

# Rorty's Straussianism; Or, Irony Against Democracy

Melvin L. Rogers

Richard Rorty's irony is an extended form of Leo Strauss's esotericism, which can harm democracy. Esotericism and irony both grow from a confrontation with nihilism. Strauss's vision seeks to guard the democratic community from the necessity of esotericism, but stops short of installing esotericism and its deception as a public virtue. Rorty, however, replaces belief in sincere speech with inauthentic and insincere rhetoric by presenting the Ironist as a model for public imitation. The social reproduction of dissimulation through irony among deliberative agents undercuts the moral resources that make democracy possible.

Every profound spirit needs a mask: even more, around every profound spirit a mask is growing continually, owing to the constantly false, namely *shallow*, interpretation of every word, every step, every sign of life he gives.  
Nietzsche, 1886<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

There are a number of well-known controversies associated with Richard Rorty.<sup>2</sup> His redescription of liberalism has been the object of much heated debate among political philosophers.<sup>3</sup> Rorty attempts to sever the connection between liberal politics and the quest for epistemological certainty. For Rorty, liberalism no longer needs to rely on metaphysical narratives for justification, but rather on an uncoerced consensus capable of binding society. Any previous attempts to reconcile our public commitments with our private self-creative visions under a larger metaphysical structure must be abandoned, according to Rorty, as a relic of the Enlightenment's hubris. As Rorty remarks, when talking about the "moral justification of [liberal] institutions and practices" the discussion is "mostly a matter of historical narrative ... rather than of philosophical metanarrative."<sup>4</sup> Instead, we can subordinate our expressions of self-development to our public commitment to social solidarity and aversion to

cruelty. In doing so, we can do justice both to our perfectionist longings and liberal sensibilities.

The title of this essay will thus appear strikingly out of place. Indeed, within the context of democracy, the pairing of Rorty and Leo Strauss appears, on its face, inaccurate. For Strauss's political philosophy, scholars contend, is at best an elitist vision of democracy and at worst wholly anti-democratic.<sup>5</sup> On Strauss's view, politics is merely guided by opinions (*doxai*). The masses are, in effect, epistemically cut off from knowledge (*episteme*) ascertainable by a few. Strauss encourages the intellectually gifted to engage in clandestine projects and esoteric writing and speech to secure freedom in pursuit of wisdom. This requires that philosophers influence that which could only challenge their freedom: political authority. We must, at last, avoid the fate of Socrates. It is precisely at this juncture — a juncture that is seemingly far removed from Rorty's appreciation of liberal democracy — that is, on my reading, most reminiscent of and extended by his description of irony and its function in political society.

When read against the background of Strauss's work, I argue, that (1) irony and esotericism are strikingly similar, and (2) that Rorty complicates the relationship between irony and democracy in ways that undo the latter altogether. Both Strauss and Rorty share a specific nihilistic understanding of modernity that grows out of their Nietzschean affinities. Both take seriously Nietzsche's "God is dead" dictum — a claim that underscores the eclipse of the transcendent and the possibility of seeing our values as stable rather than fleeting. This nihilistic vision, for Strauss, makes esotericism necessary, and on Rorty's view gives birth to the Ironist. Strauss's specific articulation of esotericism, however, seeks to shield and guard the democratic community from this ontological claim. The demos is thus left believing that the fruits of collective will-formation are something more than evanescent desires. Strauss therefore stops short of installing esotericism and the attendant deception upon which it is based as a public virtue.

Rorty's Ironist goes much further. The Ironist accommodates himself — through rhetorical performance, we should say — to the principles of the community in which he exists because he secretly opposes them. The Ironist engages in self-perfection by manipulating the conventional meaning of words and concepts employed by the masses through deceptive speech and conduct. Recognizing, as he does, that only a few can be genuine Ironists — capable of reveling in the contingency of selfhood — Rorty nonetheless presents the Ironist as a source of imitation. In doing so, Rorty does what Strauss refuses to do — namely, replace belief in sincere and authentic speech with inauthentic and insincere rhetoric. The social reproduction, I maintain, of dishonesty and dissimulation among deliberative agents has the affect of undercutting

altogether the moral resources, such as trustworthiness, reciprocity, and commonality, needed to make social coordination and solidarity within democracy possible. By configuring irony's relationship to democracy in this way, Rorty undermines the community's attempt to create meaning through deliberative interactions that capture and elucidate our collective world, and which, for that reason make our union both possible and secure. This reading of Rorty's Ironist, I suggest, is more ominous than the threat of elitism, for it at once represents a left-Straussianism and a dark perfectionism.

## 2. Strauss and Esotericism

*Setting the Stage for Esotericism.* In reading Rorty, one is struck by the extent to which his conception of irony is a form of esotericism under another name. Esotericism is a form of deceptive engagement with one's interlocutors; actions, but primarily speech, are the opposite of what is intended as a way to shield one's heterodoxy. This implies a simultaneous engagement and withdrawal from one's political community, its corresponding truths and the constraints they place on one's autonomy. For Strauss, such "truths" are merely expressions of our opinions, our *doxai*, about the world. Nonetheless, on Strauss's view, they endow the world and our political institutions with meaning and purpose that ought not to be compromised. Methodologically, then, esotericism not only shields the philosopher from the beliefs of the community of which he is a part, but more significantly for Strauss, protects the demos from the corrosive impact the philosopher will have on its moral foundations.

Although Rorty's articulation of irony expresses a similar tension between esotericism and democratic life, Strauss underscores a connection between the philosopher's quest for wisdom and the demos that is all but missing from *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. On this reading, then, Strauss's esoteric philosopher seeks not to destroy *doxa*. Rather, he acknowledges that the attempt to see existence *sub specie aeternitatis* (under the aspect of eternity) implicates philosophy in the consolation of the demos. This peculiar configuration of the relationship between philosophy and democracy helps to explain how it is that Strauss's thoughts express an elitist strain that is also congenial to liberal democracy.

In order to elaborate the suggestion that esotericism implies a social responsibility by the philosopher, we should turn to Strauss's "Note on the Plan of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*." Throughout the essay Strauss compares Nietzsche to Plato; he seeks in this regard to explore Nietzsche's philosophical and methodological proximity to Plato. In doing so, he simultaneously reveals the truth that Nietzsche puts in front of our eyes, but which

Plato sought to hide. Introducing Nietzsche's famous idea of will to power, Strauss observes:

The will to power takes the place which the *eros* — the striving for “the good in itself” — occupied in Plato's thought.... Whatever may be the relation between the *eros* and the pure mind according to Plato, in Nietzsche's thought the will to power takes the place of both *eros* and the pure mind.<sup>6</sup>

The combination of uninhibited desire and the quest for wisdom reinvents the function of philosophy. Unlike what is found in Plato, philosophy appears not as a quest for truth freed from the burdens of irrationalism and human convention; rather, to be a philosopher is to prescribe to “nature what or how it ought to be.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Nietzsche reveals more clearly the implication of the need for Plato's noble lie. Philosophy now becomes, as Strauss remarks, “the sole source of truth.”<sup>8</sup> But what is to be understood in this regard about Strauss's reading of Nietzsche is that philosophy is not the source of truth because it *seemingly* discovers it (*à la* Plato), but rather because it creates it: “everything thought by anyone — philosopher or man of the people — is in the last analysis interpretation.”<sup>9</sup>

