

The Idiosyncratic, Playing, and Rorty's Brand of Philosophizing

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My entry into Jim Garrison's essay focuses on three puzzling claims. First, Garrison claims, "Rorty retains a commitment to an atomistic individualism that Dewey spent his career trying to overcome." Second, he claims that Richard Rorty's liberal ironist is, "just so much pretentious, self-absorb[ed], dualistic nonsense." Finally, he claims that Rorty's notion of self-creation is "profoundly mistaken." I agree with Garrison, "To create our selves, we must help others create their selves and by helping others, we create our own selves" is necessary. However, I find it is not sufficient. With Rorty, I believe self-creation also entails the private and the idiosyncratic moments of solitude to ruminate and to otherwise attend to those private loves that don't interest other people.

In Rorty's *Philosophy and Social Hope*, he demonstrates a sort of intimate reverence towards the world and democratic society that is perhaps more in step with John Dewey and our contemporary living than Garrison is willing to concede. From my reading, I find myself imagining Rorty as something of a "free spirit." I evoke the term "free spirit" to describe Rorty because I feel *what* he says is very much connected to *how* he goes about communicating his ideas. Rorty advocates for open, free inquiry, and indeed he is often quite frank in his remarks, and at times intimate.

As Charles Guignon and Davis Hiley point out, a central tension in Rorty's work is the fuzzy boundary between "the existential and pragmatic strands" in his thought: where private, self-creation ends and public, pragmatic hope begins.¹ Rorty's philosophical fuzziness is intentional. For in a very technical sense, I claim that Rorty's ironist, like himself, is *playing*. Indeed, philosophizing is a form of *playing*. And it is precisely because of this capacity to play, I claim that the ironist can engage in private moments of self-creation without it being a nonrelational activity, nor being seen as an atomistic individualist who is self-absorbed and disconnected from others and the world. My claim can be tracked by looking at three other thinkers.

First, my claim in part parallels Hannah Arendt who argues that thinking is done in solitude (the two-in-one), and that when engaged in thinking one withdraws from the world to re-engage with oneself in conversation, reflection, and solitude. Eduardo Duarte states, "Arendt insisted that the need to withdraw from the company of others and thereby, to stop and think is as much an integral part of the human condition as the need to appear in the company of others....Togetherness and solitude comprise the human condition."² Further, as Arendt details, from thinking — the intercourse with ourselves — we make judgments, and from judgments we form convictions, and with convictions we enter the public arena to debate, deliberate, and otherwise engage the experiment of democracy. For Arendt, the capacity to withdraw from the public sphere is an essential ingredient in the democratic process.

Second, Alison Kadlec explains for Dewey, "communication is not merely the medium of social life, it is constitutive of and identical with social life. Only in communication do individuals develop."³ That is, if communication encompasses both public and private moments, and if communication is constitutive of social life, then both public and private intercourse is part of the social.

Third, D.W. Winnicott adds another element, the fuzzy "transitional space" where the private and the public meet and intermingle in "playing". That is, in playing one does not disengage from the world, but rather one engages in an intimate "conversation" with their environment. That is, "it is only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self. Bound up with this is the fact that only in playing is communication possible."⁴

Taken together: if playing makes communication possible, and if communication is constitutive of social life, then playing is social life! And if it is plausible to consider that Rorty's ironist philosopher is playing, then the ironist's private acts of self-creation are also social. For while they may appear self-absorbed, they are self-absorbed in a particular way: they are self-absorbed in the activity of playing. If the ironist is playing in private self-creation, then this playing is a part of the social, *but* not in the public, pragmatic terms.

Finally, Rorty explains in his autobiographical essay, "Trotsky and Wild Orchids" that he tried to be a Platonist, to bring together in one unified vision the idiosyncratic pleasures, like being fascinated by wild orchids with the concern for social justice and Trotsky. "But it didn't pan out." Instead, he came to the conclusion, and following the pragmatists notion of truth, there does not have to be a necessary correspondence between our political stands and our private interests. In reflecting on statements made earlier in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty observes,

there is no need to weave one's personal equivalent of Trotsky and one's personal equivalent of wild orchids together.... The two will, for some people, coincide — as they do in those lucky Christians for whom the love of God and of other human beings are inseparable, or revolutionaries who are moved by nothing save the thought of social justice. But they need not coincide, and one should not try too hard to make them do so.⁵

Put simply, not everyone's private, idiosyncratic loves are relevant to the struggle, nor is it clear how forcing a correspondence between private loves and public policy, unless "organic" like Rorty's Christian, adds to humanizing our lives.

And here of course, Rorty's ironist fits into the picture and is the rub of contention between Garrison and myself. Rorty states,

we ironist hope, by this continual redescription, to make the best selves for ourselves that we can.... However, 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. Irony seems inherently a private matter. On my definition, an ironist cannot get along without the contrast between the final vocabulary she inherited and the one she is trying to create for herself.⁶

The ironist's redescription of self is constituted then in the dialectical activity of creating a unique vocabulary for oneself, by and through a critique of one's

socialization. Hence, while the moment of self-creation is private, in the sense that it is idiosyncratic to the existential factors of one's life, there is the proviso that this creative activity is always constituted in relationship to one's inherited world. For Rorty states, "I portrayed pragmatism as a generalized form of antiessentialism — as an attempt to break down the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic features of things. By thinking of everything as relational through and through...they have doubts that anything is, or could be, nonrelational."⁷ Self-creation, as I reconstruct Rorty, is on the continuum with public hope (though the boundaries are fuzzy as to where "the existential and pragmatic strands" begin and end).

Rorty's ironist then, is cognizant of the private, idiosyncratic moment; and where what matters to us, and only us, is allowed to take center stage, at times. As such, the fallacy in thinking about the ironist then, is to equate the necessity of the idiosyncratic with some ontological reality. It is to turn an important difference of degree into a difference of metaphysical kind. Our private moments of self-creation can be idiosyncratic, and not all these idiosyncratic ruminations need to "go public."

In closing, Rorty's brand of philosophizing advocates for open, free inquiry, and indeed the making of a "free spirit": one who is developing the capacity to embrace solitude, and the idiosyncratic, while playing in the presence of others — and perhaps in public solidarity towards a more just and democratic society.

1. Charles Guignon and David R. Hiley, "Introduction: Richard Rorty and Contemporary Philosophy," in *Richard Rorty*, eds. Charles Guignon and David R. Hiley (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 29.

2. Eduardo Duarte, "The Eclipse of Thinking: An Arendtian Critique of Cooperative Education," in *Hannah Arendt and Education*, ed. Mordechai Gordon (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 2001), 202.

3. Alison Kadlec, *Dewey's Critical Pragmatism* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2007), 67.

4. D.W. Winnicott, "Playing: Creative Activity and the Search for the Self," in *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 1971), 55.

5. Richard Rorty, "Trotsky and Wild Orchids," in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 13.

6. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 87–89.

7. Richard Rorty, "Ethics Without Principles," in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 72–73.