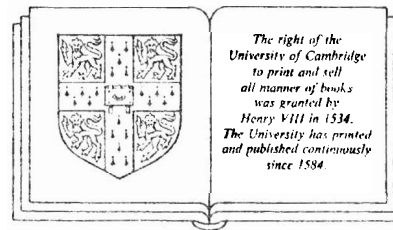


# Contingency, irony, and solidarity

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## Introduction

The attempt to fuse the public and the private lies behind both Plato's attempt to answer the question "Why is it in one's interest to be just?" and Christianity's claim that perfect self-realization can be attained through service to others. Such metaphysical or theological attempts to unite a striving for perfection with a sense of community require us to acknowledge a common human nature. They ask us to believe that what is most important to each of us is what we have in common with others – that the springs of private fulfillment and of human solidarity are the same. Skeptics like Nietzsche have urged that metaphysics and theology are transparent attempts to make altruism look more reasonable than it is. Yet such skeptics typically have their own theories of human nature. They, too, claim that there is something common to all human beings – for example, the will to power, or libidinal impulses. Their point is that at the "deepest" level of the self there is *no* sense of human solidarity, that this sense is a "mere" artifact of human socialization. So such skeptics become antisocial. They turn their backs on the very idea of a community larger than a tiny circle of initiates.

Ever since Hegel, however, historicist thinkers have tried to get beyond this familiar standoff. They have denied that there is such a thing as "human nature" or the "deepest level of the self." Their strategy has been to insist that socialization, and thus historical circumstance, goes all the way down – that there is nothing "beneath" socialization or prior to history which is definatory of the human. Such writers tell us that the question "What is it to be a human being?" should be replaced by questions like "What is it to inhabit a rich twentieth-century democratic society?" and "How can an inhabitant of such a society be more than the enactor of a role in a previously written script?" This historicist turn has helped free us, gradually but steadily, from theology and metaphysics – from the temptation to look for an escape from time and chance. It has helped us substitute Freedom for Truth as the goal of thinking and of social progress. But even after this substitution takes place, the old tension between the private and the public remains. Historicists in whom the desire for self-creation, for private autonomy, dominates (e.g., Heidegger and Foucault) still tend to see socialization as Nietzsche did –

as antithetical to something deep within us. Historicists in whom the desire for a more just and free human community dominates (e.g., Dewey and Habermas) are still inclined to see the desire for private perfection as infected with "irrationalism" and "aestheticism." This book tries to do justice to both groups of historicist writers. I urge that we not try to choose between them but, rather, give them equal weight and then use them for different purposes. Authors like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Proust, Heidegger, and Nabokov are useful as exemplars, as illustrations of what private perfection – a self-created, autonomous, human life – can be like. Authors such as Marx, Mill, Dewey, Habermas, and Rawls are fellow citizens rather than exemplars. They are engaged in a shared, social effort – the effort to make our institutions and practices more just and less cruel. We shall only think of these two kinds of writers as *opposed* if we think that a more comprehensive philosophical outlook would let us hold self-creation and justice, private perfection and human solidarity, in a single vision.

There is no way in which philosophy, or any other theoretical discipline, will ever let us do that. 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 – causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by those less advantaged. There are practical measures to be taken to accomplish this practical goal. But there is no way to bring self-creation together with justice at the level of theory. The vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange.

If we could bring ourselves to accept the fact that no theory about the nature of Man or Society or Rationality, or anything else, is going to synthesize Nietzsche with Marx or Heidegger with Habermas, we could begin to think of the relation between writers on autonomy and writers on justice as being like the relation between two kinds of tools – as little in need of synthesis as are paintbrushes and crowbars. One sort of writer lets us realize that the social virtues are not the only virtues, that some people have actually succeeded in re-creating themselves. We thereby become aware of our own half-articulate need to become a new person, one whom we as yet lack words to describe. The other sort reminds us of the failure of our institutions and practices to live up to the convictions to which we are already committed by the public, shared vocabulary we use in daily life. The one tells us that we need not speak only the language of the tribe, that we may find our own words, that we may have a responsibility to ourselves to find them. The other tells us that that

responsibility is not the only one we have. Both are right, but there is no way to make both speak a single language.

This book 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. It sketches a figure whom I call the "liberal ironist." I borrow my definition of "liberal" from Judith Shklar, who says that liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do. I use "ironist" to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance. Liberal ironists are people who include among these ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease.

For liberal ironists, there is no answer to the question "Why not be cruel?" – no noncircular theoretical backup for the belief that cruelty is horrible. Nor is there an answer to the question "How do you decide when to struggle against injustice and when to devote yourself to private projects of self-creation?" This question strikes liberal ironists as just as hopeless as the questions "Is it right to deliver  $n$  innocents over to be tortured to save the lives of  $m \times n$  other innocents? If so, what are the correct values of  $n$  and  $m$ ?" or the question "When may one favor members of one's family, or one's community, over other, randomly chosen, human beings?" Anybody who thinks that there are well-grounded theoretical answers to this sort of question – algorithms for resolving moral dilemmas of this sort – is still, in his heart, a theologian or a metaphysician. He believes in an order beyond time and change which both determines the point of human existence and establishes a hierarchy of responsibilities.

The ironist intellectuals who do not believe that there is such an order are far outnumbered (even in the lucky, rich, literate democracies) by people who believe that there *must* be one. Most nonintellectuals are still committed either to some form of religious faith or to some form of Enlightenment rationalism. So ironism has often seemed intrinsically hostile not only to democracy but to human solidarity – to solidarity with the mass of mankind, all those people who are convinced that such an order must exist. But it is not. Hostility to a particular historically conditioned and possibly transient form of solidarity is not hostility to solidarity as such. One of my aims in this book is to suggest the possibility of a liberal utopia: one in which ironism, in the relevant sense, is universal.

## INTRODUCTION

A postmetaphysical culture seems to me no more impossible than a postreligious one, and equally desirable.

In my utopia, human solidarity would be seen not as a fact to be recognized by clearing away "prejudice" or burrowing down to previously hidden depths but, rather, as a goal to be achieved. It is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves by thinking, "They do not feel it as *we* would," or "There must always be suffering, so why not let *them* suffer?"

This process of coming to see other human beings as "one of us" rather than as "them" is a matter of detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like. This is a task not for theory but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist's report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel. Fiction like that of Dickens, Olive Schreiner, or Richard Wright gives us the details about kinds of suffering being endured by people to whom we had previously not attended. Fiction like that of Choderlos de Laclos, Henry James, or Nabokov gives us the details about what sorts of cruelty we ourselves are capable of, and thereby lets us redescribe ourselves. That is why the novel, the movie, and the TV program have, gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress.

In my liberal utopia, this replacement would receive a kind of recognition which it still lacks. That recognition would be part of a general turn against theory and toward narrative. Such a turn would be emblematic of our having given up the attempt to hold all the sides of our life in a single vision, to describe them with a single vocabulary. It would amount to a recognition of what, in Chapter 1, I call the "contingency of language" – the fact that there is no way to step outside the various vocabularies we have employed and find a metavocabulary which somehow takes account of *all possible* vocabularies, *all possible* ways of judging and feeling. A historicist and nominalist culture of the sort I envisage would settle instead for narratives which connect the present with the past, on the one hand, and with utopian futures, on the other. More important, it would regard the realization of utopias, and the envisaging of still further utopias, as an endless process – an endless, proliferating realization of Freedom, rather than a convergence toward an already existing Truth.