

Self-Creation or Choosing the Self: A Critique of Richard Rorty's Idea of Democratic Education

Patricia Rohrer
Teachers College, Columbia University

In his book *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, Richard Rorty presents a democratic pragmatism centered on the individual's pursuit of happiness, a project he understands to encompass far more than the pursuit of material well being.¹ Central to Rorty's account is the figure he calls the "liberal ironist," liberal in the desire not to be cruel, ironic to the extent of knowing her most central beliefs are contingent. Despite her rejection of foundational truths, the liberal ironist is passionately engaged in making sense of her life, which she does by means of what Rorty calls "self creation." Rorty argues that the survival of contemporary democracies depends on such committed yet undogmatic citizens. His project suggests to me that the individual pursuit of meaning should not be left out of public education.

Although I agree with Rorty's general approach to an ironic education, his ideas present some significant dilemmas, particularly in terms of moral education. I have two main concerns: One is his rejection of attempts to answer the Platonic question, "Why is it in one's best interest to be just?" Rorty is right to reject this question as a philosopher, but some form of the question must be central to each individual's moral education. The second, related concern is that the resulting split between an individual's public and private goals provides little ground for the growth of a passionate commitment to democracy or to anything else. These concerns can be addressed, I believe, not by attempting to reconcile the split *in theory*, but *in existing*. In this essay I will propose that Søren Kierkegaard's existentialism can contribute to developing such a link between an individual's quest for meaning and her moral orientation. Educating passion without dogma might become the centerpiece of moral education in a democratic society. I will also draw on Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* to evaluate the moral identity of the liberal ironist.

Let us begin with a sketch of Rorty's liberal ironist that highlights her suitability to democratic society. This figure hinges upon the separation of public and private, or communal good and individual good. Seeing no need to link private interests to public commitments, Rorty aims to describe how the communal good of democratic society can be fostered alongside the liberal freedom of each individual to pursue his or her own idea of the good life. Rorty suggests we stop worrying about reconciling what he calls the public and private realms because the desire for justice (to be a good liberal) and the desire for self-creation (to pursue one's happiness) cannot be united in theory. Rorty's strategy for a liberal utopia seeks to accommodate what he believes to be the equally valid but ultimately incommensurable demands of solidarity and autonomous fulfillment.

Liberal ironists, their world views backed by neither Reason nor Religion, understand the contingency of what Rorty calls their final vocabulary, "a set of words which [human beings] employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives" (*CIS*, 73). The ironist recognizes the contingency of both the content of her

vocabulary — an accidental and unique product of her personal history — and its status, which may at any moment be undermined.

In the liberal ironist, then, we have a number of qualities important in thinking about a democratic society made up of individuals with diverse beliefs. The liberal ironist is committed, faithful to her conscience, yet not dogmatic. She is not only tolerant of views unlike hers but embraces them in order to see what she can learn from other final vocabularies. She is an individualist in the sense that she refuses to live unthinkingly in accordance with someone else's description of her. She resists conformity because the contingent project of her life can have meaning to herself only insofar as she demonstrates her uniqueness.

In his educational proposal, "Education without Dogma," Rorty presents a scheme for the education of the liberal ironist based on Dewey's two aims of education: socialization and individuation. On the one hand, pre-college education should be devoted to socialization, "familiarizing the young with what their elders take to be true, whether it is true or not."² Higher education, on the other hand, is a time for individuation and the opportunity to question society's truisms. The transmission of society's values in the early years should be followed by ironic detachment from and thoughtful critique of those values in the college years.

As Alven Neiman thoughtfully suggests, however, secondary education might more effectively provide a sort of transition between elementary and higher education, providing certainties as necessary while still paving the way for the introduction of irony in higher education.³ This seems a more realistic approach to the socialization/individuation issue, if only for the reason that pre-college adolescents are already beginning to question their socialization, perhaps not with mature critical irony, but with a passion that deserves to be acknowledged and is ignored at our peril. The distancing of the adolescent self from the immediate adult world marks the beginning of a lifetime of making choices about how to live. As such, it is also a time marked by perfectionism, idealism, and absolutism — a crucial time for serious moral inquiry, and, I will argue, for the beginnings of an individuated moral identity. For this reason, I am interested in pre-college, mainly secondary, education.

