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

1. Introduction

There are a number of well-known controversies associated with Richard Rorty.7 His redescription of liberalism has been the object of much heated debate among political philosophers.3 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.”4 Instead, we can subordinate our expressions of self-development to our public commitment to social solidarity and aversion to
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. 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 cruelty. In doing so, we can do justice both to our perfectionist longings and liberal sensibilities.