Herein lies the danger for Strauss. The essay reads less as a glorified appreciation of Nietzsche when read in the context of Strauss's other reflections, *contra* Laurence Lampert, but rather a cautious one.<sup>10</sup>

If we may make a somewhat free use of an expression occurring in Nietzsche's *Second Meditation Out of Season*, the truth is not attractive, lovable, life-giving, but deadly ... as is shown by the true doctrines of the sovereignty of Becoming, of the fluidity of all concepts. ... The world in itself, the “thing-in-itself,” “nature” (aph. 9) is wholly chaotic and meaningless.”<sup>11</sup>

For Strauss the truth is not attractive — that is, to the masses — precisely because it denotes the fluidity of all concepts and beliefs. Nietzsche grasp the fact that the will creates perishable truths, and it is this acknowledgment that is the source of Strauss's admiration. As evidenced by Nietzsche's “Schopenhauer as Educator,” he embraces the Schopenhauerian tragic vision of life and the inevitable element of suffering it entails — a form of suffering brought on by our inability to explain its meaning and place in our lives.<sup>12</sup> As Nietzsche writes elsewhere:

Nihilism appears at that point, not that the displeasure at existence has become greater than before but because one has come to mistrust any “meaning” in suffering, indeed in existence. One interpretation has collapsed; but because it was considered *the* interpretation it now seems as if there were no meaning at all in existence, as if everything were in vain.<sup>13</sup>

But like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche too hopes for a complete upheaval and reversal — an emancipatory aesthetic — that creates distance between cognition and the world such that one appreciates the whole without being enslaved to what is perishable within.<sup>14</sup> It is, in short, an attempt to recreate human action through a tragic and solitary heroism in the absence of God.

At this juncture, however, Strauss's admiration turns into caution. For he does not share Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, or even postmodernists' desire to put us in touch with this knowledge as part of an emancipatory project. Part of the reason for this has to do with Strauss's implicit assumption about human needs and desires that anchor psychological and political stability. Human traditions and beliefs work to stave off the recognition of the abyss beneath our feet and the incomprehensible fragility that attends life. Humans cannot, Strauss suggest, assume a God's eye view in relation to themselves; they cannot comprehend their own values as having a transcendent quality if their understood to be merely a reflection of the creative drive, without falling into a vicious cycle that undercuts veneration for those values. Much of this comes out in Strauss's commentary and critique of the contradictory nature of historicism. For historicism, on his view, ultimately erodes “the protecting atmosphere within which life or culture or action is alone possible.”<sup>15</sup> It is not merely the necessity of myth that is important for Strauss, but the absence of any belief in its illusory quality. Nietzsche's truth thus publicly shared can only, on Strauss's view, end with the erosion of social and political life. Indeed, the effort to hold at bay the erosion of civic commitment in democratic Athens led, as Strauss no doubt reminds us, to Socrates's death.<sup>16</sup>

Read in this light, it is not the absence of a sacred world that Strauss bemoans as such, a fact that is willfully ignored, but rather the similitude of sacredness to help venerate human values and tradition. What Anthony Giddens refers to as “emotional inoculation”<sup>17</sup> — that is, protection from Nietzsche's ontological claim — is threatened, and with that the possibility of the political. Rejecting Nietzsche's proposal as a viable option, Strauss strongly reasserts the Biblical dictum: “For in much wisdom *is* much grief; and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.”<sup>18</sup>

*Esotericism and Democratic Necessity.* In the context above, the meaning and importance of esotericism and its connection to political life for

Strauss become intelligible. In a number of writings, but particularly in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Strauss confronts the uneasy relationship between philosophy and democracy. But he does not, as is often thought, conclude that this relationship is incommensurable, although his answer does suggest the need for an important compromise.<sup>19</sup> In cautioning about this relationship, Strauss points toward an accommodation he refers to as the “Platonic Writing.”

The Platonic way, as distinguished from the Socratic way, is a combination of the way of Socrates with the way of Thrasymachus: for the intransigent way of Socrates is appropriate only for the philosopher’s dealing with the elite, whereas the way of Thrasymachus, which is both more and less exacting than the former, is appropriate for his dealings with the vulgar.... By combining the way of Socrates with the way of Thrasymachus, Plato avoided the conflict with the vulgar and thus the fate of Socrates. Accordingly, the revolutionary quest for the other city ceased to be necessary: Plato substituted for it a more conservative way of action, namely, the gradual replacement of the accepted opinion by the truth or an approximation to the truth. The replacement of the accepted opinions could not be gradual, if it were not accompanied by a provisional acceptance of the accepted opinions ... .<sup>20</sup>

Before turning to the meaning of the Platonic way, let us first look at the Socratic approach. What should we make of the account of Socrates? What does it indicate about esotericism as a methodology of writing and speaking in public? What does it imply about democracy as a mechanism for elucidating the truths about our common horizon? To begin, the early Socrates is, on Strauss’s view, truthful and transparent with his speech. He shows little caution with his words. Only when it is too late does Socrates become more guarded with whom he shares his thoughts, restricting his audience to those few intellectuals capable of coping with the truth, but who will nonetheless pay lip service to the reigning political idiom. Socrates’s fate thus exemplifies the dark side of Plato’s myth of the cave in Book Seven of the *Republic*. In the dimly lit cave, one individual breaks free of the salutary deference to the shadows on the walls and discovers that those images are merely illusions. But Plato reminds us of the fate of that person who seeks to free his fellow citizens, invoking the image of a violent death: “And if they were somehow able to get their hands on and kill the man who attempts to release [them], wouldn’t they kill him?”<sup>21</sup> Echoing Plato, Strauss articulates the moral of the story and concretizes some of the claims informing the essay on Nietzsche: there are “basic truths which [cannot] be pronounced in public ... because they

[will] do harm to many people who, having been hurt, [will] naturally be inclined to hurt him who pronounces the unpleasant.”<sup>22</sup> This classic illustration of the untenable relationship between truth and opinion, philosophy and citizenship, cast into relief the necessity of both Socrates's death and the reason for esoteric teaching.

Yet, Socrates's willingness to die as opposed to philosophize elsewhere underscores the obligation of submitting oneself to the conventions of the city.<sup>23</sup> Socrates removes the cloud of suspicion over philosophy — the accusation of its tendency to corrupt and erode civic duty and communal tradition. Socrates identifies with his fellow citizens' obligation to the demos through his death, thus shielding them from the insights to which he is privy. He spares them from the spiritual and moral emptiness that follows. It is true that Strauss underscores the difficulty in getting philosophers to turn to “human things” and the compulsion involved in this turn.<sup>24</sup> And I do not reject Strauss's own claim that Socrates was not a “citizen-philosopher.”<sup>25</sup> But we ought not forget, especially in Strauss's commentary on the *Crito* that, “however profound the difference, or the antagonism, between Socrates and the non-philosophical citizens may be, in grave situations he identifies himself completely, as far as his body is concerned, with the city, with the people.”<sup>26</sup> Thus I follow Thomas Pangle in arguing that, for Strauss, “though Socrates remained in his deepest thinking essentially solitary ... he nevertheless ‘originated a new kind of the study of the natural things — a kind of study in which, for example, the nature or idea of justice or natural right, and surely the nature of the human soul or man, is more important than, for example, the nature of the sun’.”<sup>27</sup>

