

## ON THE REFUSAL OF HUMOUR AS SCORN IN KANT AND RORTY, THE UNKANTIAN KANTIAN\*

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**Abstract.** The presentation approaches Kantian Ethics, selecting for an oriented discussion, first, of the Kantian interest in the disinterested good. In Kant, “Reason creates for itself the idea of a spontaneity”, an indication for and a fertile background of the discussion of the Kantian connection between the (rigors of) Reason and Freedom, which opens then the path, among other topics (in what interests us for the announced discussion), for the understanding of the Kantian ethical choice. The duality of human situation rational and non-rational, sensuous, animal-like creates multiple complexities in the confrontation and senses and intellect and reason in managing a righteous moral life, a correct life, in front of the social forum and the inner one, too. People are actors and acted upon, but when one is adopting the moral Kantian paradigm of conceiving all human beings as ends-in-themselves understands the special status of the human being, the ethical purposiveness of human existence. The second moment in this communication concerns the description of the Kantian rejection of scorn amid a conception of humour as incongruity. In Kant, ethics has to be a guiding presence in all social activities. Among these activities humour is the least examined and most volatile from an ethical standpoint (although, nowadays, political correctness tends to “correct” and prevent this deficiency by cancelling individual freedom and choice). In the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant states: “In everything that is to excite a lively laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing”. Here is the main aspect and meaning of the Kantian theory of incongruity. At the same time, in Kantian view humour represents a type of “the play of thought.” It is an event a bodily happening triggering “the affections of hope, fear, joy, wrath, scorn, are put in play ... alternating every moment; and they are so vivid that by them, as by a kind of internal motion, all the vital processes of the body seem to be promoted.” Given the special status of the human being, assured by Reason, all these are to call for the attention of Reason and morals and for the rejection of certain aspects, such as scorn. Thus, the third moment

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of the presentation capitalizes on the previous two, mentioned above, and emphasizes the paradoxical Kantianism found in the Rortian rejection of all-dissolving irony and of all forms of cruelty. In ironism, a philosophical attitude to life, ethos, pathos and others, different from irony, lays the Rortian hope for the possibility and accomplishment of solidarity. Rortian ironism is a paradoxical type of Kantianism emancipated from, or, hoping for an emancipation from metaphysical foundations.

**Keywords:** *Kantian Reason; Humanity Formula; Refusal of Scorn; Ironist; Ironism*

The center of interest of this study is *the disinterested good*, followed under the aspect of particular pragmatist nuances, which we consider of particular philosophical interest, this *good* being interpreted in this study as the presupposition of what the refusal of cruelty entails, and as the face and correlative concept for the Kantian categorical imperative for Rortian ironism, both binding as morals. This notion, the disinterested good, represents a starting point, but also a benchmark to interpret, considering the multiple nuances caused by a discussion of moral philosophy in Immanuel Kant and ironist ethics in Richard Rorty. The latter is interpreted as an alter ego of the formula of humanity in Kant (an idea that we announce as the thesis of the study); overall, as a fascinating philosophical notion, but which will not be exhaustively discussed here, or definitively clarified.

This is a fascinating discussion. A utilitarian society of the self-interested good would be monstrous, even more so from the perspective of Kantian duty-based ethics. Kant's criticism of utilitarianism rejects the moral value of action either on the basis of happiness, or on the basis of the satisfaction brought to the most by a certain decision or action. The Kantian objection and refusal are based on an essential devaluation of the individual, which would be involved in such a utilitarian approach noting that the devaluation is also affecting, *mutatis mutandis*, those who would benefit from utilitarianism. If they act motivated by utilitarian calculations then people are just a kind of automata. If we evaluate the well-being and interests of any person in relation to the attainment of a utility considered a valuable good, then utility rules society, and even the good and what-is-good become somewhat degraded values limited to the quasi-economic level in a universe governed by calculation and use. Can this be a human universe?

Or, even in a less high key, we can ask ourselves if, in a universe that exclusively evaluates use and utility, the human individual still has a point in being something other than a subject-object of use. The human being becomes a means in such a universe. Can it still evolve? Can he still love? Can he still hope? Can he still practice any faith? Would human being still have a spiritual realm reserved for him or her that is particular to her or him? Would these and perhaps others related to a specific cultural, spiritual, ineffable and metaphysical human have any meaning? Sacrifice of an individual for others would happen without debate. as regards the good for which it can be used. It would be possible, for example, to justify sacrificing one individual for the benefit of others if

utilitarian calculations promise more benefits. To do so would be the worst example of treating someone entirely as a means rather than an end in itself.

Can we talk about a certain pragmatism in Kant?<sup>1</sup> We believe that this fine nuance of pragmatism begins with the crucial role of intuition and antinomies. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant shows that thoughts without (intuitive) content are empty, while intuitions without concepts are blind.<sup>2</sup> The antinomies proposed by Kant are surprisingly contradictory intuitions, consisting of theses and antitheses associated like this, two by two, which we interpret in this study in the sense that it is pragmatic to accept a flexibility of the antinomies, which translates into a flexibility of the metaphysical foundation, to allow contextual-local adaptations, necessary for an understanding of the world according to the case and context, in order to be able to act in it.

Likewise, according to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant does not abandon the metaphysical idea of “absolute totality, which holds only as a condition of things in themselves”, but considers that this cannot be totally disconnected from the possibility of “applying it to appearances”. In fact, for Kant, the conflict of the faculties is generated by the existence of different spheres of applicability of these faculties with the main role in explaining these appearances that the individual encounters in the world and which can be, themselves, conflicting. The First Antinomy holds that the world has a beginning in time and space, and that it has no beginning in time and space. The second antinomy shows that every composite substance is made of simple parts and that nothing is composed of simple parts. The thesis of the third antinomy is that agents like ourselves have freedom, and its antithesis is that they do not. The fourth antinomy contains arguments both for and against the existence of a necessary being in the world. All these antinomies can be a source of perplexity. This last one is particularly surprising in its capacity to cover all possible situations from the perspective of the anthropic principle, *avant-la-lettre*.

