BOOK REVIEWS

Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity

Contingency, Irony and Solidarity
Richard Rorty
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
1989. $16.95 paperback. 201pp.

Irony has been a bewitching feature of historical philosophical interest. Since the sarcasm of Socrates the ironic note has charmed our philosophical lives. Richard Rorty in his book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* has provided a new linguistic turn and has brought irony into the contemporary context of twentieth-century democratic liberal society. Abandoning older philosophical foundations of Truth and the search for Truth, Rorty has brought us into the Nietzschian perspective of a "mobile army of metaphors" (p. 17). The metaphor which the Rortian turn provides us with is that of the "liberal ironist." There is irony because we live in contemporary democratic society with a demand for what Berlin calls "standing with unflinching convictions" while recognizing the very contingency of the standpoint from which we address the world (p. 46). We are liberal in our irony because we share Judith Shklars' sense "that liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we can do" (p. xi). We are led as Rorty invokes:

> *...to name 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. Liberal ironists are people who include among these ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease.* (p. xi)

It is our search to be liberal ironists which leads us to both try to achieve the perfection of the highly individualized internal private life while also trying to achieve the public demand for human solidarity and an end to cruelty. Rorty proposes that we think of both of these projects not as two quests that can be fused in one overarching perspective but as "two kinds of tools — as little in need of synthesis as are paintbrushes and crowbars" (p. xiv). The aim of this book is to provide us with "a post metaphysical culture" which suggests the possibility of a "liberal utopia" in which the vocabulary of private self-creation can stand with equal weight with the vocabulary of public shared justice (p. xvi).

To provide such a culture with its divergent vocabularies Rorty hopes to use the exemplars of the poets and visionaries — the interpreters of the private life such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Proust, Heidegger, Orwell, and Nabokov and align them with the fellow citizens — the philosophers and utopian political chroniclers of the public realm such as Mill, Dewey, Marx, Habermas.

In this alignment Rorty first takes us through our contingencies of language, selfhood, and the liberal community. The Davidsonian divorcing of language from somehow expressing or representing a "truth out there" leaves us free to recognize that "our languages are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences" (p. 7). The method of philosophy thus becomes the method of revolutionary politics — the re-creating of the world by creating a new vocabulary for re-describing it. It is this metaphoric redescription which allows us to go beyond talk of "expressing human nature" and an "intrinsic nature" and language as a medium somehow representing or expressing some "core self." In changing the way we talk, we change the things we do, and what we think we are, and thus recognize human history as "the history of successive metaphors" (p. 20). It is this succession which he traces in his accounts of the contingencies of the human self and the liberal community and which he uses to disclose Bloom's notion of the "strong poet" — the one who acknowledges and appropriates contingency.

The beacon for the self is Freud since he is the one who captures this spirit; he is "the moralist who helped de-divinize the self by tracking conscience home to its origins in the contingencies or our upbringing." It is such a tracking and a recognition of the Bloomian strong poet that will allow us to internalize the selected metaphors

for the political life of democracy which allows for its progression. The rationalist enlightenment language of truth and foundationism would be replaced by a de-divinized secular account which fails "to be haunted by specters called 'relativism' and 'irrationalism'" and which will call for improved "poeticized" re-description (p. 53). This re-description will lead us to "citizens of my liberal utopia [who] would be people who had a sense of the contingency of their language of moral deliberation, and thus of their consciences, and thus of their community. They would be liberal ironists ... people who combined commitment with a sense of the contingency of their own commitment" (p. 61).

It is this irony which Rorty explores more in the second part of his book. It is a private irony matched with a liberal hope marked by three features 1/ radical and continuing doubts about one's own vocabulary 2/ recognition that argument in the present vocabulary cannot dissolve these doubts 3/ recognition that her vocabulary is not closer to reality than others. It is an irony for which the sense was, "A matter of imaginative identification with the details of others' lives rather than a recognition of something antecedently shared" (p. 190).

Rorty traces the privitization of such an ironic stance in the self creation of Proust, Nietzsche, and Heidegger and the private allusions of Derrida. These thinkers, he indicates, move in very private directions yet they do not disrupt the liberal project. Rorty then goes on in the last section of this book to explore the directions and channels of cruelty using the literary texts of Orwell and Nabokov as seen through the lens of the literary critic. We expand our vocabularies by engaging in the descriptions and language games of others. It is this which is our spring of solidarity because it allows us susceptibility to that pain and humiliation of others. It gives us "the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of 'us'" (p. 192).

It is such a language with which Rorty has weaved the bewitching irony of the philosophical legacy through the predicament of modern liberal contingency. Rorty has written an engaging book which brings very divergent voices and vocabularies through an interesting path of his own literary appropriation and criticism. His is an ironic voice with bewitching undertones. His ironic turn provides an intriguing evocative pathway to solidarity. His is a vocabulary and an "mobile army of metaphors" that we can go far with.

Susan Scherwitz teaches in the Philosophy department at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, La Crosse, Wisconsin.