I now want to look more closely at the liberal ironist's attempt to make her life meaningful to herself. This sort of self creation is vividly illustrated in the lives of what Rorty, after the literary critic Harold Bloom, calls "strong poets." These are individuals who make a life out of defining themselves against their precursors in their attempts to express in novel ways what is most important to them. Strong poets acknowledge that they have been influenced by other poets but they are driven to overcome this influence by appropriating the language of their precursors into a new and different way to express themselves. The strong poet has an urgent need to demonstrate that she and her ideas are not a copy of what has existed before. Describing herself in her own terms is how the strong poet confronts a special variant of the unconscious need we all have: the need to come to terms with what chance has left us. Like Friedrich Nietzsche, Rorty's strong poets and ironists want to be able to say, "Thus I willed it."

Though his primary focus in *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* is the creative genius of intellectuals, understood in terms of the model of the strong poet, Rorty observes that most people need a strategy to cope with the vagaries of fate. Nonintellectuals can also engage in self creation, weaving webs of meaning from the contingent facts of their lives. According to Rorty, liberals must consider all humans in the light of their efforts at self creation, which may take as many forms as there are individuals. The form these efforts take for nonintellectuals differs from that of the strong poet, but the quest can be as grave and the commitment as strong. Rorty suggests that “any seemingly random constellation” of things — the tools of a trade, possessions, family, sports — can establish an “unconditional commandment to whose service a life may be devoted” (*CIS*, 37). No matter what one’s cup of tea happens to be, devoting one’s life to it can be poetic, allowing an individual to live on her own terms, to be unconstrained by the way others might describe her.

As Rorty understands the individual’s “unconditional commandment,” it need have no moral content. The ironist has no fixed criteria for rightness or wrongness, so her attempts to articulate who she wants to be are aimed at finding better ways to live rather than the one true way. Morality enters the picture less as a question of individual identity than as one of communal identity: “Who are ‘we,’ how did we come to be what we are, and what might we become?” (*CIS*, 60). Likewise, Rorty focuses on the importance of moral thinking to the greater good. Educationally, however, I propose that we consider moral orientation a crucial component of individual identity, something one pursues with passionate interest for her own fulfillment. In addition, how can such an interest in herself as a moral self connect, through education, to her social relationships and the thriving of liberal democratic society? In terms of Rorty’s account of the virtues of the liberal ironist, the question becomes this: how can pre-college education sow the seeds of passionate commitment — first to the democratic virtues, later to those beliefs worth dying for held by the liberal ironist?

Charles Taylor, another philosopher who links moral thinking to questions of identity, emphasizes “Who am I?” as a moral question in *Sources of the Self*, arguing that selfhood only makes sense in terms of an orientation to a larger moral framework.⁴ I want to argue that the most promising way to educationally nourish a passionate commitment to democratic citizenship (the precursor to liberal irony) or to anything outside of narrow self-interest, is to allow passion as an existential question to take root in an exploration of Rorty’s identity question. “Who are we?” must be substantively connected not only to “Who am I?” but to “What gives my life direction or meaning?” Another way of putting it is that for the purposes of pre-college education, the public and private spheres must be linked by way of the Platonic question “how is it in my interest to be good?”

Rorty’s idea of self-creation links the individual’s identity with her attempts to make sense of her life, specifically in terms of the unconditional commandment to which she devotes herself. This is parallel in form to Taylor’s view of the self in at least one significant way: the importance of some sort of larger framework that serves to orient the individual in her attempts to make sense of her life.

For my purposes, the most interesting divergence between the two concerns the issues surrounding Rorty's public/private split. Rorty aims to separate the individual's public commitments from her private attempts to make sense of her life. He relegates what makes life meaningful to the private sphere, while the moral concerns that keep the liberal polity viable (solidarity and the liberal pact to avoid causing pain) constitute the public sphere. Thus, Rorty's liberal ironist seems to follow two stars, one the unique unconditional commandment that makes sense of her private life, the other, her shared commitment to solidarity and liberal society. In Rorty's educational scheme, she is introduced to democratic values in childhood and adolescence by means of socialization, including the influences of parents, school, and public discourse. As an adult already grounded in liberal democratic values, she develops her private life in terms of self creation, and ultimately the relationship between her public and private commitments.