<sup>1</sup> The intuition of a pragmatist strand that underscores the history of universal philosophy was proposed by the author, under the metaphor “like a dotted line”, since the support of the empowerment thesis and reached in Henrieta Șerban, *Neopragmatism and postliberalism. A contemporary Weltanschauung*, bilingual edition, referees Alexandru Surdu and Claudiu Baciu, Bucharest, Ed. ISPRI, 2021. As surprising as the idea of a Kantian pragmatism in tension with Kantian metaphysics may be, it seems that the possibility is recently explored by several researchers. For illustration, we can offer the work edited by Gabriele Gava and Robert Stern, entitled *Pragmatism, Kant, and Transcendental Philosophy*, published at Routledge in 2016, which debates precisely the compatibility between transcendental arguments and a pragmatist point of view. We believe that we can affirm that certain pragmatist assumptions that come from intuitions can be made in order to be able to understand the world and to be able to act in the world.

<sup>2</sup> Im. Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. 1787, Werner Pluhar’s translation, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1996, p. 75. Im. Kant, *Critique of pure reason*, translated into Romanian by Nicolae Bagdasar and Elena Moisuc, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, by Ilie Pârnu, Bucharest, IRI Press, 1998, p. 46. The idea also appears, albeit much transfigured, in Im. Kant, *The foundation of the metaphysics of morals*, p. 100: “And thus categorical imperatives are possible by the fact that the idea of freedom makes me a member of an intelligible world [emphasis added. ns.], by which, if I were such a thing alone, all my actions would always be in accordance with the autonomy of the will, since I also regard myself as a member of the sensible world, they should be in accordance, which categorical necessity represents a proposition synthetic a priori by the fact that on top of my will affected by sensual desires is added the idea of the same pure will practical by itself, but belonging to the intelligible world and comprising the supreme rational condition of the former; almost as concepts of the intellect are added to the intuitions of the sensible world, which for themselves mean nothing but the legal form in general and thereby make possible synthetic a priori propositions, on which all knowledge of a nature is based [emphasis added. ns.]”

Kant rejects the materialistic idealism; in other words, he continues neither Descartes' nor Berkeley's idealist project. Descartes considered that once he is aware of his own existence it is valid to also consider that objects in the surrounding space exist, deducing further confirmation for this belief from the idea that God exists, so he would not have created him by endowing him with deceptive senses for the material world around. As a result, evidence from his senses can be considered. But for Kant the knowledge of external objects cannot be of an inferential type, and the ability to be aware of one's own existence (the "cogito argument" of Descartes) already presupposes the existence of objects in space and time outside the thinking, contemplative, knower-subject. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, space and time are formal features of how we perceive objects, and nothing that exists independently of us, or the properties or relations between them, such as the thing-in-itself, comes through.<sup>3</sup> We can formulate the idea by calling objects (of space and time) "appearances". This way of conceiving the world is "transcendental idealism" proposed by *Critique of Pure Reason* for the first time in 1781.

This transcendental idealism is in fact a form of "phenomenalism"<sup>4</sup> which we will put in the second part of this study in a nuanced way, with all the cautions suggested by certain pre-existing interpretive traditions, or beyond them, with the refusal of metaphysics and with the ironism of Richard Rorty. As "phenomenalism", Kantian philosophy nevertheless approaches Berkeley's idealism, although Kant was careful to specify aspects in which it differs from it<sup>5</sup>. Certain more recent interpretative views<sup>6</sup> boldly appreciate that Kantian Transcendental Idealism is not metaphysical or ontological at all, and this "unorthodox" direction gives weight to its own interpretation of Rorty's philosophy as "non-Kantian-Kantian" through the reverberations it evokes.

In approaching Kantian moral philosophy, we aim at an oriented analysis that has at its center the Kantian interest in the selfless good. In Kant, "Reason creates the idea of a spontaneity which can, of itself, begin to act – that is, without being preceded by another cause by which it is caused to act in its turn, according to the law of causal connection."<sup>7</sup> Having as the supreme principle of morality the categorical imperative – an unconditional, rational, necessary and objective principle – all moral requirements are subordinated to it and are rational, necessary and in a contemporary-pragmatic key, we can appreciate them as "natural", from the perspective of the existence and of the operation of a categoric imperative. The aspect of the rationality of moral requirements was

<sup>3</sup> "There is an immediate correspondence between thought and reality at the level of the principles of the intellect, principles which were considered to be also of things." Claudiu Baci, "Caracterul substanțialist al 'lucrului în sine' kantian" ["The substantialist character of Kantian thing-in-itself"], *Revista de filosofie*, Vol. LXX, No. 6, 2023, pp. 591–599 (592).

<sup>4</sup> This thesis belongs to P. F. Strawson, in *The Bounds of Sense*, London, Methuen, 1966.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Allison, "Kant's Critique of Berkeley", *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 11, 1973, pp. 43-63.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Allison, "Transcendental Idealism: The Two Aspect View", Ouden and Moen (eds.), *New Essays on Kant*, 1987, pp. 155-178.

<sup>7</sup> Im. Kant, *Critica rațiunii pure* [*The Critique of pure reason*], translation into Romanian language by Nicolae Bagdasar and Elena Moiscu, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, by Ilie Pârnu, IRI Press, Bucharest, 1998, p. 561.

also present in Hobbes, Locke or Thomas Aquinas, but they approached other dimensions than the Kantian ones: in Hobbes, they were instrumental principles which, although moral, were in the service of satisfying the individual's desires, while in Locke or Thomas Aquinas those external rational principles that reason discovers. But Kantian compliance with the categorical imperative is something more, a non-instrumental principle, or, beyond the instrumental. Here, on this occasion, is a special moral openness specific to the rational human being. The principle of the categorical imperative participates in the capture of human singularity.<sup>8</sup> Because the Kantian doctrine shows that a rational will must be regarded as autonomous, therefore free, in the sense that the individual gives himself the law by which he constrains himself.

