

Utopia Flawed? A Response to Reich on Rorty

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If Rob Reich is right, Rorty's views on education undermine his liberal utopia. Is Reich right? Not entirely, as I shall show. But first a confession. This published version differs somewhat from the response I gave at the Houston meeting on 1 April 1996. There I yielded to the temptations of the date to engage in a little playing of the fool, here I pay more sober heed to Reich's arguments; there I said little on the idea of utopia, here it moves to the center of my response.

Reich sets out on a dual mission: to show that some deep flaws in Rorty's educational views put his utopian vision at risk and to suggest what options are open to Rorty if he wishes to save his liberal utopia. Each of Reich's proposed routes to salvation has the virtue of attempting to preserve the most precious elements of Rorty's final vocabulary — contingency and irony.

Reich detects two flaws. First, Rorty's version of education is riddled with inequity since it creates a system that affords only a select elite the opportunity of self-edification towards becoming a liberal ironist. Second, Rorty's version of education ignores the question of how citizens are to be educated as liberals. The first flaw involves an incoherence in Rorty's ideas; the second points to dire consequences. The presumed incoherence is this: Rorty's liberal utopia grants all citizens equal opportunity to be self-creating ironists, yet his account of education appears to exclude many citizens from the edifying conditions so crucial to self-creation. The dire consequences are this: Suppose the citizens of Rorty's liberal utopia do learn to be self-creating ironists, concerned with their own private quests of self-creation. What is to stop them from coming into conflict with one another? What will ensure that Rorty's utopia remains a liberal utopia, unless liberalism as well as ironism is taught?

If we take Reich's reading to be charitable and accurate, his case against Rorty is sound. But there is a telling silence in Reich's account. While ironism, contingency and liberalism all receive due attention and solidarity lurks on the periphery of the account, utopia passes through it as an unnoticed word. Before I address my question ("Is Reich right?") I want for a moment to dwell on, if not in, utopia.

George Kateb¹ lists five varieties of utopian writing:

- (i) works of fiction describing imaginary societies held to be much closer to perfection than any society in the real world;
- (ii) works of political theory that consider the social and cultural presuppositions of an ideal political order and the ends of life which that order can and should facilitate;
- (iii) theories of history which culminate in a vision of achieved perfection;
- (iv) philosophical anthropologies which attempt to define what is genuinely human rather than merely conventional; and

(v) prophecies of profound alteration in human existence. Rorty's liberal utopia clearly falls within the second category, but the ironic turn in his writing takes a bow towards the first, while his insistence on contingency takes a swipe at utopian writing in the fourth and fifth. Some utopian works invite us to delight in the playful imagining of new kinds of social reality, others may be read as a vivid record of human wants and hopes, and others — like some of Rorty's essays — do both. Utopianism's principle mission, in Kateb's view, is to encourage the hope that human nature is malleable beyond the limits set by theological despair or worldly pessimism.²

Rorty sees his philosophy as employing the method of utopian politics, a method he describes as redescribing "lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behaviour which will tempt a rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate new forms of non-linguistic behaviour."³ Casting himself in the company of political utopians writing since the French Revolution, his utopian hope is that we are malleable through language, that we can shape ourselves through the words we choose as our own final (or, at least, provisionally final) vocabularies. But there is no end, no settling of accounts once and for all. The historicist and nominalist culture Rorty envisages is one which "would regard the realization of utopias, and the envisaging of still further utopias, as an endless process."⁴

Not all of Rorty's writing is strictly utopian. While some of his popular pieces on education may be laced with utopian longings, they are critical redesigns of educational institutions and practices in the United States, rather than full-scale depictions of his liberal utopia. Reich's accusation of incoherence rests on an account drawn from several of Rorty's works — some explicitly utopian and others only marginally so. For instance, Reich worries that current socio-economic conditions in the United States impede university access for many citizens and so diminish opportunities for self-creation. True, but does this count as evidence of an incoherence in Rorty's utopia? Surely not. The way things happen to be now is quite different from the way they could be, at least in our utopian imaginings. On my reading, Rorty's utopian vision is not blind to the enabling conditions for equal opportunity for self-creation. Two sets of conditions are crucial, although neither is sufficient.