Rorty does not develop the notion of balancing public and private because he is arguing that there is no theory that can describe how such a balance works or should work, no answer to the question: "How do you decide when to struggle against injustice and when to devote yourself to private projects of self-creation?" (*CIS*, xv). Each individual is free to choose how to respond when she perceives a conflict of allegiances, as long as her choice does harm to no one else. It is my contention that a philosophy of moral education must attend more closely to this question of balance. If an individual understands her public allegiances to be independent of her sense of who she is and who she should become, how will she weigh her commitment to solidarity against her desire to fulfill herself? If justice and solidarity are not required of her by a supreme being or the law of Reason, and she does not consider the choice to commit to these principles part of what makes her life meaningful, could an individual's desire for justice stand up to her desire to pursue her own idiosyncratic wishes?

The issue of balancing allegiances raises questions about the nature of individual commitment to any number of public projects, including democracy. Rorty calls on socialization in early education to pass along to children "what the elders take to be true," thus to establish the basics of democratic citizenship. In a post-metaphysical society most citizens will accept the fact of democracy because they have been socialized into being the kind of person who happens to believe democracy is the best way to live. Indeed, this seems to be all that Rorty is asking of the average non-intellectual. However, absent a conviction inspired by a strong notion of democracy as a universal Truth (or the best way to do things) or justice as a God-given right of all peoples, why would an exceptional person devote her life to democratic practice or principles?

In Rorty's account of the liberal ironist, negotiating the terms of this balance falls to the individual. By most accounts, balancing such allegiances is a matter of soul searching — even religiously doctrinaire individuals must search their souls to decide how far out of their way to go to help someone or to promote a cause they believe in. The difference for the liberal ironist is that she does not necessarily have a strong moral standard by which she, almost without thinking, weighs her decision. The Christian, for instance, *knows* that in God's eyes caring for the poor and

unfortunate is one of the noblest callings. Some “liberal metaphysicians” *know* that democratic freedoms should be spread to all parts of the globe. The questions these individuals ask themselves are a matter of degree, a measurement of their own efforts against an absolute standard of what they know to be good. Such are the absolutes for which many exceptional individuals give their lives. Why would an ironist, on the other hand, devote her life to an ethical (or democratic) commitment, much less believe anything worth dying for?

The only answer I can imagine is that the commitment would have to play a crucial role in how the individual understands who she is. Such a commitment, to democracy or justice or anything not directly related to a narrowly conceived self-interest, would have to be inseparable from her understanding of the better self she is always in the process of becoming. To fail to live up to such a commitment would be as good as losing one’s identity. Thus, it seems to me that if it is possible for schools and teachers to nurture a passion for ethical commitment, as opposed to the passive acceptance of liberal obligations, it will be by means of the role the educational process plays in the development of individual identity. Another way of putting this is that nurturing a commitment to justice or solidarity is not just a matter of socialization but of individuation as well. All this is to suggest that educating future liberal ironists who are capable of passionate commitment to something other than their idiosyncratic desires requires some way of bridging obligation and idiosyncrasy, public and private spheres.

Taylor, in contrast to Rorty, aims to develop more fully the link he discerns between the moral aspect of our lives and our questions about the meaning of life. He argues that in confronting both moral questions and questions of meaning, “strong evaluation” comes into play. That is, both kinds of questions “involve discriminations of right and wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not *rendered valid* by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged.”⁵ Taylor describes these standards as “ends or goods that command our awe” or “hypergoods.” Hypergoods are not just better or more desirable than other ends, they are in a class by themselves — they are incomparable. For Taylor, living in the light of these awe-inspiring goods that are profoundly important to our lives is a fundamental aspect of human agency.

