman who might otherwise take his critical appreciation of political custom too personal. The ironic contrast between the juridical and philosophical format of the essay, later on is metonymically transferred to an opposition between the lawyer and the philosopher. A similar ironic opposition between theoretical philosophy, in its scholastic or exalted guises and the dexterity that is required for a successful statesmanship parallels this contrast.

These moves are ironic tropes since their meaning is dissimulated. The good reader would understand them contrarily from what their wordings suggest (cf. Quintilian 9.2.44). They are, however, not instances of Socratic irony. To use Foucault's assessment of Socratic irony, Kant does not feign to be as ignorant as his interlocutor in order to prevent him from being ashamed of disclosing his own ignorance. He does not need to do so for his target is not to show the addressee that he is ignorant of his own ignorance. (1983 48-9).

Kant rather is here engaged in the verbal activity of parrhesia (gr. *παρρησία*), that is —to refer to Foucault's assessment again — “(the) activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself)”. Foucault adds: “In parrhesia, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy”. (1983 5). In Kant's case, the parrhesiastic mix of free speech—that is as Vorländer observes, not exempt from the ‘broad indulgence’ [das breite Sichgehenlassen] of the whole epoch— and adulation (cf. Quintilian 9.2.27) can be qualified as an instance of ‘monarchic parrhesia’, “where an advisor gives the sovereign honest and helpful advice”. (Foucault 1982. 5).

Kant's stance in *On Perpetual Peace*, therefore, rather resembles that of Diogenes, whose attacks on his interlocutor's pride are aimed to bring state power to engage in a discussion. An example of this is his rather cynical description of a despot's political maxims in the first appendix. They run as follows: Do as you like, there is always an excuse (*Fac et excusa*); Deny what you have brought about (*Si fecisti, nega*); and Divide and reign (*Divide et impera*). (Kant 1795 374-5). It is in this context that Kant explicitly makes a mockery of political pride. This, he scornfully states, is not at all hurt when these maxims are made public, since, first, they are already generally known and, second, a despot cannot be ashamed before the general public, but

only before his peers. On the contrary, his political pride would remain undiminished even if the despot would be ashamed by his failure to execute these maxims successfully, for it consists in the accumulation of his power, however it might have been acquired. (375).

To prevent Alexander from drawing away Diogenes “says something (...) he believes complimentary.” (Foucault 1982 49). And this, precisely is what Kant does as well. For, though the author’s appeal to the idleness of philosophical speculation might at first sight seem to be an exhibition of epistemic modesty—and the prejudiced politician probably would not spend a second thought on it—the plea for immunity from criminal charges is not motivated by this idleness as such, but proposed as a consequence of the low esteem the practical politician is purported to have for the philosopher, when it comes to state affairs. Likewise, Kant uses the opposition between the lawyer and the philosopher only as a pretext to make his plea, that the state, though it should not give preference to the principles of the philosopher above the claims of the lawyer—which he depicts as a representative of state power—should at least pay attention to her. This is, again ironically, worked out in the second supplement, that is entitled: Secret article on perpetual peace. (Kant 1795 368). Similarly, the opposition between practical philosophy and statesmanship is not introduced as an incentive for a division of labour between both, but as a prelude to a subtle play with the concepts ‘political moralist’ and ‘moral politician’ (372). The former, which Kant pretends not to be able to conceive, forges his morals according to his political interests. The latter intends to harmonise his political principles with morals. The priority of politics over law and morals that Kant initially seemed to grant the statesman undergoes an inversion. The maxims of the *Realpolitiker* are rejected as sophistry. (374). Statesmanship, that requires knowledge of empirical contingencies, might seem a mere technical craft, it is, however, subjected to the pure concept of duty according to the moral law (377).

The parrhesiastic use of irony by Kant is connected with a certain pathos for truth and purity that urges him to judge politics from an ethical perspective. His irony is linked with his idealism. Thus, he obviously employs the vocabulary of Enlightenment rationalism (cf. Rorty 1989 44 ff.). This enables him to contrast the demands of political craftsmanship, with the necessity of the moral duty that is grounded in freedom. Although this necessity only pertains to the categorical form of this duty, in abstraction from its hypothetical, political aims (Kant 1795 377), the claim of universal validity of duty is at odds with a thorough contingency of language (cf. Rorty 1989 69). The same goes for the metaphysical distinction between form and content of a political act. Kant’s account of politics, therefore still employs a “metavocabulary that seems to include all possible vocabularies”. (xvi). Kant is not a genuine ironist because his “power of redescription” (cf. Rorty 1989 89) leaves his final vocabulary of transcendental idealism undisturbed. On Rorty’s terms, Kant is, unlike Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida, not an ironist theorist, i.e. a theorist who “understand(s) the metaphysical urge, the urge to theorize, so well that (he) becomes entirely free of it.” (1989 96).

However, Kant's generous use of irony shows that he is not engaged exclusively in the Socratic business of querying the essence of politics by analysing a description of political dexterity by means of a description of justice, which is grounded on ethical principles (cf. Rorty 1989 74). His project is neither metaphysical nor moralistic. As he says in the preparatory works of the essay, he does not seek to enhance morality or happiness but to eliminate war (Kant 1794-95 162). His irony has an obvious political function. It creates the conversational space in which a redescription of the vocabulary of a despotic form of government into the vocabulary of a republican form of government can be carried out.