Plato's subsequent combination of Socrates's approach and the way of Thrasymachus — the rhetorician who speaks the language of the demos — reconfigures the relationship between philosophy and the city. Here we find an amplification of the meaning of Socrates's sacrifice. In this reconfiguration, one that Strauss praises, esotericism becomes a necessary part of philosophy. Philosophy's social responsibility becomes more pronounced. Thus Strauss writes in his study of Plato's *Republic* in *The City and Man*, Socrates and Thrasymachus “have just become friends, having not been enemies before either.”<sup>28</sup> Thrasymachus's art of speaking is necessary to bring philosophy and the multitude into harmony; he serves Socrates without ever being aware, and this relationship stands as an analogy for the way in which the city mediated by esotericism is in the service of philosophy without acknowledgment. Once combined, both Socrates's and Thrasymachus's style speak both to those statesmen in power and the masses respectively. Strauss appreciates the way of Plato precisely because he makes a home for philosophy without having to shed blood, but more importantly, without ultimately endangering the political

as such. In doing so, the possibility that philosophy can be made to coincide with the city is realized.

The precise importance of this esotericism, I suggest, is tied to the psychological tension the philosopher experiences — that is, between the self-referential quest for wisdom and the social obligations generated by one's membership in a democratic society — and its subsequent management. It is true that by virtue of his counsel to those in power, the philosopher becomes society's ruler "without ever becoming its servant."<sup>29</sup> But what we must not obscure is that for Strauss in this secret rulership there exists a desire to protect and to console democracy.

Strauss takes up many of these themes, particularly the dual quality of the philosopher's nature, in that all-important essay "What is Political Philosophy."

Political philosophy will then be the attempt to replace opinion about the nature of political things by knowledge of the nature of political things. Political things are by their nature subject to approval and disapproval, to choice and rejection, to praise and blame. It is of their essence not to be neutral but to raise a claim to men's obedience, allegiance, decision or judgment. One does not understand them as what they are, as political things, if one does not take seriously their explicit or implicit claim to be judged in terms of goodness or badness, of justice or injustice, i.e., if one does not measure them by some standard of goodness or justice. To judge soundly one must know the true standards. If political philosophy wishes to do justice to its subject matter, it must strive for genuine knowledge of these standards. Political philosophy is the attempt truly to know both the nature of political things and the right, or the good, political order.<sup>30</sup>

This passage captures a number of different points, the first of which is the philosopher's unadulterated and unconstrained quest for truth, but secondly his need to cloak that effort so as to continue to be at home within and to serve the demos — that is, to settle political controversies of vital importance. Though political philosophy is a species of philosophy, one cannot be philosophical without the threat of hemlock or the guillotine. *Strauss tells us that a life in pursuit of wisdom requires one always to assume an edifying stance toward democracy.* Hence the way of Plato. Both transcendence and groundedness in the city or cave explain the internal workings of esotericism and political philosophy. Although this dual character makes one's utterances to the demos only half-truths, it nonetheless provides a stance from which the adjudication of paramount controversies is made possible. The political philosopher's

questions are already other-regarding — such as What is the good life? and What is the best regime? — examining the diverse political terrain outside the demos to find that configuration that produces excellence, nobility and sustains civic virtue. Adjudication of important questions such as what is the best regime never moves to the antecedent inquiry that challenges our desire to ask the question from the outset. Political philosophy, on Strauss view, seeks to protect and safeguard more carefully the statesman's perspective from those who might offer answers unmotivated by public spiritedness.<sup>31</sup>

This hybridized tint to the philosopher's character expresses itself as an outward teaching — the “exoteric philosophy” — that pays lip service to the reigning public narrative, but which is configured such that the subtext captures a more subversive teaching.<sup>32</sup> Although there is dependence on the conventional meaning of political idioms in light of its context, there is the possibility that such idioms can mean something else when perspectives are changed and diversified. This captures the ironic or esoteric meaning. The political philosopher appropriates the perspective of his community, thereby cloaking his dangerous thoughts. This appropriation moderates the philosopher's speech, and manipulates us into believing in his sincere loyalty.<sup>33</sup> But this is a methodology that Strauss refuses to hold up as an object of imitation. Aside from what it implies ontologically, esotericism as a mode of engagement is concealed from the community. In a reconfiguration of Plato's myth of the cave, Strauss tells us that to be philosophical in the presence of non-philosophers requires that one's perception be dimmed, made translucent, so that the light of truth is barely visible. This moderation of the philosopher's speech, which, Strauss remarks, stands in contrast to the freeness that comes with a kind of drunkenness from consumption of the truth, is not a “virtue of thought” but rather citizenship.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, it is the virtue of citizenship that above all else guides Strauss's reflections on the relationship between philosophy and democracy.

But what, then, is the content of this truth from which society needs to be protected? The essential point is epistemological: philosophers are capable of living authentically, without myth, in a world that has been disenchanting. Socrates's death is prompted by his discussion of and challenge to the “ancestral divine code” of Athens: a code needed to subdue the masses while simultaneously providing order and stability for society.<sup>35</sup> Strauss thus shares with Nietzsche a kind of nihilistic orientation toward the world regarding meaning and value, although both affirm a hierarchy among human types. This is why the philosopher, as suggested earlier, speaks only half-truths, and opinions, in one sense, continue to reign. The genuine political knowledge of which Strauss spoke earlier is thus understood to live out its usefulness — its reliability as an interpretation of the world — leaving in its wake the need for

another reading.<sup>36</sup> Strauss's hermeneutical method implies nothing short of agreement with Nietzsche, and as we will see Rorty as well. But Strauss encourages a different approach, that is, the philosopher must begin with the values that are currently in existence as the guiding framework. This is part of their role as adjudicators and aids in the creation of a normative political philosophy. Thus the political philosopher's "What Is?" questions sidestep nihilism altogether. The possibility that God is dead is ruled out of hand as a viable option. Strauss's precise understanding of philosophy's role in the context of democracy creates a bond between the two, with a band of elites standing guard to ensure the equilibrium of that relationship.

### 3. Rorty's Straussianism

*The Aestheticized Self.* In turning to Rorty, we immediately notice a difference in language, since he uses the word "irony." This will be the source of deep difference, but *only* to the extent that it extends Strauss's idea. Indeed, while Strauss believes esotericism must remain part of philosophy and therefore distanced from the masses, Rorty unleashes it upon the public mind under the rubric of irony. Rorty not only risks the exposure of the truth implied by irony, but indeed encourages its imitation. In many respects this makes sense when looking at the development of the Western intellectual and political landscape. The kind of hostility faced by Socrates has seemingly been eclipsed. Toleration, as an offspring of the Enlightenment, thus forms a permanent part of liberal democracy in ways that invites irony to be part of a reality to be managed as opposed to persecuted. But with this openness follows something else: the spiritual quality that we seemingly attribute to collective will-formation, the belief in a durable and extending knowledge, is revealed to be shifting, transient and superficial. Much of this is a species of the methodological orientation implied by irony such that the ability to generate faith in speech and action is undercut. And it is this that constitutes an extension of Strauss's esotericism that I refer to as *left-Straussianism*.

