

Contingency in Rorty's Philosophy

RENE VINCENTE ARCILLA

Teachers College, Columbia University

Why are we here? Assuming that this question is addressed to me, among others, I may take it at least two ways. I may understand it to be asking, Why must we be here? and to be looking for a necessary reason for our gathering. Or I may understand it to mean, Why do we happen to be here? and to be looking for a reason that is contingent. So to provoke a conversation by which we may be here reasonably, I shall begin by offering an account of why Rorty would encourage us to take this question, and any other request for reasons, in the latter fashion. This account will sketch out a defense of, and a response to, Rorty's thesis of contingency.

The thesis, as I understand it, is premised on the failure so far of human beings to identify a convincing, necessary reason for why things must be the way they are. In response to that failure, the thesis holds that we should from now on settle for contingent reasons. It urges us, in effect, to find in the futile quest to discover apodictic facts about the universe's essential nature, a quest which has motivated most pursuits in metaphysics and epistemology, a historical, even historicist lesson. It recommends that we try to cure ourselves of the desire for such facts, and to accept that all the reasons we have come up with so far for why things are as such, and all the reasons we can reasonably hope to come up with, are bound to beg the question of their own reasons. We should accordingly acknowledge that the in-principle infinite quest for a reason for that reason can only be concluded by circular argumentation, arbitrary fiat, or happenstance causes, thus by an appeal to contingency.

Now the word "should" in the above sentence may trigger off suspicions that the thesis is self-contradictory. It may appear that Rorty is trying to sell us necessary reasons to believe that all reasons must be contingent, and so a bill of goods that is at bottom a version of the self-refuting claim that "relativism is universally true." He has an out from this trap, though: it is that he is consistently prepared to accept the contingency of his own beliefs, including his belief in the thesis of contingency. He could deny, therefore, that he is in any way insisting that we *must*, on pain of violating our "rational" essence, accept the thesis. Rather he may confine himself to offering weaker, professedly circular, contingent reasons for taking it up, reasons which take into account and derive from causal forces that happen to be influencing our present circumstances. These reasons would be no stronger and no weaker than our recognition of these forces.

To be sure, this makes for a less compelling appeal, for I may always protest that the circumstances so described are not in fact mine. Yet by restricting

himself to a “contingency of contingency” argument, Rorty gives himself leverage for some defensive judo. He may now point out that any attempt to reject the thesis on the grounds that it cannot be supported with necessary reasons – begs the question against it in an arbitrary manner subject to happenstance causes, thus ironically illustrating the thesis. He could thus be content to renounce any conclusive proof of the thesis as an acceptable price to pay for drawing a line of incommensurability between his universe of argumentation and that of those who respect only necessary reasons, and so keeping the skeptic at bay and stalemated.

Nevertheless, we could still reject the thesis of contingency for other reasons, such as that it embroils us in more problems than it solves, or that it simply costs too many of the other cherished beliefs we happen to hold. We could dispute Rorty’s justifications for the thesis by contending that although we as yet lack any usable idea of what a necessary reason for the universe’s being would look like, the pragmatic price of giving up the quest for such an idea is too high. For precisely contingent reasons, the argument would run, we should continue to pin our hopes for happiness on our capacity to harmonize our lives eventually with their necessary reason.

To meet this kind of argument, Rorty strives to offer us a plausible account of the thesis’s practical costs and benefits, one which shows that the latter exceed the former. In general, what the thesis costs is any confidence that we may ground our beliefs in Truth as a nonhuman, and so impartial, arbiter of conflict. How the thesis benefits us is to stress the freedom of creative self-assertion, which Hans Blumenberg has identified as the driving force of modern culture. Indeed, we may interpret Rorty’s project as an attempt to liberate that culture from the last chains of the medieval culture of “theological absolutism,” from the subjection of modern self-assertion to the demand that there be an absolute reason for everything, prior to and transcending humanly controversial, asserted reasons.

Contingency stresses freedom by keeping open the possibility of metaphorical redescription. Rorty observes that when it is understood that any reason we may offer for holding a belief is contingent, then it is always feasible and pertinent to ask, Would we prefer to redescribe metaphorically the circumstances of the belief such that the offered reason appears out of place? For example, in response to the idea that we should institute standardized tests in schools because we need to raise the productivity of workers, one may redescribe the circumstances that make productivity, or a specific metaphor of “productivity,” a desideratum, and so make the above reason seem beside the point and a new practice seem in order. This freedom to redescribe one’s circumstances, he argues, promises to enhance each of our capacities to form both a more original, happier self and a more liberal, compassionate community. As AI may elaborate, the freedom of redescription broached by the thesis of contingency enables us to celebrate what distinguishes one’s self from others through the exercise of irony. And as Lynda may discuss, in order to foster respect for this freedom in a liberal community, we need to stay morally sensitive to our common vulnerability to

pain and humiliation; we need to keep alive the conversation of solidarity.

Having sketched out Rorty's thesis of contingency, what do I make of it. Is it nihilistic? I do not think we can make this charge stick unless we are willing to just beg the question against Rorty – and so cast doubt on our own "rationality." Does the thesis have educational implications? Clearly it does, for it paves the way for a promotion of ironic self-formation and compassionate communal solidarity as the two principal aims of an education that would support a liberal culture. As I am sure Al and Lynda have plenty to say about the viability of these goals, let me turn in conclusion to one particular educational promise in the thesis that Rorty does not explore.

As I mentioned earlier, I believe that we can read Rorty's work as an extension of Blumenberg's defense of modern self-assertion. If we do this, though, then an odd fact comes to light: the purported opponents of modern thought, namely the tradition of theological absolutism culminating in Ockham's nominalism, were rigorously committed as well to upholding the thesis of contingency. The thesis enabled them to distinguish Christian thought from the ancient, metaphysical interest in a cosmology of necessary and eternal forms; by denying that we could possess knowledge of such forms, they emphasized that the only reasons for things human beings could arrive at were all ultimately contingent on the absolutely inscrutable will of the Creator. Contingency, then, restricted human reason in order to make room for divine transcendence. Now Rorty's work appears to suggest that with respect to this key thesis, theological absolutism may actually be compatible with modern self-assertion. May it not be possible, then, to supplement his anti-metaphysical, historicist pragmatism with a negative metaphysics and ethics, akin to the work of Heidegger and Levinas, that would deliver us over to the underserved gift and the unanswerable obligation? Could we not read assertions in a Rortyan world as additionally pointing to what transcends the world, or more precisely, the worlds of antagonistic discourses? And so could not some of the difficulties with the two aims of a Rortyan education – difficulties which I imagine Al and Lynda will bring up – be mitigated by an appreciation of this possible peace?