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The University of Richmond
Philosophy Department

Senior Honors Thesis

by

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Human Solidarity: A Reconciliation between Plato and Rorty

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In *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, Richard Rorty outlines his conception of the ideal liberal utopia, wherein moral change results from the substitution of Freedom for Truth as "the goal of thinking and of social progress" (xiii). Rorty maintains that autonomous self-creation and human solidarity are not to be united in a "single vision" (xiv), but rather, "the closest we will come to joining these two quests is to see the aim of a just and free society as letting its citizens be as privatistic, 'irrationalist', and aestheticist as they please so long as they do it on their own time" (xiv). Rorty charges Plato as being one who endorses the notion that Truth exists, an idealist account which (according to Rorty) entails beliefs such as the following: there is an essential human nature that might be defined, there are absolute standards to which we might appeal in order to make correct moral judgments, and there is an ultimate "final vocabulary" that will accurately describe "the way things are". Rorty is a pragmatic relativist who is suspicious of Plato and other idealists, and as an unfortunate consequence of this tension, Rorty fails to see that many of the practical consequences of Plato's philosophy are in fact very similar to those desired by Rorty himself.

As evidenced by his account of justice and a just society in the *Republic*, Plato shares many of Rorty's ideas about the most appropriate ways to discuss the concept of justice and how it would work in an ideal community. With respect to this topic, I will highlight the points of convergence that exist between Rorty's and Plato's ways of thinking. I will then propose several descriptions of what exactly it is that one might be looking for when one seeks to transcend cultural differences in an attempt to promote human solidarity, which might ultimately prove compatible with both pragmatism and idealism.

Rorty writes, "When I say 'we should do this or that 'we cannot' do that, I am not, of course, speaking from a neutral standpoint" (54). In fact, Rorty's conception of philosophy makes it impossible for anyone to be a neutral thinker, even if s/he would like to be. Rorty states, "... there is no natural order of philosophic inquiry" (55), and "the creation of a new form of cultural life, a new vocabulary, will have its utility explained only retrospectively" (50). So even if we grant Rorty his notion that Plato's references to the ideal Truth demonstrates that Plato was a metaphysician, Rorty still has to say that Plato was:

(1) simply starting his inquiries where he saw fit, and
(2) creating a new vocabulary along the way, to be judged retrospectively.

Admittedly, Rorty and Plato's theories do differ in principle: Plato allows Truth to enter into his account of the ideal just society, and Rorty does not. But Rorty, as a self-proclaimed non-neutral thinker, will have to allow Plato's account to be equally as viable as his own. In other words, regardless of how Plato arrives at the ideas in the *Republic*, the bottom line is that he, like Rorty, is simply putting forth yet one more metaphor that redescribes justice and a just society. In fairness, then, Rorty can only say that pragmatism might be *superior to* (but not a replacement for) metaphysical idealism, in that it would be more likely to lead to a functional society.

So what exactly would constitute a functional society, from Rorty's point of view? He writes:

> To sum up, the citizens of my liberal utopia 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... people who combined commitment with a sense of the contingency of their own commitment. (61)

And in terms of a just society, Rorty agrees with John Rawls, who says:

> What justifies a conception of justice is not its being true to an order antecedent and given to us, but its congruence with our deeper understanding of ourselves and our aspirations, and our realization that, given our history and the traditions embedded in our public life, it is the most reasonable doctrine for us (58).