Before we turn, however, to the precise threat to democracy, we must first explicate the meaning of irony for Rorty. Next we turn to the exact danger posed. My argument throughout is that irony's deleterious impact on democracy rest not merely with holding it up as an object of imitation, but also the internal dynamics of irony — that is, the connection between deception as a mode of public engagement and the perfectionism that justifies such deception. This self-referential aesthetic quality makes deception a feature of a playful and constantly shifting identity. In combination, any other-regarding commitments once attached to esotericism as articulated by Strauss fall away, and with that the protective barrier that affirmed the similitude of sacredness.

Rorty's preoccupation with irony develops against the backdrop of his attack on foundational epistemology in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. There Rorty challenges the use of ocular metaphors employed throughout the history of philosophy as a way to capture philosophy's proper work — its attempt to see the really Real, to mirror the truth that exudes from nature. In its wake, Rorty offers a radically historicized and therefore contingent vision of human existence. Of language, for example, he writes: "There is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence."<sup>37</sup> "There are many ways," Rorty writes elsewhere, "to talk about what is going on, and that none of them gets closer to the way things are in themselves than any other."<sup>38</sup> This is because at the end of the day there is nothing "beneath socialization or prior to history."<sup>39</sup> This distinction between language and its object dissolves altogether and with it the belief that language can be seen as accurately capturing the truth of that object.

Just as we acknowledge our vocabularies to be contingent, we should also see ourselves as the result of history and chance. There is no such thing as a core self that seeks discovery or expression, but rather our core self is equal to the language we happen to employ. We must hold at bay, according to Rorty, the calcifying influence of believing that who we are is fixed in nature. For, alas, we may find ourselves confronting that "horror" to which Harold Bloom refers to as thinking ourselves "to be a copy or replica."<sup>40</sup> Instead, we must face up to contingency; we must acknowledge that we are comprised of "webs of beliefs and desires," and as we develop these webs reweave themselves so as to include new beliefs, new sentences — hence, new vocabularies for understanding ourselves.<sup>41</sup> The overriding aim, to be sure, is self-creation, but this is derived from a naturalistic account of contingency that yields an anti-essentialist understanding of selfhood. In other words, Rorty's evaluation of the Ironist is based on an antecedent belief in contingency.

This description casts into relief Rorty's most known character, the Ironist, intimated in the second chapter, "The Contingency of Selfhood," but discussed more fully in the fourth chapter, "Private Irony and Liberal Hope."<sup>42</sup> The Ironist, on Rorty's view, is someone who does not take their vocabulary, their ways of understanding themselves and relationship to the world, too seriously. The reason for this is threefold.<sup>43</sup> First, the social impulse that brings the Ironist in contact with others, whether it is an encounter with another person or a character in a book, also brings her in contact with new and exciting vocabularies. Second, the Ironist can make no appeals to her present language to arrive at a firm belief in the credibility of her own vocabulary. And third, the Ironist thus views her language as existing within a language game in which she is constantly aiming for re-description. To be an Ironist is,

according to Rorty, "to see one's life ... as a dramatic narrative ... a process of Nietzschean self-overcoming," an act of self-perfection.<sup>44</sup> As Rorty writes:

The [I]ronist 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. But she cannot give a criterion of wrongness.<sup>45</sup>

This perfectionist element at the heart of irony prompts Rorty to see it as allied more with the poet or the novelist rather than the philosopher or metaphysician as traditionally understood.<sup>46</sup> The differences between the poet and the novelist on the one hand, and the philosopher on the other, is that the former is always in the process of becoming and so cannot rely on one description, while the latter believes that he has already arrived at a final state or that such a state may exist. Rorty's appropriation of the term "becoming" is taken over from Nietzsche. As Nietzsche writes in *The Gay Science*, individuals who are in the process of becoming are "human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves."<sup>47</sup> The Ironist therefore embraces literature, for example, because it puts him in contact with other vocabularies; it is a bank, if you will, filled with old words and the possibility for constructing new ones.<sup>48</sup> Rorty thinks of the Ironist, as Nietzsche thinks of the historian. For the historian, Nietzsche observes in *Human, All-Too-Human*, "in contrast to the metaphysician, is happy to harbour in himself, not 'an immortal soul', but *many mortal souls*."<sup>49</sup> Perfectionism in this regard thus refers to the self's process of cultivation, rather than denoting some static end-state. It refers to process and development rather than *telos*.

Yet, this description of irony conceals that it works in two distinct ways that Rorty often runs together.<sup>50</sup> The first of these is local; irony acts as a trope within a language game disrupting the process of ossification, revealing its inability to mean what it intends to describe. This is the form of irony Rorty himself employs in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* when he reveals ultimate realities to be a function of language as opposed to language's foundation. Indeed, this is the more traditional style of irony. So understood, irony is both a descriptive property of what language is doing when it works to describe or a function of a person's mode of speaking, thus indicating that it is the person rather than language that means the opposite of its stated purpose.

Irony functions in another way that implies a more fundamental negation than found in discrete speech-acts. This is the sense in which irony has existential overtones as being a way of life. So understood, irony

transcends dispersed rhetorical instances and denotes, what Ernst Behler following Friderich Schlegel calls, "single ironic instances" of living life.<sup>51</sup> Here, irony discloses itself less in individual speech-acts that mean the opposite of what is intended, but rather principally in how utterances are rendered altogether. Thus, to call someone an Ironist is to offer a description of their orientation toward the world — to underscore the irrepressibility of their character that is made all the more possible by the masks they wear as part of a life-style that is performative. But more importantly, the Ironist, as with the esoteric philosopher, is an individual with the skill of speaking and acting as one who believes in what is being said and done, and who instills in others by virtue of the *appearance* of sincerity the belief that it is reasonable to trust the accuracy of what is being said and done. There is always a provisional tint to such a person's character, "a kind of built-in conditional stipulation that undermines any firm and fixed stand."<sup>52</sup>

This second description of irony captures something at once distinctive about modern subjectivity, but also exemplifies what it means to be the post-modern individual *par excellence*. Indeed, it suggests, perhaps reluctantly by Rorty, that being an Ironist is far more rare and idiosyncratic than initially thought. In all fairness, Rorty does not offer a description of modern subjectivity in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, but it is implied by the account given there and throughout his later works. For our purposes, it helps explain why irony is understood as a rare rather than standard phenomenon of the modern condition.