According to Taylor, people make sense of their lives by living within some sort of framework, whether or not it is philosophically defined, whether or not they themselves can actually articulate its terms. His understanding of hypergoods and moral frameworks encompasses a broad range of possibilities. On the one hand, his description accounts for the traditionally theistic individual who understands her orientation to the world in terms of her relationship to a higher being. On the other hand, Taylor’s moral universe also includes the modern individual who believes she faces a meaningless universe, but chooses to do so with courage and conviction. Such an individual has a notion of human dignity that serves as a moral source. In terms of the effort to make sense of one’s life, central to both Rorty’s and Taylor’s accounts, Taylor’s “hypergoods” might be understood to play a similar role to Rorty’s “unconditional commandment.” In both descriptions, some larger purpose,

be it justice or the accumulation of cash, illuminates the individual's life. This larger purpose or meaning, in its particulars and in the extent to which it exercises a claim on the individual, is inextricably related to that individual's personal circumstances, history, and experience.

I want to draw attention to two significant differences between the two accounts, however. First, Taylor's hypergood serves as a standard that helps the individual to make moral choices. The unconditional commandment that makes sense of the life of Rorty's liberal ironist does not necessarily have any positive moral connotations. It sets the tone for the private sphere of self-creation while the public sphere is delineated by the ironist's relationship to the set of values she shares with other liberals. The second, related, difference is that in Taylor's account hypergoods have a kind of weight granted by their role in a particular historical narrative, for instance that of Christianity or of humanism or of the affirmation of ordinary life. Rorty, in contrast, describes the "commandment" as completely idiosyncratic and individualized. The concern for originality, particularly for the strong poet, tops all other concerns. There is a sense in which Rorty is making a case for a sort of radical individualism, a concerted disconnection from what Taylor calls traditional moral sources, and of course, from any notion of the transcendent.

Another way to compare the two accounts is to try to redescribe the liberal ironist as working within a Taylorian moral framework that helps her orient herself. The hypergood of the liberal ironist might be considered individual freedom, which is at the heart of both private and public spheres, private being devoted to one's own pursuit of this freedom, public to our attempts to assure the freedom of self-creation for others. The liberal emphasis on individual freedom also lends historical and communal weight to the liberal ironist's moral framework. Rorty makes it quite clear, however, that for his liberal ironist the value placed on the freedom of human beings in general serves more as a limiting factor to excessive individual pursuits than as a positive good. The love of freedom as a good in itself, absolute or otherwise, could not thus be said to guide the liberal ironist's life, or to provide a moral framework in Taylor's sense, because she seems to pursue it solely for her own advantage. To allow that there is any "greater good" is to run the risk that one's own individuality might be compromised by this good.

Rorty's public-private split is intended in part to eliminate the transcendent as an impediment to individual freedom and self-creation. As I mentioned before, this split also makes possible other important goals of a multicultural democracy such as a tolerance for difference. The question that arises with Taylor's account of individual meaning is whether a liberal individual might orient herself in terms of her love of what is good, even a transcendent good, and still be the sort of essential democratic character Rorty describes? Could she be committed to what she believes in, undogmatic, freely pursuing self-creation, describing herself in new and ever more interesting ways? And if this were possible, how might an educational philosophy handle the idea of transcendent good, and still be appropriate for public education in a democracy?

The alternative view of self-creation and moral individuation I am developing might be considered more existential than psychological, based on a self-interest

characterized by connection to and identification with something beyond the self, but not necessarily a metaphysically defined framework of certainty. It is the interest of a self that must heed the uncertainty inherent in embracing something that can be neither defined “rationally” or “scientifically” nor justified metaphysically. This sort of quest is described by Kierkegaard.⁶ As opposed to the traditional quest for objective truth rejected by Rorty, the existential quest is in the name of subjective truth, which is the demand placed on the individual by her unique relationship to the larger uncertainty of human existence. She can only confront this unknown by trying to understand the questions that most passionately concern her.

The dissimilarities between Rorty the neo-pragmatist and Kierkegaard the Christian existentialist are easy to spot. What they share is less obvious but significant: an antifoundational approach to the most important human concerns. Both aim to wrest control of the individual pursuit of meaning from philosophy and theory in general. Both emphasize the actual quest for understanding as a good in itself regardless of what might be considered the results. They are both “ironic.” In fact, Rorty acknowledges Kierkegaard as a significant ironic predecessor. In this vein, they both take a literary approach to the pursuit of meaning, one that entails individual engagement with a text, resulting in as many “meanings” as there are individuals.