As a moral principle, the categorical imperative is a type of assertion of strong idealism, a special and unprecedented assertion of the autonomous will as a law that reinforces legality, morality, sociality, and self-assertion at the same time. This particular conception of reason is a conception of the categorical imperative is based on a particular conception of rationality which is self-governing towards moral aspirations, of the good, totally detached from aspirations regarding empirical (Hume), material, "immediate" gratifications, as it had to say Lucian Blaga. This self-governing individual-human rationality underlies the thesis of the equal merit and end-in-itself status accorded to each individual.

Although Kant's most influential positions in moral philosophy are considered to be found in *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ideas from the *Critique of Practical Reason*, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, *Religion within the Limits of Simple Reason*, and other cultural historical or philosophical essays to encompass the complexities and antinomies, tensions and contradictions of the Kantian conception of morality, which we cannot aim for in this study.

Kittay<sup>9</sup> criticizes the Kantian moral theory starting from the exemplification and analysis of the concrete situation of individuals with cognitive disabilities with a negative effect on moral capacities, exactly those which are essential from a Kantian perspective, necessary to make the being in question a person with dignity and moral rights, with in other words, "an end in itself." For Kant, contingent human characteristics do not contribute to the definition of a moral being, but this categorical imperative active and functional in the inner and

<sup>8</sup> Kant shows: "The concept of any rational being that must be considered universal-legislative. through all the maxims of his will, to judge himself and his actions from this point of view, leads to a very fruitful concept dependent on him, namely to that of an empire of ends. However, I understand by an empire a systematic connection through common laws of special rational beings. Since laws determine ends according to their universal validity, then, abstracting from the personal distinction of rational beings, as well as from any content of their particular ends, a totality of all ends (both of rational beings as ends in themselves as well as and of their own goals that each one would propose), in a systematic connection, i.e. an empire of goals, which, according to the above principles, is possible." Im. Kant, *Întemeierea metafizică a moravurilor* [*The Metaphysics of Morals*], translation into Romanian language by Traian Brăileanu, Bucharest, Casa Școalelor, 1929, p. 116.

<sup>9</sup> Eva Kittay, "At the Margins of Moral Personhood," *Ethics*, vol. 116, nr. 1, 2005, pp. 100-131. See also, Linda Barclay, *Disability with Dignity*, New York, Routledge, 2020.

social life of the individual generates the respect and dignity that make human being “an end in himself”. There is no degradation of this end-in-itself status, nor of the rational nature and ability to follow moral principles.

Anticipating the delicate comparison of the Kantian and Rortian conceptions, a comparison which is only limitedly tenable in some respects, the essential similarity between Kant’s and Rorty’s conceptions lies in the orientation of the Kantian ethical-moral disposition. For Kant, others are ends in themselves through their quality of being able by nature to follow the categorical imperative, and for Rorty, others are ends in themselves through comprehension and empathic awareness of the fact that others are like “new” in the face of suffering. The essential difference between the Kantian moral conception and the Rortian ethical one lies in the fact that everything follows from rationality and for Rorty from awareness. But is awareness possible without rationality? The answer can only be negative, and the role of rationality in awareness can only be important. The trigger for the approach of this study consists in detecting some subtle Kantian veins in the conception of the contemporary non-Kantian and anti-metaphysical thinker Richard Rorty. And this comparative study is possible due to the complexity of Kantian thought and especially the antinomian specifics of Kantian philosophy, also generating certain ambiguities, contradictions and difficulties.

In the context of Kantian philosophy, the moral character of people is the same, equal or similar, in the sense that it can be talked about in a general way, although there can be levels at which moral dispositions are realized or manifested. In the literature specific to Kantian moral philosophy, this aspect is discussed in the sense that infants, young children, the sleeping man, people suffering from autism or Down syndrome possess a fundamental moral status, although not (completely) realized.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, even for Kant the human being is not reduced to the grounding reason, the Kantian human being is generic, but not schematic: all aspects of the human and being are of interest, for example, including laughter and humour.<sup>11</sup> This discussion and these aspects are also particularly relevant from the perspective of the fact that we find in Kant a rejection of humour that degrades other human beings. Today the fact that Im. Kant also contributed to a philosophy of humour through an important direction, namely that of the “incongruity theory”, in the Critique of Judgment (1790). From a Kantian perspective, humour does not involve irony, sarcasm, cynicism, humiliation of others, contempt for others, but something else: a surprise, an unexpected turn of events.

“Incongruence theory” is a phrase related to Kant’s name in contemporary philosophy of humour (along with “superiority theory” or “relaxation theory”)

<sup>10</sup> Henry Allison, *Kant’s Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals: A Commentary*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011. Immanuel Kant, *Întemeierea metafizicii moravurilor*, Bucharest, Humanitas Press, 2007 (chapter 6). Tamar Schapiro, “What Is a Child?”, *Ethics*, vol. 109, nr. 4, 1999, pp. 715-738.

<sup>11</sup> In the contemporary philosophy of humour, laughter and humour are distinct categories, so the philosophy of humour today is not also of laughter; but, in Kant, humour and laughter are correlated.



although the term “incongruity”<sup>12</sup> is not one of the terms used by Kant. However, this term captures the content of Kantian’s theory of humour, as well as the intellectual, cognitive, rather than emotional character of his theory. The application of this term occurred more recently. At the core of the Kantian theory there is this dynamic generated by an incongruity, humour springing from what is unexpected, from turns of the situation, from surprises, from what is inappropriate. In other words, incongruity theory identifies conceptual models of humour.<sup>13</sup>

The duality of the rational and non-rational, sensual, animal-like human situation creates multiple complexities in confronting the senses and the intellect and reason in managing a righteous moral life, a righteous life, in front of the social and inner forum. Humans are actors and act upon themselves and others, but when one adopts the Kantian moral paradigm to conceive of all human beings as an end in themselves understands the special status of the human being, the ethical purpose of human existence. The second point in this communication concerns the description of the Kantian rejection of contempt against the background of a conception of humour as incongruity. In Kant, ethics must be a guiding presence in all social activities. Of these activities, humour is the least scrutinized and the most ethically volatile (though nowadays political correctness tends to “correct” and prevent this shortcoming by nullifying individual freedom and choice). In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant asserts that there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, cannot find satisfaction) in everything that gives rise to lively laughter, and that laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a tense expectations in nothing.<sup>14</sup> Here is the main aspect and significance of the Kantian theory of incongruity. At the same time, Kant considers that in humour we only find minor matters: it is a play of ideas, of thoughts, which is associated with the playful aspect of the human body, through playful reactions, such as tickling, or others, as in any other way of play.

