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## **Our Everyday Frailty: Selfhood, Contingency and Online Belief Networks**

**Abstract:** Richard Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* has been one of the most influential books in the last two decades. The concepts and the philosophical problems developed in it created a fruitful intellectual agenda for scholars active in many fields of social sciences. The advent of digital culture, on the other hand, spurred interest in the re-interpretation of the latter within the frame of online communication. In my paper, I focus on the traits of contingency and selfhood – seen against the background of cyberspace – and on their effects on our beliefs. An analysis of people’s online behaviours shows that the multitude of possibilities available is counterbalanced by the epistemic risks. Understanding this tension helps us keep a useful online conversation going and recalibrate our hopes for an effective electronic future.

**Keywords:** Richard Rorty, contingency, selfhood, cyberspace, online belief networks.

### **1. Introduction**

Few other contemporary thinkers contributed to the understanding of the philosophical concept of contingency as Richard Rorty did. A careful examination of his project shows the presence of its central ideas ever since the publication of the widely influent *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. These ideas were further developed in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* and in the *Philosophical Papers*. The subsequent conceptual structures not only have the merit of constituting a key element of the consistent debate that took place in the last three decades of the twentieth century, a debate marked by the arguments conceived by the likes of Habermas, Derrida, Putnam, Foucault, Chomsky or Quine; they also opened an extremely useful application field.

Rorty’s arguments concerning the contingency of selfhood (Rorty 1989, 23-43) are relevant when it comes to the problem of understanding

our presence in cyberspace. If Rorty's original plan concerning selfhood was focused on the deconstruction of the dominant metaphysical tradition of the Western world – a tradition that starts with Plato and is continued by Kant or Hegel – for me the important thing is to research the ways in which our online behaviours are symbolically linked with the idea of contingency.

The fundamental question now is no longer who wins in the millenary fight between the poet and the philosopher, between the creative genius and the scientist who discovers useful things. Rather, we are interested in deciding if our traditional image (indebted to the Plato-Kant-Hegel line) of ourselves as moral beings who become active within the space of common conscience remains fresh in the context given by the new means of communication and information. Do our online behaviours indicate the activity of a unitary self or rather point towards networks of fallible and constantly changing beliefs, connected through family resemblances of the type described by Wittgenstein? Moreover, how important are, in the virtual space, the vocabularies of self-assertion and self-fashioning in their confrontation with public vocabularies, vocabularies of common practices and solidarity?

## **2. Selfhood and contingency**

As Rorty notices (1989, 42), “the best way to understand the pathos of finitude which Larkin invokes is to interpret it not as the failure to achieve what philosophy hoped to achieve – something nonidiosyncratic, atemporal, and universal – but as the realization that at certain point one has to trust to the good will of those who will live other lives and write other poems”. In this vein, the main contribution brought by Freud, Rorty thinks, is the idea that, ultimately, every life is the product of a personal fantasy, a project that is not over until the death of that person: “The strategy is the same in all these cases: it is to substitute a tissue of contingent relations, a web which stretches backward and forward through past and future time, for a formed, unified, present, self-contained substance, something capable of being seen steadily and whole” (Rorty 1989, 41).

Freud's importance has to be seen against a historical background, in a script within which both Kant and Romanticism play a key role. Kant made a decisive turn in the process of philosophical reflection, namely a turn towards our inner life, believing that this would be the way to form a base for moral conscience and justice. The Romantic writers

took over Kant's accomplishment, but what they made of it differs radically from the Kantian project.

Freud takes the things even further, stopping the fight between Romanticism and moralism, namely between the accent put on the spontaneity of the individual and the one put on the universal moral responsibility. The moral sense loses its universal character in Freud's works, being both historically determined (and thus a matter of chance), and subjective. As Rorty (1989, 32) put it,

“by associating conscientiousness with cleanliness, and by associating both not only with obsessional neurosis but (as he does elsewhere) with the religious impulse and with the urge to construct philosophical systems, he breaks down all the traditional distinctions between the higher and the lower, the essential and the accidental, the central and the peripheral. He leaves us with a self which is a tissue of contingencies rather than an at least a potentially well-ordered system of faculties”.