Rorty evidently places great stock in the pragmatism of Rawls, who, according to Rorty, has helped to "undermine the idea of a transhistorical 'absolutely valid' set of concepts which would serve as 'philosophical foundations' of liberalism" (CIS 57). My suggestion is that Rorty would thereby endorse Rawls' concept of the 'veil of ignorance' and, furthermore, that Plato operates from a theoretical standpoint much like the one outlined by Rawls (i.e. from behind a veil of ignorance) when giving his account of the ideal society. Plato writes, "If we could watch a city coming to be in theory, wouldn't we also see its justice coming to be, and its injustice as well?" (43). It is precisely this sort of coming-to-be that Rawls proposes to observe from behind the veil of ignorance. Briefly, this 'veil of ignorance' is a metaphorical description of a knowledge-barrier that is in effect in a certain hypothetical situation, namely, when all rational beings have a meeting of the minds in order to produce a non-biased theory of justice. The goal is to theoretically develop a just society that could be presented to any rational person for consideration, and this same person would endorse it, believing that her chances for finding happiness in this society were optimized, even without having the knowledge of which class she would find herself in. For example, most rational beings would not be likely to favor a society in which one individual had total authority while the rest of the citizens adhered to her every wish and command, over a society which allowed everyone to have a say in matters of consequence.

Rawls suggests that one of the primary purposes of the imaginary veil is to "nullify the effects of specific contingencies which put men at odds and tempt them to exploit social and natural circumstances to their own advantage" (136). In a similar attempt to avoid power struggles in his utopic society, Plato says that one important goal is "to see that the city as a whole has the greatest happiness" (95), thereby refuting Thrasymachus, who had argued that "justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger" (14). Rawls goes on to describe the (imaginary) ones assessing the principles of justice as follows:

> They understand political affairs and the principles of economic theory; they know the basis of social organization and the laws of human psychology. (137)

Since it is Plato who is assessing the principles of justice in this case, we will examine his particular background with respect to the above description. Plato was obviously well aware of the political ideologies of his time, given his astute observations about the organization of the stratified societies in Greece and his familiarity with the particular needs of each class. He was also quite attuned to the emotional tensions that could arise if a particular sort of government were in effect, such as a tyranny or a democracy, to cite two examples. I believe that it is safe to say that he would meet Rawls' criteria for political savvy. Rawls then writes:

> The evaluation of principles must proceed in terms of the general consequences of their public recognition and universal application, it being assumed that they will be complied with by everyone. (138)

In a similar vein, Plato asserts his belief that people gather in cities "to live as partners and helpers" (44) because they find communal living to be best. The implication of this is that the citizens are willing to comply with the principles of their societies, and thus we can speculate that they would behave in a similar manner in Plato's hypothetical society.

Moreover, according to Rawls, the individuals considering the theory of justice should "have a secure sense of their own worth so that they have no desire to abandon any of their aims provided others have less means to further theirs" (144). Likewise, Plato writes, "we've heard many say and have often said ourselves that justice is doing one's own work and not meddling with what isn't one's own" (108), and thus we can conclude that Rawls stipulation is actually inherent in Plato's account of justice. The main point of this comparison between Rawls and Plato is to show that Plato is operating with an assumed veil of ignorance, while still presuming (as does Rawls) that his resulting theory of a just society would be commonly accepted. I suspect that Rorty would favor such a move, as Plato also admits, "the true city, in my opinion, is the once we've described... [but yet] the things I mentioned earlier and the way of life I described won't satisfy some people" (48). Plato does acknowledge that there is not a predetermined and universally accepted idea of a just society. This raises the question, however, of whether or not Rawls' plan is realistic, given that so far there has been no universal consensus on any description of an ideal just society. What would be a reason to even speculate that there could be any social organization that people would unanimously favor over all others? If we uphold Rawls' assumption that the decision-makers are rational beings, and if we add the further assumption that rational beings want to optimize their chances for self-preservation and positive interactions with other rational beings, then we can safely say that there must be a (hypothetical) society that will best promote such objectives. Basic human needs will be accounted for, as well as outlets for common human desires such as love, physical fitness, artistic ventures, finanical security, and so on. Rawls' plan is to simply formulate an account of a society that will provide the greatest amount of contentment for the greatest

come upon a belief that we find more suitable. The evidence for this is the central claim in Chapter 1 of *Contingency, irony and solidarity*:

> ... what matters in the end are changes in the vocabulary rather than changes in belief, changes in truth-value candidates rather than assignments of truth-value. (47)

Socrates would have been willing to go along with this plan as well. When talking about corruption of the youth (this particular topic being irrelevant to the point I am trying to make) Socrates states: "Then, as the argument has demonstrated- and we must remain persuaded by it until someone shows us a better one-they mustn't behave like that" (64). It seems as though he is not being so dogmatic after all.