Simon Critchley noticed in *On humour*<sup>15</sup> that jokes “tear apart our usual predictions about the empirical world” by being surprising and illuminating unexpected aspects. In analysing laughter, Critchley points out, Kant limits humour to the realm of the agreeable rather than the beautiful, evading aesthetic judgment proper. Yet in the Kantian theory of humour “there is something in the form of aesthetic judgment that requires consent or intersubjective agreement,

<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the term “incongruity” is used by Schopenhauer, who has a philosophy of humour similar to that of Kant. In *The World as Will and Representation*, Volume II, Schopenhauer shows that, in each case, laughter is triggered by the surprising perception of the incongruity, or mismatch, between a concept and certain real objects taken for granted, in -otherwise. It is an idea that appears early, in a somewhat similar way, in Epictetus, who shows, under a concern other than humour, that men are troubled by the opinions they have of things, not by the things themselves.

<sup>13</sup> J. Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, Albany, New York, State University of New York Press, 1983, p. 15 and Ian Jaeger Straus, “Incongruity Theory and the Explanatory Limits of Reason”, Series UVM Honors College Senior Theses, vol. 26, 2014. <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/hcoltheses/26>.

<sup>14</sup> Im. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, part I, section 54.

<sup>15</sup> Simon Critchley, *On Humour*, New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 1. See also, R. Clewis, *Kant’s Humorous Writings*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.

“and telling a joke somehow implies that I am indeed seeking the agreement of others about the humorous content. There is a certain universality of humour and a disinterested ‘goal-orientation (agreeing that funny is funny too) but mostly disinterested’”.<sup>16</sup>

One of the illustrative jokes that Kant uses is that of the rich merchant who has a dilemma: he would like a grand funeral, but how to do it, because those who come to mourn him will look all the more cheerful the more he gives them more money to mourn him more! The “incongruence” is noticeable, but neither in this example nor in the others, the element of surprise is never also an element of contempt towards someone else.

Such a playful attitude cannot be transferred to others, from the perspective of treating them as “ends in themselves.” The directed and undirected play of thought may trigger vivid feelings of hope, fear, delight, anger, or contempt, alternately, but the special status of the human being is assured by Reason to the human being, precisely because he possesses Reason, and through this the categorical imperative will operate in the sense of dismissing humour as contempt. Through this Kantian formulation of the problem, we arrive at the interpretation that is also called “the formula of humanity associated with the categorical imperative”: in short, we should never act (react) treating our humanity (in ourselves) or that of others as a means.

And from here follows a specific Kantian respect for others. People end up using other people for their own purposes, because realistically (pragmatically, “consequentialist”) speaking, this is a part of living together that cannot be totally purged, even more so in a modern and contemporary society where division operates work and in which we no longer produce what we need through our own efforts and means. But men can remain men only by their rational devotion to the categorical imperative. Responding to the categorical imperative, the humanity of those with whom we are in social relations (of “interdependence”) requires special attention, and helping or interested relationship with the other is not only a co-interested relationship, but, from the perspective of Kantian moral philosophy, has this double respect for the humanity of the other, which can be manifested, in our interpretation, communicationally (words, intonations, facial expressions), gestural and attitudinal, in the right contexts and weights, through interactions and relationships, services and gifts, sharing visions and projects.

The most understandable connection to Richard Rorty’s ironic philosophy comes from the perspective of responsive and sensitive relation to the other respected in his humanity. Ironism, ironic attitude, ironic philosophy, represent central elements in a contemporary version of the formula of humanity (a formula of Kantian, but also of Rortian humanity), modulated, transfigured into an *ironist ethics*. As for the categorical imperative, it is preserved, through a transfigured “translation” within the context of a Rortian pragmatic contemporary philosophy, a philosophy of contingencies and not of metaphysical and moral essentialisms. Nevertheless, it must be stated, ironism does not represent the ironic attitude, on the contrary. We will clarify this differentiation in the following.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 84.



Hypothetically speaking, Kant might have agreed with Judith Shklar that being cruel is an evil of the utmost gravity (the worst thing) that one can do, as Rorty states explicitly and which is foundational for the philosophical perspective argued in *Contingency, irony and solidarity*.

“I am sketching a profile of the ‘liberal ironist’,” says Rorty, specifying that the meaning of the term “liberal” is the same as with Judith Shklar. The Rortian, postliberal and neopragmatist philosophical conception outlines a “central figure”, the ironist, who leads his life self-ironically, lucidly and who could be said to be characterized by *ironism*. This approach, the appeal to a central, quasi-generic figure (for he does not describe all people, describing only liberal spirits and not all of them, but only a selection, in the sense of the above definition) is extremely surprising in Richard Rorty. This philosopher is a neo-pragmatist, post-liberal, anti-essentialist, anti-metaphysicist and who refuses the idea of “human nature”, considered as a theoretical benchmark also an essentialism, a metaphysics or a generic human being as in Kant’s philosophy. It is both interesting and surprising that Rorty nevertheless concludes that the definition of a “central figure” is required, even though he refuses a human nature in his neopragmatist philosophy (constructing a postliberal ontology based on a non-essentialist epistemology and a philosophy of culture that stands for a special kind of ethical humanism).