First, there is wealth, peace and the so-called "bourgeois freedoms." Without them, the goal of "letting everybody have a chance at self-creation" is empty. With them, the question of "how to equalize opportunities for self-creation" becomes one of the pivotal questions for public debate and action in a liberal utopia. Assuming a thoroughgoing commitment to contingency, the answer to the question will depend upon where, when, and with whom the debate occurs. If everything is contingent and thus amenable to re-shaping, there is no reason to suppose that universities, as we now know them, will remain the most likely sites for provoking self-creation. And if books, films and videos have the power to quicken our imaginations, as Rorty suggests, there is no reason why — in a liberal utopia — citizens couldn't be given equal opportunity to self-creation by being given equal and uncensored access to the

many cultural artifacts that may provoke or inspire self-creation. Of course, another possibility might be to broaden access to universities. Whatever the possibilities (imagine them, if you will), peace and wealth are preconditions for their fulfillment.

The second enabling condition for self-creation is socialization. Without socialization, Rorty insists, there can be no self-creation. Presumably we are all socialized willy nilly. The question is whether some kinds of socialization serve better than others as a springboard for self-creation. If they do, the aspiration to provide all citizens with an equal opportunity for self-creation needs to be backed by access for all to this kind of socialization. Rorty is fairly explicit about the kind of socialization he regards as the responsibility of lower education. It is to get the students "to take over the moral and political common sense of society as it is."⁵ In an American (Deweyan inspired) version of a liberal utopia, socialization consists in "inculcating...a narrative of national hope...but...setting it in the larger context of a narrative of world history and literature, against the background of the world-picture offered by the natural scientists."⁶ Reading Rorty from a broadly liberal but non-American perspective, it seems to me that this requires access for all citizens to a rich array of stories and cultural tools (among them literacy and numeracy), to a full gamut of current ways of speaking. A tall order, but one surely worth striving for even if we do not share Rorty's ironist desires.

Reich worries about the inequities involved in restricting the individuating functions of education to institutions of higher learning and thus excluding all those without the means to gain entry into the academy. I think there is a bigger worry, one which can only be addressed if we take the project of socialization seriously. Institutional access and epistemic access are not synonymous. Without the cultural capital that comes from a rich immersion in the prevailing traditions of one's time, locale, and world, the opportunities for self-creation offered at universities may remain illusive for all but a privileged few.

I have suggested Reich is not altogether right in his first charge. Since Rorty's description of education does not ignore questions of equity, the incoherence Reich detects may not be as deep or matter as much as he thinks. But suppose there is a problem. The style of Reich's response is interesting: he challenges Rorty at his own game by providing a redescription of lower education, using Rorty's vocabulary and an appeal to Rorty's hero, Dewey, to do so. Accepting the distinction between socialization and edification, Reich sets out to sketch an approach in which the seeds for self-edification are sown at the time the socializing ground is prepared. In a sense Reich's challenge is as much a victory for Rorty as it is for Reich. Recall that Rorty's utopian method is to "create a pattern of linguistic behaviour which will tempt a rising generation to adopt it." By challenging Rorty at his own game, Reich participates in the game, and so succumbs to temptation.

Reich's second charge — that fostering a community of self-liberating liberal ironists may cause grave conflict among citizens — arises from his concern that the very possibility for solidarity is undermined by the flourishing of irony, unless we can ensure that citizens are liberals as well as ironists. Such assurance must come,

he argues, either from an account of liberal education or from an account showing that irony and liberalism are internally connected. Rorty, in Reich's view, provides neither.

Once again, Reich is not altogether right. Rorty does offer a description of the sort of education which will nurture liberal attitudes: a liberal education is an education of the imagination so as to nurture — through novels, ethnographies, films and the like — people's sensitivity to cruelty. Clearly Reich wants something more, some kind of guarantee against possible abuses of irony. But that precisely is Rorty's point — there can be no guarantee that doesn't itself undermine the very purpose of a liberal utopia as he sees it, and that is to grant people the freedom to be themselves. Reich is right, as far as I am in a position to judge, that Rorty does not show that irony and liberalism are internally connected. And surely he could not without comprising contingency.

1. George Kateb, "Utopias and Utopianism," in *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, vol. 8 (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 212-15.

2. *Ibid.*, 215.

3. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 9.

4. *Ibid.*, xvi.

5. Richard Rorty, "Education without Dogma," *Dissent* (Spring 1989): 202.

6. *Ibid.*