One of the most distinct parallels between Rorty's and Plato's ideal societies is that both have as an undercurrent the notion that the avoidance of cruelty should be a common social goal. In the Introduction to CIS, Rorty writes:

> Liberal ironists are people who include among these ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humility of human beings by other human beings by other human beings may cease (xv).

Likewise, at the end of a discussion between Socrates and Polemarchus, Socrates asks, "... for it has become clear to us that it is never just to harm anyone?" (11) and Polemarchus affirms this conclusion. Rorty makes his case again when he later states that we should privatize any desires for autonomy, "in order to prevent [ourselves] from slipping into a political attitude which will lead [us] to think that there is some social goal more important than the avoidance of cruelty" (65). Similarly, Socrates poses another hypothetical question, asking Glaucon, "And wouldn't you think that the worst thing that someone could do to this city is injustice?" (109). Given Socrates' definition of injustice, namely, meddling in another individual's affairs, renouncing human virtue, harming one's

friends, and the like, this amounts to saying that to either directly or indirectly harm a fellow citizen is an undesirable behavior. While Plato and Rorty do cite different examples of cruel and/or harmful behaviors, implicit in both perspectives is that we should strive to avoid causing unwarranted mental angst or physical pain in our fellow humans.

Another point of comparison between Rorty and Plato stems from the notion that the youth of a society are quite impressionable in their moral conduct, and that as a result, we should carefully consider the effects of publicly available literature. Rorty expects that a literary critic will:

> ...facilitate moral reflection by suggesting revisions in the canon of moral exemplars and advisers, and suggesting ways in which the tensions within this canon may be eased- or, where necessary, sharpened. (82)

Plato himself takes on a similar role when he is discussing the content of stories about gods and heroes that future guardians of the *kallipolis* might hear during their training. Concerning the storytellers, Plato says, "We'll select their stories whenever they are fine and beautiful and reject them when they aren't" (53). After citing several examples of passages that he finds inappropriate, such as *Wine-bibber, with the eyes of a dog and the heart of a deer* (Achilles insulting his commander, Agamemnon) and *Gifts persuade gods, and gifts persuade revered kings* (source unknown), Plato concludes:

> ... these stories are harmful to people who hear them, for everyone will be ready to excuse himself when he's bad, if he is persuaded that similar things both are being done now and have been done in the past. (68)

Admittedly, Plato's promotion of radical censorship is more drastic than Rorty's suggestion that we merely revise the canon (not to the neglect of all other texts, which I take to be the primary difference), but both seem to believe that we should focus our attention on authors and critics who strive to sensitize readers to misconduct.

Rorty believes that Wilfrid Sellars' concept of 'we-intentions' is a good starting point for moral reflection. In *Science and Metaphysics*, Sellars writes:

> It is a conceptual fact that people constitute a community, a *we*, by virtue of thinking of each other as *one of us*, and by willing the common good not under the species of benevolence- but by willing it as one of us, or from a moral point of view. (190)

The ancient Greeks shared this kind of "we" and "they" mentality, as evidenced by a passage in the *Republic* wherein Socrates and Glaucon are discussing the nationalistic attitudes of their people. Socrates declares, "I say that the Greek race is its own and akin, while the barbarians are strange and foreign" (145). As an offshoot to this kind mentality, Rorty says, "I want to deny that 'one of us human beings' can have the same force as ['our sort of people', 'a comrade in the movement', 'a fellow Catholic', etc.]" (190). Rorty wants us to think of solidarity as "the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation..." (192). In a like manner, Socrates says, "the having of pains and pleasures in common is the greatest good for a city" (138) because such mutual feelings will bind the citizens together. Furthermore, Socrates speculates that the city he is founding will be full of good and civilized Greek citizens, who will treat foreigners as they treat each other. He says of the Greeks-to-be, "then they'll moderate their foes in a friendly spirit" (146) and "their attitude of mind should be that of people who'll one day be reconciled and who won't always be at war" (145). Neither Plato nor Rorty are naïve enough to think that wars will not happen, but they share the attitude that (idealistically) it would be preferable to be tolerant of cultural differences and to live in a harmonious society.