The Rortian “central figure” is not a generic man, but rather an “aspirational” model<sup>17</sup> of the individual necessary to describe if our societal and individual solidarity and humanity is to be possible. In this sense, we have in Rortian philosophy a clear vein representing an alter ego of the formula of humanity and the categorical imperative. Let’s elaborate. The label “ironist” is a name for all individuals who succeed in realizing and confronting the contingent character of their own beliefs and desires in a historicist and nominalist way. Such an approach leads to the understanding that these own beliefs and desires do not have any special metaphysical basis that gives them “weight”, “strength”, “sanctity”, or any kind of “precedence” over others, absolutely, beyond space and time. Here is a major difference from Kant in whose metaphysical conception Reason confers (all) such exceptional attributes. Rorty clarifies what he means by *ironist* (and this person is a *she*), a neopragmatist benchmark explicitly defined in the feminine register, as following: “I shall define an ‘ironist’ as someone who fulfils three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Ironists who are inclined to

<sup>17</sup> “Aspirational” is a word emphasizing the spiritual stretching toward higher levels of being and a synonym to the term “elevated”, or, in Romanian, “înălțat”, “heightened”, as used figuratively by the Romanian philosopher Lucian Blaga.

philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old."<sup>18</sup>

The attentive analysis shows that in Richard Rorty's work "the new" is not whimsical, it is not a superficial highbrow act and it is not a "dissolving relativism", but it stays for "openness", "freedom", "change", briefly put, for the emblematic concepts of the cultural-liberal left, and, even more, that all of them present a facet of the refusal of cruelty. Questions such as "Why wouldn't one be cruel?" or "How do one decide when to be solidary and when to dedicate to self-realization projects?" are crucial, central and provide a liberal sense (being decisive) for the attitudes, actions and life of the ironist, that is, precisely what Rorty has in mind proposing "ironism" as a liberal life-orienting attitude toward the others, in full openness. To the previous questions one could add another: "When my one favour the members of personal family, or group, or community, to the detriment of others selected randomly?" Rorty considers that whoever finds well-founded answers to these questions – solutions to the moral dilemmas of this sort – is still, deep down the inner core of her being a theologian or a metaphysician, certain that there is an order beyond time and beyond change, decisive for the recognition of existence as human existence and responsible for a hierarchy of responsibilities.<sup>19</sup> There are no easy answers to such questions and all are in fact "local", temporary and imperfect answers that should evolve with the situations and adjust specifically to them. Rorty underlines that "The ironist, by contrast, is a nominalist and a historicist. She thinks nothing has an intrinsic nature, a real essence. So, she thinks that the occurrence of a term like 'just' or 'scientific' or 'rational' in the final vocabulary of the day is no reason to think that Socratic inquiry into the essence of justice or science or rationality will take one much beyond the language games of one's time. The ironist *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* [our emphasis]. But she cannot give a criterion of wrongness. So, the more she is driven to articulate her situation in philosophical terms, the more she reminds herself of her rootlessness by constantly using terms like 'Weltanschauung,' 'perspective,' 'dialectic,' 'conceptual framework,' 'historical epoch,' 'language game,' 'redescription,' 'vocabulary,' and 'irony.'"<sup>20</sup>

Don't one notice here a version of the transfigured categorical imperative that exacerbates the dependence of human life and fulfilment on language? Such concerns are the clearest expression of a human being extremely devoted to a categorical imperative, translated into a neopragmatist rather than a metaphysical vocabulary. Further, Rorty also shows that the ironist is motivated to articulate

<sup>18</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 73.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xv.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 74-75.

her “position” in philosophical terms, but realizes that she cannot rely as she would like on terms such as “Weltanschauung,” “perspective,” “dialectic,” “conceptual framework,” “historical era,” “language game,” “redescription,” “vocabulary” and “irony”, for all that we inherit as “reality” and “truth” is bound to become at some point inadequate and, left unexamined, can lead to attitudes and acts of cruelty.<sup>21</sup>

As I showed in *Neopragmatism and postliberalism. A contemporary Weltanschauung*, the ironist abandons the old terms as they turn out to be unfounded assumptions and prejudices, building an ironic culture, therefore removing recourse to such terms, prejudices and prejudicial attitudes. The path to ironic culture is supported, as we have explained in our previous works, but from different perspectives, within a philosophical genealogy that begins with G. W. F. Hegel and continues through Friedrich Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida and Foucault, with the help of pragmatists, analytical philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Donald Davidson.

Rorty draws on all these authors as well as a cultural-literary investigation by interpreting the role and potentially ironic meaning of some literary characters that appear in the works of Marcel Proust and Harold Bloom. Old terms are not necessarily archaisms indiscriminately, but are selected by awareness, by analysis, by thought, by reasoning as harmful presuppositions and prejudices, and only in this capacity will they be designated by the ironist as “old”, *i.e.* obsolete, potentially harmful and, thus, to be removed for this reason.

Ironism is not irony and this is the reason why this new term is coined. Irony entails cruelty and is actually rejected by Rorty. Ironism is rather self-irony, in the sense that a dose of self-irony is necessary in the awareness of contingency and in coping with contingency, but especially in order to be able of solidarity, while promoting a type of liberal social change taking place with and for all and not against some. However, the ability to contribute to solidarity unfolds along a individual autonomous and emancipated life-plan. Tradition, metaphysics, the others have no say in individual self-realization. The liberal ironist is autonomous and autonomously assumes responsibilities. It is the call of the liberal ironist which responsibilities to assume and when. With these observations, the autonomy of the liberal ironist is very close to Kantian autonomy, although they do not overlap in a perfect manner.