Through his talk on unconscious mind, Freud exposed the limits of the vision of man as a rational being. First, reason proves to be nothing more than a capacity of adaptation and of control, through calculus, of the consequences of contingency. Second, a deep analysis of the unconscious shows the complexity of mechanisms involved, which all serve the goal of adaptation. The universality of rationality frames, within this context, seems to be rather an ideological construction than a scientific fact. By changing our focus from universal to particular we understand easier the logic of chance and arbitrary selection. This is why Freud doesn't seem interested in offering a totalizing synthesis anymore (of the type done by Plato): the universal-particular relationship is, in this interpretation, off the limits of the traditional, metaphysical perspective. According to Rorty (1989, 33-34),

“Freud gave up Plato's attempt to bring together the public and the private, the parts of the state and the parts of the soul, the search for social justice and the search for individual perfection. Freud gave equal respect to the appeals of moralism and romanticism, but refused either to grant one of these priority over the other or to attempt a synthesis of them. He distinguished sharply between a private ethic of self-creation and a public ethic of mutual accommodation. He persuades us that there is no bridge between them provided by universally shared beliefs or desires – beliefs or desires which belong to us qua human and which unite us to our fellow humans simply as human”.

Moreover, the contemporary psychology acknowledges the importance of contingency (Hiraki 2006, 204):

“how can we distinguish ourselves from the external world? Detection of intermodal contingency plays an important role in distinguishing the sensory consequences of self-produced actions from externally produced sensory stimuli. Contingency detection can be seen as a fundamental ability to self-recognize”.

According to Jerold Abrams (2004, 243), Rorty’s position could be entitled post-Kantian literary Cartesianism. The reason for that is ultimately the fact that the modifications of the self lead to a new type of *cogito*, but different from the classical one. The difference consists in the fact that it loses its usual content, being, this time, infused with a literary imaginary, one that is coined “romantic” by Abrams. The above changes create the possibility for a new problematization of the self, which no longer subsists in the form of intuition. It becomes, the American author thinks, a “spontaneous, non-transcendental, *literary* unity of apperception” (Abrams 2004, 243). Thus, we should assume less the role of commenting the masters and we should create our own characters, we should engage in the effort of self-fashioning, redefining our life as such. The difference between Rorty and Shusterman looks obvious when we think that Rorty remains strongly connected to the textual, literary tradition (and this also explains Rorty’s utopia in his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*), while Shusterman focuses on the aesthetic alterations of the body (*somaesthetics* being the central concept). The latter do not represent just a way of interpreting art, but rather the sign of changing times. Rorty remains, through his choices (the discussion of Proust is, thus, clearly relevant), connected to the modernist tradition, while Shusterman heads for the direction of post-humanism.

For Rorty, a key element is to keep the conversation going and to remove the eventual factors that would stop it. We have to keep in mind that this concept does not represent just a resuscitation of the deliberative genre, like it would seem at first glance. For Rorty, it represents a central feature of the liberal discourse in general and of the discourse of the liberal ironist in particular. Unlike the metaphysical tradition – which is by itself totalitarian – a tradition that involves a forceful meaning, the liberal discourse proves courageous enough to venture in the most dangerous territories of rhetoric because it has already given up the faith in an epistemic authority above itself.

The writer or the speaker that are true to this new direction still look for good arguments, but this is not done anymore by paying respects to the masters. Moreover, he or she selects the subject of the speech in a manner which is directly linked to self-fashioning, hoping that the public would follow that particular example. In order for this to work, Rorty keeps a safety distance between the theories of private and public life. He also asserts, more than once, that it is impossible to unify the ideas of the authors who have been interested, in their work, in the problem of self-fashioning (Derrida, Proust, Nabokov, Nietzsche) with the ideas of the authors that dedicated their knowledge and mind to the research of public space and to the quest for the right solutions of a better common life (Habermas, Rawls, Dewey). Rorty advises us to simply use those fragments of their work which help us in our own self-edification or give us a technique of selfhood (the former category of writers) and to take also the images of solidarity and optimal functioning of society (the latter category) without minding the distance between them. The difficulty of establishing an efficient dialogue between the two parties involved and the seemingly unsolvable relationship between elitism and universalism probably made Richard Rorty opt for this pragmatic choice.