For this redescription to make sense, Kant invents the vocabulary of citizenship, which involves the combination of a free autonomous individual and an individual that is subject to the law, both in one person. As a free autonomous person a citizen is ready to think unbiased and independently. Thus, respect for the law as a product of the autonomous will of the citizens is compatible with a free discussion of their common cause. Citizenship requires the existence of a civil society, a concept that seems to be absent in Rorty's story. A civil society enables a citizen to put her respect for the law in the perspective of an opinion about the best possible constitution towards which the actual lawgivers are to be directed (Kant 1794-95 164) and to express her opinion vis-à-vis a general audience. This she does notwithstanding the opposition of officials who do not want the obedience to the positive law to be diminished by anything, and rightly so for their freedom in their capacity of officials is confined to what their specific tasks in civil society allow for. (Kant 1784a 37). For such an opinion to be relevant, the one who utters it has to be consistent with it. She should indeed take herself seriously and have a serious commitment to her civil duties (cf. Gerhardt 2002 213; Kant 1788 85, 157).

The parrhesiastic use of irony by Kant in *On eternal peace* can thus be seen as a model for the liberal exercise of free speech in the public domain. It is Kant's answer to what he sees as the greatest problem for the human kind nature forces it to solve, that is the attainment of civil society that is intrinsically lawful (1784b 22).

The transition from a private opinion about a lawful civil society to solidarity requires the ability to put oneself imaginatively in someone else's position. As Gerhardt (2002 164) observes, this ability is a warrant for the social dimension of such an opinion and for its being communicable. Communicability presupposes a commitment to a *sensus communis* as the idea of a common faculty to judge (Kant 1790 294-5). This cultivated understanding is not to be identified with common sense (cf. 293), which would, as the 'opposite of irony' (Rorty 1989 74) leave no room for distancing oneself from everyday politics. In sum, for to be liberal, therefore, it is advisable to be wise (cf. Kant 1798 299).

3) Philosophy and literary criticism

Let us now see where this comparison between the two faces of irony leaves us. Since the purpose of this paper is not a defence of Kant against Rorty I did neither need to engage in a

critical appreciation of Rorty's discussion of Kant in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, nor try to revise Kant's vocabulary thoroughly enough to fit him in Rorty's profile of an ironist liberal. The former would, I think not be the most appropriate thing to do, for it would, in a way, overestimate the philosophical dimension of the book in disregard of its narrative qualities. The latter would indeed presuppose an excess of irony in Kant, that is, one has to concede to Strawson, not probable, even in his political work. Moreover, it would require a deflationary reading of Kant's transcendental idealism for which there is no obvious occasion.

The purpose of this paper is rather to pay due attention to a striking stylistic feature of one of Kant's most influential political essays: its irony. This purpose can be simply motivated. If the 'inner clarity' of Kant's critical style is to be connected with the subject matter that is treated in his critical work, like Vorländer claims, one could for the same reason, try to connect the ironical dimension of *On Perpetual Peace* to the message Kant's wants to convey. After all, since Kant was perfectly well aware of the peculiarity of his critical style, he is likely to have been aware of the presence and function of this irony, even if irony was more aligned with his convivial and conversational character.

Vorländer associates the critical style with Kant's sincerity and unconditional truthfulness. In this paper I have drawn attention to the irony in *On Perpetual Peace* as an instrument of his political engagement. The use of irony underscores the sincerity of Kant as a practical philosopher. This sincerity is expressed in his saying that even if the realisation of eternal peace "were always to remain a pious wish, we still would not be deceiving ourselves by adopting the maxim of working for it with unrelenting perseverance." (1797 354-5). Kant's parrhesiastic use of irony facilitates us to take this essay as an admonition to do the same. I see no reason why such a discourse should be confined to the private sphere.

Once a discussion of an author's style is allowed to be put on the philosophical agenda, one could take the ironic style as an example of Oscar Wilde's dictum that in matters of great importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing. This could add to the awareness of the political importance of this philosophical text, and of Kant's own 'shift from epistemology to politics' which Rorty thinks is reserved to the liberal ironist (cf. Rorty 1989 68).

This opening of a philosophical discourse towards a kind of 'literary criticism' could help to avoid reading Kant merely according to the received view, as a confirmed metaphysician. After all, Rorty's plea for ironising final vocabularies commits him to allow an ironisation of the rigid distinctions he draws between philosophical and literary texts. An opening to literary criticism of philosophical texts must not engage us in the "habit of taking literary criticism as the presiding intellectual discipline" (83) for it would not obviate the demand for a vocabulary that can be employed in a conversation about our ungroundable central beliefs and desires, a vocabulary, that is, in which ironical theorising can be performed. The very idea of redescribing a final vocabulary presupposes an understanding of the vocabulary that is to be redescribed. Such theorising could dispense with an ontological commitment to reason as "a faculty, which is the

source of our moral obligations” (194). It could, however, not dispense with a faculty to judge political acts in respect with their cruelty. And this would imply that we are ready to put ourselves in the place of all and any other human being. This liberal use of our imagination could enhance a shift from unilateral relations of us as observers of victims that do not belong to us, to reciprocal relations of free individuals.

Such a rational discussion must not start from a canonisation of certain provinces of literature, let alone exclusively western literature as seems to be the case with Rorty, as ironist or as liberal. It neither has to proceed on the assumption that distinctions have to be made between ironist figures like Proust and Nabokov, and models of liberals, like Orwell and Derrida, or between “books which help us to become autonomous” and “books which help us to become less cruel” (1989 141), or “books aimed at working out a new private final vocabulary” and books “aimed at working out a new public vocabulary (143). Such distinctions can be accepted as the outcome of this discussion, but one cannot exclude that Rorty’s literary pantheon, as well as the ‘Plato-Kant canon’ (96) will be reshuffled in the course of it.

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