Rorty's account thus presupposes a familiar story already present in Max Weber regarding the inexhaustibility of individual identities by their functional location in society. In contemporary post-traditional societies, there is more of a disjunction between the meaning and purpose of life and its relationship to institutional structures. This, however, leaves the individual unhinged from those moorings, religious or otherwise, that once provided him with a sense of identity, or to use Rorty's language, a "final vocabulary."<sup>53</sup> Coextensive with this, however, is that individuals nonetheless actively negotiate their lives to realize a narrative unity that makes intelligible both conflicting commitments and institutional pressures. Rorty recognizes, as did Strauss, that there are needs and desires that ground and make possible psychological and political stability. Most of us "non-intellectuals" Rorty remarks, "are still committed either to some form of religious faith or to some form of Enlightenment rationalism" because we have not given up "the attempt to hold all the sides of our life in a single vision."<sup>54</sup> In a later essay, "The Decline of Redemptive Truth and The Rise of a Literary Culture," Rorty refers to this commitment, in much agreement with Strauss, as a quest for "redemptive truth" — a spiritual longing to have our lives transcend and

amount to more than the mere sum of our relationships and engagement with the world.<sup>55</sup> Undoubtedly such individuals become more “protean” in understanding the possibility of identity-formation.<sup>56</sup> But this ought not to obscure the fact that individuals struggle to locate themselves such that their identity is more than a mere reflection of this process. Modern subjects thus seek to generate, as Strauss suggested earlier, a belief that the lives they lead have depth, stability, and unity, and to generate an answer to the question “What is the good life?”<sup>57</sup>

Rorty’s Ironist is the greatest expression of this moment, but sits beyond its shortcomings. The Ironist views himself as being unhinged from traditional moorings, much like Strauss’s esoteric philosopher, but he does not seek any new ones or the appearance of such that might organize and connect his commitment to self-perfection together with a responsibility to fellow citizens. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, writes Rorty, “tries to show how things look if we drop the demand for a theory which unifies the public and private, and are content to treat the demands of self creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable.”<sup>58</sup> Stability is achieved, and hence self-governance, precisely in being perpetually “narrativized.” It is this perpetual narrativity that does not merely act as an incursion within our language games, advancing skepticism and doubt, but presents and pursues alternative modes of being.

The presentation and pursuit of such alternatives in many ways already radicalizes esotericism, rejecting as it were the way of Plato. What esotericism implies that Rorty’s Ironist rejects is that deception is a way to share knowledge about the emptiness of the world with the few, while paying lip service to communal practices shared by the rest. Instead Rorty parades irony as a methodology to be imitated by all.<sup>59</sup> In a revealing passage where Rorty engages Strauss on precisely the point of esotericism he remarks,

This idea, familiar from the work of Leo Strauss and his followers, is one for which I have no sympathy. It presupposes that the masses are still unable to kick their metaphysical habit, and that we ironical types must therefore be prudently sneaky in our dealings with them. My hunch is that if the masses could learn ... that the powers that be are not ordained of God, then they can learn to get along without metaphysical backup for their deep attachment to democratic institutions.<sup>60</sup>

This is an interesting passage, considering how it comes only one year after Rorty’s concession that most of us seek the similitude of sacredness as part of our individual and collective lives. Has Rorty changed his mind? After all, throughout *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, in keeping with Strauss, Rorty

makes a distinction between intellectuals and “non-intellectuals,” where the former represent those types that can be genuine Ironist.<sup>61</sup> My suggestion is that Rorty’s “hunch” about the masses ability to “kick their metaphysical habit[s]” is disingenuous precisely because of the frequency with which he says and laments the opposite claim. In other words, Rorty recognizes, as did Strauss, that most of us hang a great deal on the sacredness of our beliefs and values.

At this juncture, Rorty himself advances doubts about this appropriation of irony, and gestures toward its reconfiguration altogether: “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.”<sup>62</sup> Here, Rorty slowly moves toward his public/private split where he seeks to confine irony to mere inward reflection. Rorty’s remark, then, is a concession about the problems that attend irony from which he seeks to escape. Irony is not merely skeptical of the life one is living, but actively seeks to subvert it. Skepticism and active subversion are collapsed because of where they originate in the self — that is, in a desire to be distinctive — and so carry a dark undercurrent. Irony thus has an outward stance toward its community that is also tied up with exacting harm: “For the best way to cause people long-lasting pain is to humiliate them by making the things that seemed most important to them look futile, obsolete, and powerless.... Redescription often humiliates.”<sup>63</sup>

*Democracy on Trial.* This last remark comes in the context of a paragraph about the limits of irony. The second half of the fourth chapter articulates the compromise of the entire book, which is first expressed in the conclusion of the third chapter. There, Rorty’s voice is more pronounced and its inflection is more direct, as if to indicate that he is offering a piece of advice to the Ironist: “The compromise advocated in this book amounts to saying: *Privatize* the Nietzschean-Sartrean-Foucauldian attempt at authenticity and purity, in order to prevent yourself from slipping into a political attitude which will lead you to think that there is some social goal more important than avoiding cruelty.”<sup>64</sup> The argument for irony is now more circumspect and more chastened. But why? To begin, the Ironist is now homegrown in liberal democratic soil; part I of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, which articulates the generic traits of irony were unhinged from any specific political-historical milieu. Part II opens up with the all-important fourth chapter that has been central to our concerns. But now, Rorty does not speak of the Ironist proper, as he had done for much of Part I, and throughout most of the fourth chapter that opens Part II, but rather the liberal Ironist.

Textual investigation, however, reveals that Rorty does not constrain this problematic relationship between irony and democracy. For what would

sincerity and authenticity of public speech and action look like when examined through the soul of the Ironist? Irony itself calls the possibility of sincere and authentic speech into question. This is precisely why the subsequent move to chasten the Ironist through the public/private split is unsatisfactory. After all, irony is not merely skeptical of the public narrative, but actively subversive of it. Although it is clear how the Ironist can come to profess a commitment to liberal democratic principles, it is unclear how he can consistently affirm that position. Even a homegrown Ironist struggles to break free. Irony explodes the public/private split in large measure because it reaches all the way down to one's political identification. This is evident in Rorty's language when he often refers to the "poeticized culture" or "ironist culture,"<sup>65</sup> after having denied that a culture can be completely ironic.<sup>66</sup> But the point is precisely that culture as a medium through which irony functions transcends the split Rorty seemingly favors. The Ironist walks freely amongst us as opposed to living on the fringes of society.

I maintain that this is a crucial but neglected point in Rorty's account of irony.<sup>67</sup> We quickly move to his description of liberal irony and solidarity, but never underscore that the description of irony offered in the earlier parts of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* calls into question the genuineness of the later parts. The motivation behind Rorty's postmodern stance — his perfectionist longings — against the above backdrop affirms rather than circumnavigates the incommensurability between his description of irony and democracy. Indeed, it is the former that is being chastened, reconfigured, and ultimately eroded.

On the basis of this analysis, we uncover the impetus behind being perpetually narrativized, and with it the connection to democracy. Rorty begins to explain the psychology of the Ironist when he makes use of Bloom's language of horror, referred to above, in knowing that one is merely a replica. This language should be taken in its literal sense; for the Ironist to look back on his life and place in society and realize both of which he never made but merely inherited, is to be subjected to a form of violence. "The impulse to think," Rorty asserts, "to inquire, to reweave ... is not wonder but terror."<sup>68</sup> This is not so much a physical violence — such wounds heal — but a tormenting of, and assault against the soul. Violence therefore, at least from the perspective of the Ironist, could not have been legitimized.