### **3. Post-humanism and digital Cartesianism**

For Abrams, the contemporary post-humanism creates the frames of a different world from the one referenced in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Rorty himself realized, nine years after the publication of his book, that the fall of communism reconfigured both the social and political balance and the subsequent symbolic universe (for instance, the concept of permanent revolution). As Abrams put it (2004, 251),

„pluralism abounds, and consensus seems too much to ask. And on this count, Rorty breaks ties with the political pragmatists like Rawls and Habermas who still hope to achieve some realm of moral consensus in such a fragmented global climate. Yet on the other hand, he does not have the moral and political pessimism evidenced by postmoderns like Foucault. Between the excessively pessimistic postmoderns and the overly optimistic moderns (who argue for world consensus), Rorty takes a subtle middle path, claiming that we ought simply to keep the conversation going”.

Rorty consciously ignores the difference between the norm of conversation and the fact of conversation, but this suits his project

because it makes the postmodern authors continue what they have already been doing, namely keeping the debate on. The American philosopher also warns us about the necessity of eliminating all the factors that could block this conversation (*conversation-stoppers*)<sup>1</sup>: even if we are aware that consensus is rarely present, it is sufficient that the parties continue to talk because this is the only way, Rorty thinks, to increase the degree of humanity within a community. The simple fact of deliberating together instead of being violent equals a more civilian society.

The theme of Cartesian digital dualism emerged as a major subject of inquiry in the last two decades. The discussions concerning the radical split between body and mind were fruitful enough to give birth to new directions of research. As Dianne Currier (2010) pointed out, the decorporalized mind and the virtual body turned out to be authentic tropes in the digital universe and in the subsequent works that analyze it. This led to talks about conscience download (Moravec 1988), cyborgs and transhumanism.

Actually, Rorty fits very well in this frame of dialogue. If we remember that he advocated the continuous search for better utopias, then we may leave aside, for a minute, the fact that he never actually developed an articulate perspective on such a (brave) new world. As we have seen above, Rorty did not show the signs of political/philosophical pessimism seen in the case of other leading thinkers, and this gives us the reasons to imagine how things might have been envisaged by him. For instance, is Internet a conversation stopper? No, by what we've witnessed so far. Another strong argument comes along the lines of censorship: when so many states and institutions try to impose forms of censorship, then we can say that something really valuable is happening online, namely something that occasionally puts establishment to a serious test. The problem with talks and forums on the Internet is not that it might turn out to be conversation stoppers. The real issue here is whether our minds are strong enough or educated enough in order to operate a useful selection of information. It may even be the case that we lack the precious help of our body when we communicate online. In our real life, the body is not only a vehicle of consciousness, a goal-oriented machine, but also a detector, a tool that spots danger, similarity, affinity or lies. Online, we

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<sup>1</sup> The situation of religion is particularly tackled by Rorty, who thinks it really is a conversation stopper. For him, the problem arises from the absolute nature of its presuppositions, any religion subsequently developing an intransigent metaphysics, within which any deviation leads to punishment. But I wonder if there isn't a double standard in play here.

have to manage the situation with our decorporalized mind and, at most, with our virtual body (which, this time, may not prove so helpful). We also have to mention the fact that we, humans, have constantly invested, in the course of our history, in any structure that proved useful for the goal of evading or escaping from our bodies (Bey 2001, 115). The Internet makes our dream of breaking out of the bodily prison come true. As Hacking put it (2005, 153-166), the tension between the analogic character of the body and the digital character of informational processing revives the Cartesian dualism. Even if we are not dealing with two separate substances now, we still have to work with two radically different forms of representation. Freed from the prison, our conscience takes the form of a mobile and dispersed digital ego. Bolter points out to the educational effects of the latter:

“the central question underpinning this critique of digital Cartesianism is: whose goal is it to transcend the body and what may be lost in this migration to new spatial imaginaries? These interdisciplinary approaches share a common concern with how bodies, space and social relations are understood best within materialist terms, and how the shift from proximity to computer mediated communication redefines the way in which we conceptualize social networks and relationships of self and other, thus placing radical, critical and transformative pedagogies at risk” (2007, 141).

The communication sequences that are typical for the cyberspace involve *hypermediation*, which leads to fragmentation and heterogeneity. On the other hand, the digital, Cartesian ego experiences the promise of freedom. In the early stages of the Internet, the lack of nonverbal cues and the overwhelming anonymity were the principles along which someone could build his or her discursive identity. This auroral happiness turned into an “emancipatory rhetoric of technology” (Dery 1996, 8), related to the idea that many phantasies of transcendence now find a suitable tool. As Coyne pointed out,

“the dominant ethos is now romanticism: a focus on subjectivity, a new metaphysics of proximity, a revival of the early socialist dream of community, a disdain for the constraints imposed by the body, embracing the holistic unitary patterning of chaos theory, the representation of the object world, a hope for its ultimate transcendence through the technologies of cyberspace, and a quest for a better, fairer more democratic future. In this vein, certain writers point to the computer as the harbinger of the postmodern age, which, contrary to Heidegger’s radical

anti-metaphysical stance, succeeds in reproducing a subjectivist metaphysics” (1998, 7).

Will the post-human beings continue the conversation? This, really, is a difficult question. First, we have to wonder if these (new) beings will still keep debate and discussion as fundamental values for their communities/societies. If the current state of humanity is just a transitory phase, it may turn out that certain values that seem central to our world view in the present would lose their substance in the future. Also, we don't know, for the moment, how much from our old humanity will remain in the inner structure of the cyborg. Isn't it possible that this betterment of humans leave behind, like an old skin, the notion of dialogue? Is the decorporalized intelligence marching towards empathy, sharing and solidarity or simply choosing control?

#### **4. Belief Networks and the Internet**

What happens with the fragile human being in cyberspace? If Rorty's arguments on contingency were built around human life in its traditional form, it is worth seeing whether their value still holds when we change the medium. In fact, many times it is the very description of the human being as a chance product that helps us understand better how it manifest itself on the Internet. On the other hand, by analyzing online behaviours we get a clearer picture of how contingency functions. The first elements that we should mention are the browsing and searching behaviours. In the case of scholars, for instance, researches show the existence of certain patterns, like squirreling, bouncing and power browsing (Grădinaru 2013). If we are to use those results and generalize, we can say that the focus on speed and simplicity resulted in a quality loss. Moreover, in order to turn information into knowledge we do not need only a horizontal move, but also a vertical inquiry. Our tendency for downloading seldom translates into vast quantities of stored information, but we lack the capacity of reading and selecting the whole lot. So, sometimes, our quest for knowledge has a very disappointing finish. The hypertext of the Internet allows us to bounce from page to page, and this leads to a superficial examination of the content. This constant invitation to go from one site to another opens a big range of options, but only if we enter the details of a problem we get closer to understanding it.

When we create a web of beliefs through our online searching behaviours, we encounter similar problems as in the case of their offline



counterparts. But the lack of nonverbal cues, for instance, adds a few more uncertainty degrees. There are a lot of examples in which people could not distinguish between ironic content and serious content. In other cases, their propensity for a particular idea or doctrine made them embrace certain assertions and invest them with the status of “truths”. This reminds us of Ch. S. Peirce’s *method of tenacity*. But how much of what we stumble upon on the Internet can really be called “relevant information” or “knowledge”? How do we judge the parts that aim to become justified true beliefs? The psychology of our online activities is, without any doubt, extremely complex, as Stefanone, Lacaff and Rosen (2011, 41) show in the case of photo sharing:

“as cameras have become ubiquitous and ever present (primarily as they have been integrated with mobile communication devices), photography has become more than an archival process. Photos do not just commemorate important events and special occasions, but record our everyday lives and social interactions. Unlike the textual media that has formed the basis of online communication for most of its existence, personal photos are intrinsically intimate, even as the ubiquity of Photoshop promotes skepticism about the truthfulness of images. Counts and Fellheimer suggest that photo sharing serves to enhance the social presence of individuals to their close friends and family, and helps establish a common social milieu among groups. However, when presented in public or semipublic fora such as a Flickr album or Facebook profile, photos may signal the existence of relationships, a desire for relationships, or even a desire for attention”.

For an Internet user who doesn’t have a comprehensive map in advance, swimming in the sea of information may constitute an epistemic trap, since he or she can build a network of beliefs through the simple juxtaposition of arbitrary chosen standpoints. Moreover, in the absence of such a map, the Internet user lacks the critical criteria that are necessary for the evaluation of the opinions found online. Many times, the first pieces of information that we find with Google search are invested with the symbolic status of knowledge. The selection of relevant information must involve relevant criteria, and many times we can find them offline. This type of selection must be relevant, valid, justifiable and applicable. The correctness is, also, a matter of debate. Not everything comes down to majority opinion. Here, I simply disagree with Rorty when he tries to put almost every problem in the form of deliberation on the basis of majority opinion. Moreover, his dream of replacing logic with rhetoric

must have been a metaphor, since rhetoric is based on logic. This image of logic, truth and metaphysics on one side and rhetoric, belief, irony (deconstruction) on the other side is too simple a paradigm. We can link the logic tools to truth (in the narrow sense that Rorty despises), but we can also connect them to properties such as consistence or validity.

In the case of virtual communities we witness a special situation. As in our real life, a certain community can enhance the level of theoretical and practical knowledge of a person, providing justifiable beliefs and psychological reinforcement. In the meantime, communities can fuel our frustration, our maladaptive cognitive schemata, and our ideological biases. Other times, a community is nothing short of a suffocating environment for that person, especially when the cultural software of the community doesn't fit with the choices made by that person. The unitary self of the past centuries completes its own dissolution by the infinite online reflection. The digital culture offers, in this vein, plenty of space for liberty, experimentation and, thus, for self-fashioning. It is also true that the vocabularies of self-fashioning sometimes have a communitarian side that is even more salient than Rorty expected, since the phenomenon of sharing became quasi-universal. One only needs to remember what happened in the cases of social networks and personal blogs.

The contingency of a liberal community is tested through the presence of the continuous, unbroken, lively dialogue between partners. The vocabularies of public deliberation – marked by spontaneous participation and comments – represented, since the first phases of the development of the Internet, serious hope for the revitalization of public space. That's why the fight for the freedom of speech and for imposing limits on data surveillance became so passionate.

## **5. Conclusions**

Rorty's influential analysis developed in his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* is an intellectual framework that allows a fruitful examination of our argumentative online behaviours. Moreover, we can use, up to a point, his ideas concerning the contemporary understanding of selfhood, contingency and vocabularies of self-edification. As expected, our online counterparts prove the same lack of consistency as our "real" personalities. But frailty is not only a liability. It may also be strength, since we can always re-adjust and re-calibrate our networks of opinions. We can sometimes be defenceless when facing a talented speaker or a well-planned discursive intervention, but we can also adapt

to a new environment. We do it faster this time, since our ancestors only had their own brains as primary weapons (and the brains of their peers in the community). We, on the other hand, can access and assess a vast amount of information that comes from all over the world. The electronic togetherness, the online common conscience that is, in key moments, put to work can help us find the right answers. It can also help us protest when we feel to, oppose to unjust laws, caricature corruption and duplicity or create hope through our projects. Even if few people (still) re-read the classics in order to find good irony, the spirit is there.

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