The question is, then, how do we reconcile our tendency to think "we-mindedly" with our (Rorty-inspired) goal of transcending cultural differences? Perhaps we need to look for a larger "we" than one that is primarily social or historical. What is it exactly that Rorty would be looking for, should he try to uncover what we have in common with other human beings? To recall, he suggests that what is important are our similarities with respect to pain and humiliation. This hints at a search for similarities that are biological and psychological in kind, as opposed to social or historical. In keeping with the idea that humans share certain biological and psychological states, we can now introduce Plato's notion of the tripartite soul, which he believes is common to all individuals. Each of the parts, namely, the rational part, the non-rational appetitive part, and the spirited part, correspond with distinct features of the *kallipolis*, namely, the rulers, the producers, and the guardians, respectively. In order for a human being to function well, just as for a city to function well, each of the three parts must be in harmony with the other two. Accordingly, this leads us to the description of a just person, much in the same way that Plato arrives at the concept of a just city. Plato states:

> One who is just does not allow any part of himself to do the work of another part or allow the various classes within him to meddle with each other. He regulates well what is really his own and rules himself. (119)

There are two things to be gleaned from this account. First, it seems as though we have highlighted Plato's elucidation of the concept of justice that is most congruent with a "deeper understanding of ourselves and our aspirations". Second, Plato has put forth a description of what he believes to be inherent in all human beings, which may, in fact, be just the tip of the iceberg with respect to what we have in common with other humans.

Rorty writes, "solidarity is not thought of as recognition of a core self, the human essence, in all human beings" (192). Rather, he says that the right way to construe the slogan 'We have obligations to human beings simply as such' is to say that it urges us "to *create* a more expansive sense of solidarity than we presently have" (196) by trying to notice our similarities with people whom we currently think of as "they" rather than "us". If we are going to take seriously Rorty's plea for us to overlook cultural differences in our attempt to promote human solidarity, then it will be beneficial to delineate a set of biological and psychological human characteristics that seem to transcend political, social, cultural, and historical boundaries. Rorty would likely approve of the suggestion that there is not one finite set of characteristics that is inherent in any and every person, but that instead, there is an infinite set of possible characteristics, certain of which are manifested in humans more commonly than the rest. And if we can divulge the particular characteristics that do appear most often, then we will have a clear idea of what we will most likely discover in our quest for human solidarity.

Since Plato's time, there have been many and varied attempts to answer the question, What is it to be human?. Perhaps the best that we can do to answer this query is to approach it with a firm conviction that "human nature" is characterized by a vast number of what Wittgenstein calls "family resemblances", as he describes them in *Philosophical Investigations*. When considering all of the actual human natures that exist in the world (i.e. one per human), Wittgenstein would say that "if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that" (PI 66). Thus, instead of attempting to describe the *essence* of human nature, as Plato would have us do, we should acknowledge that there is no single

trait that is common to *all* humans, and then we are at liberty to discuss 'human nature' in terms of what characteristics are found in *most* people. Accordingly, it is not my intention to determine whether the philosophers cited in the remainder of this paper are correct or incorrect in their analyses of human nature, but rather I will assess their ideas by considering the extent to which the characteristics that they cite are manifested in the human species.