Ironism is more an inclusive device based on a grounding work with personal self in a project of self-fulfillment that considers the others, too. This concept is different from irony and much closer to self-irony, as mentioned, predicated upon the careful investigation of one’s own grounds, one’s own presuppositions, beliefs and desires; ironism is produced by a liberal culture and in turn produces, with extended reverberations, a culture liberal type<sup>22</sup>, that cultivates ironism, that puts ironism into practice and that recommends it as a chance to really be together with others: the chance for solidarity, based on the possibility of a real openness towards the other, once the barriers established by metaphysics,

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>22</sup> For Rorty, liberalism defined as refusal of cruelty, the democratic spirit, the self-realization life plan and the devotion for democracy are intertwined and they created and nourish each other.

tradition are permeable and prejudice. We can see in ironism (generated by the ironic/postliberal attitude) and ironic culture, in this interpretive perspective, a triumphant story of progress. Wary of the binary oppositions generating hierarchies, orders and defining justifying narratives for the status quo (necessity / contingency, universal / particular, public / private, philosophy / poetry, truth / metaphor, inference / narrative, logic / rhetoric, discovery / creation, metaphysicians / ironists), the ironist is aware of the contingency of these ordering oppositions and of their role of preserving a certain order to be overcome for the sake of more inclusion, more solidarity and more latitude in everyone's improved circumstances and freedom of self-realization. Consequently, the ironist and, implicitly, ironic culture, navigates through a series of binary (parallel) oppositions that eliminate the central contrast reason versus aesthetics. Freedom and progress, insofar as they can be achieved or constructed by the effort of human individuals, depend on weakening, or relativizing or inverting or questioning (via redescription and debate) the privilege representative of the first terms in the binary oppositions above, as is more appropriate as a refusal of cruelty.

The form of the feminine, the fact that Rorty defines the "ironist" as a "she", (she) who has different characteristics and life history, tradition and experience, would be advisable to be understood as a thought experiment that "turns the masculine upside down" redescribing its associated position of authority, but without claiming the authority position; simply questioning the honesty of the philosophical neutrality of language supposedly conveyed by the masculine form, exposing the receiver of his ironic philosophy to "the other". Here, for a change, we can assume the feminine form as the neutral, generic form, and by default the form of expression exposing a previously privileged, part of society to the experience of how uncomfortable the feminine form seems for them in this renewed posture of neutral, generic form. This is what the mentioned thought experiment would consist of. We privilege in this study to a certain extent the form of the feminine, as Rorty does in his definition, without excluding men, the masculine (and, in current terms, none of the intermediate gender forms, for neither does Rorty) from the argument for ironism, for extended ironic culture and for extended solidarity. The masculine is not banished from ironist philosophy and ethics, nor from our interpretation of Rorty's paradoxical position as a non-Kantian Kantian. He is non-Kantian in his arguments against the metaphysical grounding of the relation of the human being to the world and to the others and Kantian in his (redescribed) concern for all human beings as ends in themselves (via the refusal of cruelty).

Much of Rorty's ironic message is a warning against the traditional philosophical error of universalizing one's vocabulary and narrative (that is, a particular *Weltanschauung* and its justification) as the authority over all other vocabularies (the term stands, as I explained, for views on world, life, relationships with others and for poses of the self). and narratives, suppose that what is private must be united by reason and fundamental truth with what is public. In what sense does irony reject universalization? The idea that private ideals are only truly

valid if they are publicly validated is rejected, but the view that private ideals themselves have public relevance is considered valuable. The contradiction between these two levels is only apparent.

The postliberal ironist should resort to the possibility of understanding the contingency and particularity of pursued personal ideals as an opportunity to secure a private autonomy of creation and self-creation, possibly self-improvement.

The ironist wants to “overcome authority *without advancing, in turn, a claim to authority* [our emphasis],” which does not imply how it might be understood through a hasty interpretive approach, an implicit delegitimization and authority of individual endeavors that nevertheless need a public recognition, which implies (somewhat) an authority – of their quality, of their justification, of their adequacy, of their coming at a salutary moment (*kairos*), of their good consequences in order to be considered, appreciated, followed, or funded, as the case may be. In our view, the Rortian meaning is that of freeing individual actions from constraint, becoming them freely, without constraints, in a procedural manner that involves a certain relativization specific to the affirmation of the subjective self, of a specific life history, in its own terms (of different people), established with a view to realizing human solidarity against cruelty, violence and suffering, as well as with a view to creating, as far as possible (according to contexts and powers), a better future.<sup>23</sup>

The Rortian construction published under the title *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, easily unfolds its meanings when understood as an ensemble with three important interdependent levels, all with reference to human existence. We identify a first level, contingency, which also has an epistemological relevance, and which, once understood, provides the conditions of possibility to be aware of the world and the actual states differently, “liberating” people from their worn-out “vocabularies” (beliefs) and from their (unexamined, “blind”) attitudes, questioning the existing hierarchies, their legitimacy and the positions of authority, without an interest to actually claim these existing positions of authority. The second level identified is represented by “irony”. For Rorty, ironism represents the open, appropriate attitude less indebted to presuppositions and prejudices towards the world, towards (traditional and assumed to be “natural”) states of affairs and towards other people, after understanding contingency and the non-metaphysical consequences of contingency. The third level is solidarity, rather a desiderate. Solidarity “is to be” more deeply achievable, once the ironist attitude is founded (a specific openness towards the other) and the ironic culture that it supports and creates that expands as a particular binder nourishing a sociality and a solidarity of great depth.

In fact, *Rortian ethics is possible because ironist philosophy and ironist culture speak of ironism and not of “irony”*; for ironism presupposes, as I stated before, an attitude defined by self-irony rather than by irony. Such a philosophical and democratic attitude is necessary in view of a thinking detachment accommodated and allowed by the ironic “turn”, by the opening of one’s own

<sup>23</sup> This is another aspect of a brilliant idea: the future depends on the character of the people involved in or by the present in the making, more exactly, it is dependent on what people appreciate and what they set out to achieve and how (at what “cost”).

“vocabulary”, of everyone, of everyone, of everyone, a “vocabulary” that is, a *hexis* for a *Weltanschauung* majorly distanced from one’s presuppositions and prejudices. It is the individual’s duty to take care not to be the “wrong type of individual”, with the individual concerned alone being the assessor and responsible for such a situation.

Once contingency is understood (and awareness gained), distancing oneself from one’s beliefs becomes possible. In ironic philosophy, it is about a drastic distancing from one’s own presuppositions and prejudices, carefully followed, “hunted” with precision because the ironist realizes how easily they “sneak” along with socialization, with tradition, through interactions with others (“theologians” and “metaphysicians”), not being detached from others or society in the elitist, arrogant, contemptuous or cruel sense.