But there is yet a bolder message of the subtext: the contractual and discursive model that underwrites democracy could not have legitimized violence either. Violence is not avoided by modernity's attempt to demystify political legitimacy through rational discourse.<sup>69</sup> Rather, violence, at least from the Ironist's perspective, is bound up with democracy's quest to develop common purposes and shared identity through mutual agreement and under-

standing, and so stifles artistic development for the sake of order and stability. The metaphoric moment of founding a political order and the violence it exacts that is repeated throughout Western political thought is reinscribed, as opposed to averted, in the discursive proceduralism of democracy.<sup>70</sup> Indeed Nietzsche, Rorty's important mouthpiece, criticizes democracy's egalitarianism on precisely this point.<sup>71</sup> And Tocqueville's and Mill's exuberant arguments for democracy are matched by the sobriety of realizing its quest to fashion minds after the same model, leading to mediocrity.<sup>72</sup>

The theme of violence is repeatedly invoked throughout *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, but nowhere else except in the context of irony does it indicate an impossible relationship with liberal democracy. The inference here, based on the meaning and status of the Ironist vis-à-vis political society, furtively directs us to the great trial in the Western philosophical tradition: the trial of Socrates. There is, however, a twist. It is not Socrates on trial, but rather democracy, with the philosopher standing in as judge, jury and executioner. To be sure, this is not a straightforward claim being made. Rather, it reveals itself by what is implied by virtue of the Ironist's existence as a member of the demos. Perfectionism, on this view, is emblematic of negative liberty in ways that can only realize itself in opposition to democracy, surely something neither Berlin nor Shklar could have imagined.

For this reason the modality of violence reveals an antagonistic relationship between irony and democracy, one that is all but missing from Strauss's compromise. The Ironist's desire to avert violence is thus coextensive with a need to be perpetually narrativized and to instantiate stories about the self that are different from the public narrative. Socialization impinges on the psychological development of the self, and thus arrests identity-formation to the extent that it stifles the ability to enact the performance of aesthetic individuality. Although individuals onto-genetically experience this process from the moment of birth, the Ironist retrospectively examines it critically as being oppressive. What then, the Ironist implicitly asks, could render democracy any less violent and oppressive?<sup>73</sup> Perhaps nothing — or perhaps all that is left for the Ironist, Rorty avers, is a "hope ... that what the past tried to do to her she will succeed in doing to the past: to make the past itself, including those very causal processes which blindly impressed all her own behaviors, bear her impress."<sup>74</sup> The initial, albeit necessary, oppressive entrance into the world is thus followed by a second birth of liberation. Is this liberation any less violent?

If we take the relationship between the Ironist and his interlocutors seriously, we are lured, I maintain into a discourse of deception; the intent not to humiliate and erode what is most dear to the everyday citizen is negated. The Ironist's interlocutors at once generate confidence in his claims only to

discover they are the objects of his amusement. The Ironist hopes for no mere contingent relationship between his mode of being and the public narrative, but will work to ensure a necessary connection — to have, as we no doubt recall, the community bear his impress. The threat of violence as a part of the Ironist's second birth of liberation returns in the form of a threat to the needs and desires that ground psychological and democratic stability. Increase in humiliation is thus marked by decrease in the faith that one had previously placed in the framework that was intended to mitigate such deception.

This movement at once shares key elements of Strauss's teaching of esotericism. We find both Rorty and Strauss acknowledging the accuracy of Nietzsche's nihilism, both see esotericism or irony as growing out of this confrontation with nihilism leading to a kind of dissimulation, and both affirm the need by humans to believe in something that transcend their lives. But Rorty advances esotericism further such that the tensions inherent in esoteric methodology — the pull between the self- and other-regarding desires — are abandoned and with it the protective shield around democracy. This shows that (1) when perfectionism and irony are bound together the creative impulse of the Ironist can only be realized over and against the democratic community;<sup>75</sup> and therefore (2) the Ironist seeks to erode the moral resources of democracy, such as trustworthiness, reciprocity and commonality, that make solidarity possible.

This takes us to the meaning of democracy that is under threat. To be sure, democracy is difficult to define. Excluding, however, by fiat its intrinsic value of enlarging public judgment, developing the capacity of critical inquiry, and forging ties that bind seem just as wrong-headed as denying the instrumental reasons for why people prefer democracy. Such reasons can range from seeing democracy as a way to control and minimize the abuse of power to the possibility of impacting public policy in the service of one's cause to alleviating inequality and injustice. But perhaps both of these elements are bound up in how ordinary folk understand democracy's value. A more inclusive understanding, then, views democracy as both framing and chastening the power relations within collective activities, and through that process reflexively instantiating a sense of commonality and reaffirming norms of trustworthiness, reciprocity, and accountability as part of legitimizing public action.<sup>76</sup> It is a self-conscious critical posture that unsettles us from the belief that authority can be left to its own devices, thus demanding that it be redeemed before the public. Here is the moral urgency that one senses in the democrat: a sense that proceduralism is nothing without commitment, trust, and loyalty, and that these are lost as critical appraisal and accountability diminishes. This self-reflexive process allows us to speak of a democratic tradition that is at once procedural and substantive.<sup>77</sup> Democracy's perpetual

response to the dynamics of power and development of conflict simultaneously articulates the contours of a community, those parts of our individual lives that converge on what is shared and express how *we* understand ourselves. In this respect, Mark Warren is right to argue that such a community has moral and political authority because it has moved through the political.<sup>78</sup>

This formulation assumes, following John Dryzek, Seyla Benhabib, and Habermas, a conception of the public as a discursive arena among citizens in which speech aims at persuasion of the truth of one's claim or its rightness.<sup>79</sup> This process does not imply *ipso facto* the truth of our speech claims, but rather the possibility of ascertaining that truth in the context of issues that frustrate collective governance and maintenance. Publicity serves to demystify public speech and action as part of ascertaining what is legitimate and justifiable. But once again the self-reflexive process here implies that democratic will-formation is also a process of meaning-construction such that what is constructed transcends the particular process. Democracy is made possible in speech, actualized through action and institutions, and sustained by the dialectical relationship between the two.

Several questions now come into the foreground. What happens to democracy when insincere and inauthentic speech displaces sincerity and authenticity? What happens when dissimulation becomes a virtue of public engagement as part of an individual's aesthetic sense of self-perfection? What happens when this dissimulation is coextensive with an attempt to control or preempt democracy's need to sustain collective organization, and legitimize and develop responses to the problems that endanger that union? The argument is that democracy not only relies on formal institutions of a regulated mass bureaucratic society, but also more invisible institutions that make social coordination possible. As scholars of social capital highlight, even a vision of democracy that relies on the social reproduction of formal institutions to generate trustworthiness is not sufficient on its face, but depends for its viability "upon the supportive dispositions and understanding of those involved in them."<sup>80</sup> This cognitive premise of democracy makes possible its substantive value. When irony is understood along the lines suggested by Rorty these supportive dispositions of democracy whither away.

The difference between Strauss and Rorty is tied to how each confronts this psychological premise. On one level, we are inclined to deliberate because of the expectation of fruitful results in the context of particular problems and conflicts, but there is a cognitive presumption being made by virtue of our participation. We perceive a particular orientation toward deliberative interactions by its participants — one that excludes intentional dishonesty, deception or betrayal. There is an implied ethical content to deliberating in a democracy: deliberation seeks to secure and cultivate trustworthiness among

participants so as to institutionalize the expectation of reciprocity that makes social cooperation and union possible. Rorty's Ironist envisions a world emptied of normative assessment in which deception as a feature of aesthetic development calls into question the faith needed to sustain political life. But absent democracy's cognitive presumption, institutions themselves slowly lose their ability to stimulate cooperation and evoke creativity needed to address the problems that are part and parcel of political life.