Aristotle suggests that humans are distinguished from animals by the power of reason, which is what makes civilization possible. Hence, what we find in cities are citizens who gladly submit to the rule of the law, all aiming for a common good (although the conception of this good may vary from city to city). Accordingly, he says that we form communities larger than families or small villages in order to provide "the basic necessities of life and the context in which a good life can exist" (Trigg 32). What might be gleaned from this in relation to human solidarity is that the drive for a global community that is such a force in contemporary societies is simply an extension of our dependency on others for our own flourishing. In this context, Rorty's push for human solidarity is very much in tune with current thought, which is often international in scope, as we recognize that not only are we dependent on our own states and nations for the resources that we need, but also on the rest of the world. Although it is quite possible for an individual to survive independent from organized society, it is much more common for humans to gather together in villages, cities, and nation states in order to promote survival.

Thomas Hobbes appeals to everyday experience to confirm his central claim about human behavior, "which is, quite simply, that we are all selfish, and willing to take advantage of others for our own gain" (Trigg 59). By the same token, he suggests that this

selfishness results from our drive for self-preservation, which is not to be judged under any code of morality, as it is simply 'the natural condition of mankind' to be in competition for personal security. While it might seem, at first glance, that this characteristic would be an impediment to the creation of human solidarity, our awareness of it allows us to pinpoint good targets for social reform. In other words, if we understand that most people are self-interested above all else, then we know to approach them in order to promote our human solidarity cause. For example, one might work for a human rights organization under the pretense that if it makes people feel secure to know that they will have food, clothing, and shelter, then such provisions might eliminate part of their perceived need to be in a perpetual state of competition. In turn, this would seem to bring about more cooperative neighborhoods, towns, cities, nations, and so on, in keeping with the goal of solidarity.

David Hume is also largely preoccupied with the idea of what constitutes human nature. Hume stresses the role played by instinct in the lives of all human beings. He believed that "our preferences are fixed, and cannot be influenced by reason, or indeed by social pressure" (Trigg 76). A brief sketch of common human instincts might include hunger, sexual desire, the inclination to bear children, and self-preservation. Our recognition of the fundamental human drives allows us to assess various social situations in the world to judge whether or not they promote human flourishing. For example, when we hear that a poverty-stricken country such as Honduras has been demolished by a hurricane, we know exactly what to do in order to ensure that the citizens of Honduras have their basic human needs fulfilled. Large-scale relief efforts are likely a manifestation

of the fact that most of us have a sense of human solidarity that is sometimes based on personal instinctual experiences.

Freud's view of human nature is largely realized through his emphasis on sexuality as a motive for human action, as sexual motives are "the most potent forces in human life" (Trigg 139). He suggests that desire, and sexual desire in particular, is responsible for conflict within each individual. The way to keep desire in check, of course, is through the ego, or 'reason and common sense', which serves as the mediator between the super-ego and the id. Freud's tripartite division of the human personality is comparable to Plato's division of the soul into the rational, spirited, and appetitive parts. If accepted, Freud's analysis would serve to explain many of the sentiments that we find in our fellow humans. For example, feelings of moral guilt arise as the super-ego, representing the claims of morality, comes into conflict with the ego. Anxiety comes about as the ego has to admit its weakness in the face of its "three tyrannical masters, the external world, the super-ego, and the id" (Trigg 142). Ultimately, Freud agrees with Hume that "Reason can control, but never finally dominate, our passions" (Trigg 143). In so far as this relates to human solidarity, our search for commonality might be influenced by the recognition that humans are instinctual creatures, at least in part. We will likely meet other human beings who experience difficulties in coming to terms with their sexuality, or with their fear of death, or with the tension between outside moral forces, such as the church or the state, and their own 'lower' passions. Such an understanding of the most common psychological states will give us a common bond when we encounter another human being for the first time, as we will be able to immediately assign probable causes (in terms of inner turmoil) of their preoccupations and/or neuroses.