The work *Contingency, irony and solidarity* already has the great layers of ironic philosophy in its title: three nouns chained in enumeration, three terms of the same type with a certain similar sonority, somewhat more similar in English. It is also a certain construction, an aspirational crescendo, starting from the contingent basis of ironic philosophy passing through irony to discuss the self-ironic awareness that makes possible the ironist, ironism, as a philosophical and ethical attitude, and ironic culture, to reach (ascending) at the third level, of solidarity.

Simon Critchley<sup>24</sup> criticizes the ironist/ironist, whom he interprets as a type of nihilist capable (intellectual-sensitive) of responding to the major ethical demand to identify in what exists around him and requests a response from him, in the form of a project ethical with reformatory valences. Critchley proposes the “active nihilist,” who selectively denies and refuses only that which is an obstacle to a particular reformatory and ethical project he has undertaken. Even after this concise exposition it is clear that the active nihilist is only a version of the ironist, or another name for it.

The “quasi-generic descriptive landmark” phrase was employed above for the statute of the term “ironist”. It was not accidental at all, and at the time I only partially explained the motivations for choosing this wording. The other, particularly important aspect concerns the fact that, potentially, by becoming aware of the idea that designates cruelty as the most terrible thing one can do, and by becoming aware of contingency, in Rorty’s view, all men can become liberal (at least gradually), in the sense given by Rorty, then, all can become ironists, so that in the end all people are part of an *ironist culture*, active participants in solidary culture, contributing to a post-liberal society characterized by freedom and solidarity.

Comparatively, the overwhelming place occupied in the Kantian philosophy of Reason is occupied in Rorty by awareness, without which affective-cognitive and educated sensitivity to the facets and modes of presentation of cruelty, as well as the formulation of pragmatic, adequate and effective refusals of cruelty are not possible.

<sup>24</sup> Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, London, Verso, 2007.



Awareness of the metaphysical and traditionalist roots of the differences between individual beliefs is also decisive for the formation of the ironic attitude, for revealing the specific presuppositions of certain metaphysics and traditions of relating to the world, for accepting the possibility of redefining things and going beyond the recommended perspectives and beliefs as a standard, when appropriate, and for practicing a method of redescription. Through awareness, things can be re-evaluated and re-described differently, possibly more clearly and liberally to the extent that these re-descriptions better respond to the imperative to refuse cruelty.

What follows from this is the guiding ethical status of ironism as a way of life and as a recognition of a de-essentialized humanity in the other, let's say concisely that it is a humanity characterized above all by potential human vulnerability (or, more broadly, of alive) in the face of multiple facets of cruelty and suffering. Humility, as a facet of cruelty and suffering, would also be excluded from the specifically human ontological mode, in the perspective of Rortian philosophy. We have here, in our opinion, a formulation of the categorical imperative and of the so-called Kantian "formula of humanity", provided that ironic philosophy takes us without the metaphysical wings, but pragmatically (in a "neopragmatist" manner, in Rorty's specific terminology) to the necessity to respond almost as a Kantian to the demands of human dignity under the guidance other vocabulary terms. The Rortian approach, the redescription is of a cognitive type, those ironist philosophy claims present also in the Rortian epistemology stating that philosophy is not a "mirror of nature" have as result the attention and care about others and other points of view. However, the created ironist culture, as a result is not a plea for sensitivity for sensitivity's sake, for idealistic borderless affection, and it does not mean that Rorty is an overly sensitive bleeding heart projecting a society of overly sensitive whiners.

In Eugen Huzum's interpretation, the Rortian anti-representational project is less of an affective approach, but a matter of lucidity, interpretation and choice. Huzum shows: "[we should] recall that Rorty states that arguments (such as the will or feelings) are not decisive in this respect. Rather, the gradual habit of abandoning old words or metaphors in favor of new ones has such a role. However, such a habit, although not impossible, is very difficult to achieve. The current situation cannot give us clear indications whether this will happen or not, but it can at least show us with certainty that the battle between alternative vocabularies is far from over. On the contrary, it is just beginning. Rorty himself is, moreover, aware of this when he writes that the question of 'the truth of pragmatism (...) will be decided if history allows us the joy of deciding such questions only in a slow and painful choice between self-images, between alternatives'"<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> Eugen Huzum quotes in this respect Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism and Philosophy", K. Baynes, J. Bohman, Th. McCarthy (eds.), *After Philosophy. End or Transformation?*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1986, p. 62. Eugen Huzum, "Richard Rorty and the 'project of the anti-representational redescription of knowledge'," in Romanian, *Symposion*, Tome II, no. 1, 2004, pp. 42-55.

In our view, it should also be considered that the fight between alternative vocabularies is not chaotic, but is guided by the seemingly modest principle, which is, however, colossal in its implications, of the refusal of cruelty, in fact, a Kantian-type principle (a kind of categorical imperative). Although not the accent does not fall on the enlightenment by Reason, as is the pre-requisite of the categorical imperative (the duty of morality belongs to the rational man), this Rortian principle is enlightened by the general capacity to be aware of how things are and what are the possible consequences of perpetuating certain states of affairs; which is not possible outside the area of reason. It is also a capacity of self-analysis and lucid relation to the other, an educated intellectual capacity, as I have already specified, because Rorty even in the definition of ironist talks about exposure to other vocabularies (other ideas and life experiences), and in the pages of the work *Contingency, irony and solidarity* he treats the special importance of the great works that deal with the problem of cruelty by listing great authors (such as Nabokov and Orwell) in this self-interrogative rather intellectual and highly ethical and inclusive attitude that is specific for the ironist. The ironist is a cultural, ethical, democratic and inclusive being.