The argument here is not a claim about the outcome of deliberation were we all to exercise the virtues of honesty, trustworthiness and reciprocity; for even these virtues may nonetheless leave all parties to deliberative interactions with feelings of regret and disappointment. In fact, it is the cumulative impact of deliberative outcomes over the quality of human lives that reveal whether or not it is worthy to engage once more. The real point is that in a world where irony is held up as a source of admiration and imitation, deliberation as the framework through which the moral foundations of democracy are put in place becomes impossible. For mutual suspicion increases as honest relations become a rare feature of the political landscape. Citizens will be unable to trust each other and incapable of generating faith in political values, ideals and (dare I say?) laws themselves. Vision of the larger whole dims before their eyes, their public lives seem distant, and the living network of relationships that constitute democratic life are gradually and slowly lost.

I must emphasize, for those last few skeptics of this account, that Rorty's mode of writing need not be an attempt to articulate esotericism or to radicalize its relationship to democracy. I seek not, as John McCormick reminds us in his reading of Derrida, "to impose on a text a reading preordained by an orthodox and perhaps sinister agenda — an imposition all the more insulting because it claims to speak in an author's real, secret, hidden voice..."<sup>81</sup> And yet, it does not seem so difficult to see how the textual performance of the Ironist is at once a reflection of Strauss's esoteric philosopher, but also much more. This performance creates distance of a sinister nature not only between *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* and what Rorty says in his other works that lay out his sociopolitical agenda, but also between the Ironist-as-citizen of the demos and political stability. My reading, I hope, brings home the danger to democracy of the Ironist's quest for a specific kind of perfectionism and method for its realization.

The implication is not that we forego social criticism. That irony as a form of social criticism is incompatible with democracy does not imply that criticism altogether is impossible. I do not therefore encourage us to endorse willy-nilly those patterns of social and political life that, on closer inspection, may implicate us in intolerance and cruelty. Veneration for democracy and the

similitude of sacredness that attaches to the values generated is at once a product of time, but also because it takes its stand in our individual and collective lives and help navigate a treacherous world. When our values within a democracy lose their functionality in precisely the foregoing way we must not hesitate to engage in social evaluation and experimentation once more. In this formulation there is never any doubt about the goal toward which we aim. Democracy itself is not in question, since it is an expression of fallibilism and experimentation. The goal that directs our reflections is how we might yet deepen democracy's value and extend its reach.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am very grateful for helpful comments by Eddie Glaude, Paul Taylor, John McCormick, Steven B. Smith, John Smith, Eric Tam, Ethan Leib, Ian Shapiro, Seyla Benhabib, Paul Franco, Andrew Bove, Shadia Drury, David Mayhew, John Shook, and the anonymous reviewer of *Contemporary Pragmatism*. Special thanks to Michelle Tolman Clarke for carefully reading and editing this essay.

### NOTES

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Press, 1989), p. 51.

2. I mean such issues as Rorty's history of foundational epistemology, his anti-foundationalism and arguments regarding correspondence versus coherence theories of truth, and his elevation of literature over and against philosophical inquiry.

3. For some criticisms of Rorty see for example the following works: Richard J. Bernstein, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward: Richard Rorty on Liberal Democracy and Philosophy," *Political Theory* 15 (1987): 538–563; Nancy Fraser, "Solidarity or Singularity? Richard Rorty Between Romanticism and Technocracy," in *Reading Rorty*, ed. Alan R. Malachowski (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 303–322; Ian Shapiro, *Political Criticism* (Stanford, Cal.: University of California Press, 1990), chap. 2; Thomas McCarthy, "Ironist Theory as a Vocation," *Critical Inquiry* 16 (1990): 644–655.

4. Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Volume 1* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 200.

5. For critical assessments of Strauss's views with which I'm very sympathetic see: Shadia Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1988); Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of AntiLiberalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 61–88; Charles Larmore, "The Secrets of Philosophy," *The New Republic* (3 July 1989): 30–35. For a more positive assessment of Strauss's political philosophy that places him in the corner of liberal democracy that I also appreciate see Gregory Bruce Smith, "Leo Strauss and the Straussians: An Anti-Democratic Cult?" *PS: Political Science and Politics* 30 (1997): 180–189; Steven B.

Smith, "Leo Strauss's Platonic Liberalism," *Political Theory* 28 (2000): 787–809. The recent barrage of journalistic writings on Strauss and the connection to President George W. Bush's administration, I believe, on the whole is very tenuous and unhelpful in understanding the complicated relationship between Strauss and American conservatism. I have opted instead to rely on more academic reflections on Strauss. I leave to those who are obsessed with Strauss to reflect on some larger "conspiracy."

6. Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 176.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. In a valuable analysis Lampert suggests that Strauss shares Nietzsche's affirmation of nihilism; see Laurence Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), chap. 2. Of this I do not disagree. But on my reading this is not properly the source of Strauss's appreciation of Nietzsche as much as a point of concern. To be sure, for Strauss, Nietzsche is a philosopher of the highest order, but he lacks the care that makes his philosophy appropriate for political life. And, on my reading, it is political life that above all else concerns Strauss; it permeates the whole of his writings and the accent is often on what endangers or might yet protect and ennoble the political. When read in this light, Strauss's remarks on Nietzsche in the essay under consideration take a different and less positive slant.

11. Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, p. 177.

12. Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator," in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 125–195; See also Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), vol. 1, Bk. 3, Bk. 4, § 56–58.

13. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Press, 1968), p. 35.

14. Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator," §4 and 5; cf. Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), particularly chap. 6; Rüdiger Safranski, *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, trans. Shelley Frisch (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), chaps. 2 and 4; Leslie Paul Thiele, "Twilight of Modernity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Politics," *Political Theory* 22 (1994): 468–490.

15. Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 26.

16. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 36; Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 85.

17. Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 39.

18. Ecclesiastes 1:18.

19. Two good examples that suggest the opposite are Smith, "Platonic Liberalism," pp. 793–799; and Dana Villa, *Socratic Citizenship* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), chap. 5.

20. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, pp. 16–17.

21. The translation used is Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 517a.
22. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, p. 36.
23. Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, pp. 38–67; *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays By Leo Strauss*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 31.
24. Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), pp. 13–14, 124–125, 127–128.
25. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, pp. 120–121.
26. Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, p. 51.
27. Thomas Pangle, “Introduction” to Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, p. 18.
28. Strauss, *The City and Man*, p. 123.
29. Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, p. 187.
30. Strauss, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, pp. 5–6, see also pp. 29–30; Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, pp. 151–53.
31. Strauss, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, pp. 8–12.
32. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, p. 24; see also *Natural Right and History*, pp. 220, 260.
33. Strauss, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, p. 30.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 28–30.
35. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 85.
36. Strauss, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, p. 10.
37. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 315.
38. Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 1. Of course, this is not to say that Rorty’s denies the existence of a material world, but rather he rejects true descriptions of it. This is so because the world, on his view, cannot be understood apart from our perceptual and conceptual apparatus in a way that gives an archimedean point with which to adjudicate between some representations as being true rather than false (see *Truth and Progress*, pp. 19–43, 43–63, 84–98).
39. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. xiii.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
41. Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers, Volume 2* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 93.
42. For several good discussions of irony see: Ernst Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990); Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); Berel Lang, “The Limits of Irony,” *New Literary History* 27 (1996): 571–588; Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Claire Colebrook, *Irony in the Work of Philosophy* (Lincoln, Nebr.: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), in particular chap. 1.
43. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 73.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

46. *Ibid.*, chaps. 2 and 4.

47. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Press, 1974), p. 335; cf., *The Will to Power*, pp. 377–378.

48. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 79; *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 125–140.

49. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 218.

50. This and the next paragraph rely on Colebrook's distinction, although I employ it for slightly different purposes (Colebrook, *Irony in the Work of Philosophy*, chaps. 1 and 2).

51. Behler, "The Limits of Irony," p. 70; cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 269.

52. Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, p. 51.

53. "All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. I shall call these words a person's 'final vocabulary.'" (Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 73).

54. *Ibid.*, pp. xv, xvi.

55. Rorty, "The Decline of Redemptive Truth and the Rise of a Literary Culture," (2 November 2000) <<http://www.stanford.edu/~rrorty/decline.htm>>

56. Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, trans. Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), ch. 7; Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1990).

57. This means, as Stephen White underscores, that we acknowledge that the portraits of ourselves do not express *ipso facto* a "crystalline truth about the world," and so point toward the need for experimentation in identity-formation. "Yet," White goes on to say, "this emphasis on tentativeness does not imply that one's relation to an ontology is like that to a suit of new clothes taken home on approval. The cognitive and affective burdens entailed in revising the world ensure that when one seriously embraces an ontology, one does not do so in a 'light and transient' way." (Stephen White, *Sustaining Affirmation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 11). Our ontological commitments aid in navigating the world and holding at bay existential anxieties (see Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, chap. 2).

58. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. xv.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

60. Rorty, "Response to Daniel Conway," in *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*, eds. Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001), p. 92.

61. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, pp. xv, 61, 87–93.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

65. *Ibid.*, pp. 83, 97.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

67. One insightful exception I have found useful in this regard is J. Judd Owen, *Religion and The Demise of Liberal Rationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2001), chap. 4.

68. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 29.

69. See John McCormick, "Derrida on Law; Or, Poststructuralism Gets Serious," *Political Theory* 29 (2001): 395–423, at 401.

70. The fact that legitimacy of public action hinges on the perception of its accessibility to the masses reflects the instantiation of elements of the scientific method into political intersubjective legitimacy (See Yaron Ezrahi, *The Descent of Icarus: Science and the Transformation of Contemporary Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), chap. 3). This accepts, or so it is implied by the Ironist, a visualized notion of legitimacy as a counterweight to the clandestine acts of seventeenth and eighteenth century princes, and therefore misses a more profound order of illegitimacy that actualizes itself on the human psyche. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd edn., trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Press, 1995).

71. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*; see also Fredrick Appel, *Nietzsche Contra Democracy* (Ithica, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 43–46.

72. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J.P. Mayer (New York: Perennial, 2000), pp. 257–261; cf. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 67.

73. It might be suggested that Rorty denies precisely this existential pressure — a feeling, as Paul de Man writes, that we cannot "escape from a condition that [we feel] to be unbearable." (Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 2nd edn. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 131). Indeed, in the context of an essay on de Man, Rorty repudiates this feeling (shared by Sartre) as a longing to break free of all constraints, which, on his view, wrongly posits an essentialist claim about human nature (Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 132). It is unclear, on my view, how Rorty can get around this given his description of the Ironist. After all, it is this longing of the Ironist that forces Rorty to posit perfectionism as being incommensurable with social justice and solidarity. But here I'm getting ahead of the argument.

74. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 29.

75. That irony as a form of perfectionism is at odds with democracy does not imply that all forms of perfectionism need be. Indeed, taking my point of departure from Emerson, James, and Dewey, perfectionism develops out of a sense of *shame* for the community's failure to extend democracy and corresponding appreciation for

*excellence*. In this sense, perfectionism already emanates from a democratic impulse — the Emersonian or Deweyan invocation that excellence lies within us all. It is given direction, however, by collapsing and then differentiating self and community in the injunction: “I’m better than this; we’re better than this.” While Emerson and James articulate the structure of perfectionism, it is Dewey that elucidates the mode of executing social criticism and action in society for its realization. In this context, irony falls away as a useful descriptive term, and perfectionism is understood as a form of transparent and straightforward social criticism. See Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), chap. 1; Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), introduction; George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithica, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), introduction, chap. 6.

76. This formulation runs together two important ways of conceiving of democracy that are less in opposition than is often described. The first of which develops through, although not exclusively, the tradition of pragmatism exemplified by a distinct element in John Dewey’s political philosophy, and has been restated most recently by Ian Shapiro. On this view, democracy is a way to manage power relations so as to circumscribe and limit domination. As such, democratic proceduralism is underwritten by a suspicion of power employment and for that reason seeks to demystify the meaning of legitimacy and accountability through out the spheres of life by demanding inclusive discursive arrangements. It facilitates and guides our collective activities, while simultaneously managing the power relations within by prohibiting the *de facto* dominance of decision-making by any one group to the activity. See John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt, 1927), in conjunction with *Ethics*, in *The Later Works*, v. 7, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), Part Three; also Ian Shapiro, *Democratic Justice* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999); Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), chap. 3.

The second way of conceiving of democracy that this formulation includes, also develops through, although not exclusively, the tradition of pragmatism exemplified by the another element in Dewey’s political philosophy, and which can be found in contemporary communitarians such as Michael Sandel, Benjamin Barber, and neo-pragmatists such as Jeffrey Stout. On this view, democracy is also substantive precisely because the educative function of its proceduralism permeates more or less the various spheres of social life and cultivates a distinctive shared mode of reasoning, attitudes among the citizenry toward actions, suspicion of deference toward authority, and appreciation of norms of accountability, publicity, equality, and freedom. See Dewey, *Public and Its Problems, Ethics*; Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Stanford, Cal.: University of California Press, 1984); also Michael Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontents: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*.

77. Jeffrey Stout states this point most eloquently when he writes: “Democracy, I shall argue, *is* a tradition. It inculcates certain habits of reasoning, certain attitudes toward deference and authority in political discussion, and love for certain goods and virtues, as well as a disposition to respond to certain types of actions, events, or person

with admiration, pity, or horror. This tradition is anything but empty. Its ethical substance, however, is more a matter of enduring attitudes, concerns, dispositions, and patterns of conduct than it is a matter of agreement on a conception of justice....” (Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 3).

78. Mark E. Warren, “What Should We Expect From More Democracy? Radically Democratic Responses to Politics,” *Political Theory* 24 (1996): 241–270.

79. John S. Dryzek, *Discursive Democracy: Politics, Policy, and Political Science* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), chap. 3; Benhabib, “Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy,” in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 67–95; James Bohman, *Public Deliberation: Pluralism, Complexity, and Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996); Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (London: Polity Press, 1996); Joshua Cohen, “Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy,” in *Deliberative Democracy: Essays in Reason and Politics*, eds. James Bohman and William Rehg (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 67–93; Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

80. Claus Offe, “How Can We Trust Our Fellow Citizens?” in *Democracy and Trust*, ed. Mark E. Warren (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 42–88; cf. Eric M. Uslaner, “Democracy and Social Capital,” in *Democracy and Trust*, pp. 121–51; Jean Cohen, “Trust, Voluntary Association and Workable Democracy: The Contemporary American Discourse of Civil Society,” in *Democracy and Trust*, pp. 208–249; Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), chap. 8.

81. McCormick, “Derrida On Law,” p. 415.

Melvin L. Rogers  
Ph.D. candidate  
Political Science Department  
Yale University  
New Haven, Connecticut 06520-8301  
United States