Wittgenstein proposes that the main characteristic of humans is the use of language. We can usually trace an individual's language acquisition back to his or her society, so given that (on one interpretation of Wittgenstein) "Our humanity is both expressed in, and created by, language" (Trigg 139) it may be concluded that society ultimately determines what it is to be human. So, one way to create solidarity using language as the means is to encourage an individual to study the languages of cultures outside of the one(s) in which s/he lived during his or her developmental years. Any linguist will likely confirm that there is much to be learned by studying the language of another people, including their social priorities, gender relations, class divisions, and so on. Initially, we do not often have a spoken tongue in common with residents of different nations, but once we create the bridge, it allows for a great many discoveries about exactly what it is that our peoples have in common.

In his essay "Freedom and Resentment", P.F. Strawson says that most of us attach very great importance to the attitudes and intentions towards us of other human beings, particularly those human beings with whom we have formed special relationships. In response to their "goodwill, affection, or esteem... or their contempt, indifference, or malevolence..." (5), we form *reactive* attitudes and feelings, such as gratitude and resentment, in accordance with whichever of the aforementioned attitudes we perceive. It seems as though we are safe in saying that people expect goodwill from their family members, colleagues, friends, and lovers, and when they do not find it, they become resentful. In a larger sense, most people seem to expect a measure of goodwill from their fellow man in general, and they will become hostile and resentful if they are not given their due. As this relates to our quest for human solidarity, it seems as though we will find

similarities among expectations in interpersonal relationships, from the very casual to the most intimate. Thus, when we meet someone for the first time, regardless of (what Rorty might call) "tribal differences", we can presume that if we show goodwill towards this person, they will respond favorably, and if we are malevolent, then s/he will keep us at a distance, in which case we have failed to promote solidarity.

With regards to human tendencies, Strawson makes another point that I find to be in harmony with a Rortian way of thinking. He states:

> Men makes for themselves pictures of ideal forms of life... and one and the same individual may be captivated by different and sharply conflicting pictures at different times. (26)

He goes on to say that such idealistic pictures may include notions such as personal honor, contemplation, retreat, power, and "simple human solidarity and cooperative endeavor" (26). The bottom line is that "any of these ideas, and a great many others too, may form the core and substance of a personal ideal" (26). What might work for Rorty, in this case, is that we are not talking about the core and substance of a human, but rather, of a human *ideal*. What might urge each of us in the direction of human solidarity, then, would be an uncovering of any dimensions of our ideal pictures that we have in common with other humans. Strawson goes on to say that "something approaching consistency, some more or less steady balance, is usually detectable in the pattern of an individual person's decisions and actions" (27). Were such consistency non-existent, it would be impossible to find any common threads among different individuals and cultures, as everyone would be in a state of perpetual change. For Rorty's plan to work, then, humans must generally be consistent in their thoughts and behaviors. As evidenced by the law and order that supervenes on most societies, this does seem to be the case. Our recognition of this tendency in our

fellow humans to adhere to certain ideals is *itself* a discovery of something that we have in common with them, in addition to the fact that quite often, we find that we have similar goals.

There is obviously not one model of the human experience that completely encompasses all of the aforementioned human tendencies. Nonetheless, it does seem as though the philosophers cited have uncovered the tendencies that do appear most frequently in *all* societies of the world. My main concern with Rorty's account of human solidarity is that he gives us very little guidance in our search for this solidarity, aside from the recognition that we all share a capacity for pain and humiliation. The "typical" human experience obviously has many more dimensions than pain and humiliation. Furthermore, concepts like 'humiliation' seem to speak of some sort of higher moral order, in so far as there must be an accepted standard of behavior in order for 'humiliation' to have any meaning in the first place.

Plato might have to concede (were he still alive) that there is no one complete and accurate account of 'human nature', given that the debate still continues about what exactly it means to be human. Rorty, meanwhile, would have done well to provide a more detailed account of what *might* be formulated during the creation of human solidarity. A compromise between our idealist and our pragmatist might be that we *create* solidarity as we bring into the open the characteristics that we seem to have in common with other humans, in an attempt to ultimately elucidate as many shared human features as possible.

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