Awareness and cognition are prioritized along the epistemological dimension in the struggle between old and new, in re-description, in the struggle to replace old vocabularies with new ones. But to consider that Rorty completely eliminates the aspect of feelings from his vision is an extreme interpretive position, because, returning to *the defining exposure to other vocabularies* for the ironist, we should not omit that the *exposure* to which Rorty is explicitly referring is to philosophy, literature, the conceptualization of democracy and culture, not to metaphysics, mathematization, formalization or logic. Exposure to anti-cruelty ideas identified as the crucial obstacle to solidarity is cultural and the ironist is a promotor of democratic, ethical culture. Nevertheless, the parting of the ways with metaphysics, mathematization, formalization or logic in Rorty does not imply a recommendation for illiteracy in these areas, quite the contrary, because their refusal is based on knowledge and it is efficient only in the case of educated approach.

In fact, in a more careful Rortian interpretation, replacing the old vocabulary with the new is not so much a matter of fashionable trend, of mockery, of gratuitous irony, or a visceral reaction, or a futile and derisive (ridiculous) intellectual exercise, but is an effect of a phenomenon of awareness of a social and relational state that presents aspects of cruelty, calling for attitudes and actions to reject cruelty. It is precisely a deep awareness of things that can shake the individual positioning in relation to the world, with the natural, appropriate consequences of changing the vocabulary (that is, of the beliefs and the intellectual relation to the world, determinant for individual action). If the feelings and will have a weight there, they will be indebted to the pre-eminence of the process of awareness. At the same time, the ironist, being a creator (of new vocabulary, of culture, of perspectives and projects), by virtue of the connection between creative thinking, emotion and feeling, neither the appearance nor the functionality of new vocabularies in the refusal of cruelty can be totally disconnected from

emotion, because the very process is not disconnected of living, as a subjective experience of a state of fact, as an experience. In this sense, there is an interesting link between ironic philosophy and existentialism (and philosophy of life in general), a topic that we shall pursue with another occasion.

Rortian neopragmatism is concerned with “vocabulary”, narrative, ironism, ironist culture, solidarity, contextualism and consistency, without giving up any ingredient of classical pragmatism, but “adding” to it, completing it. To pursue a self-realisation plan, to set individually personal goals and to practice self-interrogation and redescription is a demanding, intellectual and seemingly elitist and idealist enterprise in Rortian postliberalism. However, this is very much an exercise of creation. It is creation in the true sense of the word; it is not inspired creation by the realm beyond the human being and his context – this is primarily a contextual creative activity, it is proaction and hard work, with practical consequences. In fact, this aspect of the practical, reformative or transformative consequences, if you will, of practice and praxis represent the double ground of the ironist approach giving way to ironist culture via (ironist) actional pursuance, specific to pragmatism. The action generates and is generated by the “ripples” of redescription restoring things to ethical state even if only in the sense of clarification of problems and injustice.

With a metaphorical perspective, the “ripples” of redescription accompanying ironist reformative or transformative action having ethical clarity, straighten things out and in socio-political terms thus, they lead to clarifying action. From Rorty’s perspective, people do not arrive at solidarity by themselves, inherently, or when they are in search of truth, or some other essentialist value, but out of horror of cruelty in all its forms. Which is not to say that people cannot have a common search for truth and feel solidarity in this endeavour. It’s just that the truth and the search for the truth are not enough, given the different (phenomenological and historical manifestation of truth) prejudices or beliefs, as well as different interest; the differences in *Weltanschauung*, background, socialization that generate different conceptions and manners of approach to life and the others generate competing and conflicting vocabularies. We can understand each other via redescription and renewed “vocabularies”. The “vocabularies” of individuals, their openness, as well as their ability to redescribe or not their positions, this is what can facilitate or ruin solidarity.

It is necessary to highlight dignity as a precondition, but also as a consequence of the refusal of cruelty. A humanity shared in dignity fits and is cultivated in both Kantian and Rortian frameworks of moral philosophy. Anyone can become an ironist: anyone who refuses cruelty in all its forms, on all occasions under all guises, anyone who is aware of contingencies, and anyone who is open to what people have in common at the deepest forum (when they refuse suffering and cruelty). What these ironists have in common in their refusal of cruelty and suffering is *humanity*, founded not necessarily on reason, but on an educated sense of the detection of cruelty and a firm resolve to reject it. This is why the *refusal of cruelty* is a facet of *the Kantian humanity formula*. Potentially they refer to all people in this way. Potentially they are all about to

become ironists. People can and do recognize *as ends in themselves* each other in this way and as defenders of an extended formula of humanity and, by implication, of extended human solidarity against cruelty (and for democracy).

In Rorty, people recognize themselves under three human dimensions: as people, as liberals and as ends in themselves. From the perspective of ironism, they are also guided by a categorical imperative stated differently from the Kantian formula and with a different foundation, but still Kantian. By refusing cruelty and, consequently, suffering, ironists deal with each other and some with others, all with all, all persons with all persons, all individuals with all individuals, etc., regardless of their particularities of background and gender, or, of whatever nature they may be, as ends in themselves.

Ironist gives way to good life and good (ethical) beings, to a specific qualitative togetherness, although not to an absolute tie of disinterested good. In Rortian philosophy of ironism the good achieved is definitely disinterested in social atomism, in injustice, fierce individualism, or total selfishness (all facets of cruelty). Furthermore, this ironic recognition of the other/others as ends in themselves is a cultural-emotional endeavour, but not an irrational one. Ironism is by definition educated by great examples and great books. Thus, we can recall the definition of similar humanity in *The Merchant of Venice*, by William Shakespeare: “If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?”<sup>26</sup> This can be an essential reading in creating an ironist stance towards the world and life and towards others. Recalling the lessons of the great books is most appropriate in the case of ironism, which is not exclusively philosophical or social, but also liberal, democratic and educated by “exposure” to the great books. From the perspective of this interpretation, of Rortian ironism can be argued as a paradoxical type of Kantianism emancipated from metaphysical foundations, or just tending towards successful emancipation from metaphysical foundations, given the particular difficulty of this aim, assumed more extensively and more precisely by conscious human beings, defined much more comprehensive. Consequently, ironism is an expression of the Kantian formula of humanity, and Rorty can be in antinomic phrasing described as the “non-Kantian Kantian.”

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