Like Rorty’s ideal democratic citizen, the Kierkegaardian individual is engaged in a lifelong pursuit of perfection, passionately committed but acutely aware that her truth applies to no one else. Kierkegaard eschews the idea of self creation, however, in favor of “choosing the self” from the multiplicity of the individual’s personal history.⁷ While both thinkers make much of the individualistic nature of their respective projects, Rorty’s ironist feels she must demonstrate her originality in order to differentiate her identity from all others. For Kierkegaard, the uniqueness of the individual quest is a given. He emphasizes the paradox: the need we all share to make sense of our lives is precisely what isolates us. If Rorty’s “thus I willed it” approach can be seen as redescribing one’s history as well as one’s fate in grand distinction from the history and fate of all other individuals, Kierkegaard’s choosing the self might be seen as taking responsibility for one’s history and one’s fate at the same time as emphasizing that it is, in essence, the same as everyone else’s.

With regard to the moral dilemma presented by Rorty’s public/private split, I want to draw on what Kierkegaard calls “existence communication.” Kierkegaard does not suggest linking private and public *in theory*, which Rorty rejects, but he offers a dialectic that links private and public *in existing*. The individual’s private striving to understand the mystery of how she should live is expressed indirectly in the public way she interacts with her world. I would redescribe Rorty’s project as follows: the questions of when to fight injustice and when to pursue private endeavors become one theoretically unanswerable but existentially compelling concern. How to live this question rather than how to answer it should be at the center of a moral education.

For Kierkegaard the ethical is a matter of constantly choosing. Rather than settling the balance between private and public, then, this approach aims to convert

the tension into a moral dynamic that drives a life-long process. This moral struggle is not just a contemplative inner-battle, but a way of being in the world that is communicated in one's existence. The individual's private passion profoundly affects and is indirectly communicated in her public life.

Where, then, in this Kierkegaardian project, is the "certainty" Rorty calls for upon which to build later irony? The transmission of society's truths? Kierkegaard's notions of "subjective truth" and "absolute *telos*" and Taylor's account of "strong evaluation" suggest an educational alternative to an over-simple notion of moral certainty. Kierkegaard, concerned with the individual's relationship with God, argued that the religious individual must always exist in the awareness of this god-relationship, her "absolute *telos*." It is this *telos*, the absolute demand her relationship with God places on her, that gives meaning to her existence. What is significant about this account for my purposes is how the god-relationship might illuminate a common human experience — the longing to be connected to what Taylor calls "the ultimately important." This longing is crucial to one's identity, and failing to strive toward its fulfillment would be to lose part of one's self. In this idea of longing I find the way to think about my second concern, the source of passionate conviction in individuals whose beliefs are contingent.

The relationship Kierkegaard describes is an "absolute relation" to uncertainty which, I propose, may serve as a way for educators to think about the individual's relationship to questions of the good. In Kierkegaard's account, God does not make Himself known in concrete certainty to the individual but the relationship is nonetheless "ultimately important" to the individual's eternal happiness. God as an entity cannot be "known" in any cognitive sense; likewise, what exactly the good life consists in we must acknowledge to be somewhat mysterious, perhaps inarticulable. The existence of what we mean when we talk about "the good," then, is more a matter of faith than of knowledge. It is a direction toward which we direct our longing, not an existing object of cognitive mastery.

Passionate commitment to democratic virtues, art, a supreme being or any belief worth dying for must be rooted in this longing for the "ultimately important," a longing that is central to the individual's idea of herself. No matter, then, that she believes in the contingency of the "ultimately important," because to passionately respond to this longing is her only way to become herself.

1. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). This book will be cited as *CIS* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Richard Rorty, "Education Without Dogma," *Dissent* (Spring 1989): 200.

3. Alven Neiman, "Ironic Schooling: Socrates, Pragmatism and the Higher Learning," *Educational Theory* 41, no. 4, (Fall 1991): 376.

4. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

5. *Ibid.*, 4.

6. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Howard V. and Edna V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

7. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. Howard V. and Edna V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).