

Contingency, Meliorism and Fate

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Contingency and irony

- Contingency: there is no philosophical, *deep theory* to support our interpretations or cultural change
- Irony: a recognition and an appropriation of contingency *of some particular sort*
- Liberalism (and solidarity) vindicated by that recognition, at least vis-à-vis to alternatives

Irony: Williams' and Schneewind's criticism

- Rorty: the ironist has radical *doubts* over her final vocabulary
- Williams: assuming anti-representationalism, what is there for the ironist to be skeptical about?
 - Instead, contingency as “modesty-inducing fallibilism”
- Schneewind: the ironist is creating, not discovering; “What is the point of doubt here?”

Irony: Ramberg's response

- Ramberg: “Another tack is called for”
 - “[H]ere we would do better to stop thinking of irony as a matter of epistemic attitudes at all”
 - Instead irony as *self-creation* in response to contingency

“[W]e are brought up against the finality of our vocabularies as a present practical limit. The ironist's self-creating response to this is to effect transformation. [...] [E]xistential irony emerges as a feature of the intellectual that keeps her perpetually engaged in that process of change.”

Reinforcing Ramberg

- “Contingency is the friend of fallibilism but the sworn enemy of skepticism” (Williams 2003, 79)
- But what is there to be *fallible* (possibly in error) *about*?
- If congruent with fallibilism, the notion of **contingency** extremely weak:
 - Denial of “foundations” (*a priori* or essentialist)
 - Recognition of limitedness and finitude of our point of view
 - Implies we might also *get it right*

Strong contingency and irony

- **Strong contingency:** there is no getting it right
 - No notion of improvement, progress, discovery available
- Irony: (i) the recognition of *strong* contingency
- but (ii) *nevertheless* the engagement in self-creation and self-experimentation
 - Self-creation *without a point*
- Liberalism as enabling self-creation in strong contingency (but what of solidarity?)

Recap

- Rorty's irony as *doubt* problematic
- Contingency too weak if merely fallibilism
- Strong contingency: no getting it right
- Then irony not (negative) doubt or detachment but (positive) “pointless” self-creation
- Questions do remain: What is strong contingency? How does it differ from fallibilism? And is such irony possible?

Two notions of meliorism (1)

- (1) Our actions may improve the world
- James's *pluralism*: the world is not ready, we can make a difference
 - Sets against materialism (nothing we can do) and absolute idealism (all's ready)
 - Both latter rather side with the *moral sceptic* in denying meliorism, or the possibility of genuine improvement

Two notions of meliorism (2)

(2) The world may improve us

“[E]thical science is just like physical science, and instead of being deducible all at once from abstract principles, must simply bide its time, and be ready to revise its conclusions from day to day. The presumption of course, in both sciences, always is that the vulgarly accepted opinions are true, [...]” (James, MPML, 1891)

- Peirce: improving our habits; *pragmatism*

“A symbol is essentially a purpose, [...] a representation that seeks to make itself definite, or seeks to produce an interpretant more definite than itself” (EP 2:323, 1904)

Fate

- Meliorism (1) goes along with the notion of *hope*:
 - The anticipation of (the possibility) of an improvement as already conceived
- Meliorism (2) goes along with the notion of *fate*:
 - The direction, push, urgency, of reality, its influence and impact on us

“The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth [...] [Fate means merely that which is sure to come true, and can nohow be avoided.]” (Peirce, HTM, 1878)

Contingency and fate

- Strong contingency more than the denial of (*a priori* or essential) foundations, or just fallibilism
- It is the *denial of fate*: there is no direction or push that our views might (fallibly) align with
 - The ironist may be meliorist (1): improvement, progress by whatever our contingent standards
 - But the (strong) ironist cannot be meliorist (2)

The possibility of irony

- James: meliorism (2) must be denied by the skeptic, absolutist, materialist as well:
 - There is no point in *revising* one's view
- Will the Jamesian challenge recur for the ironist?
 - Will the ironist nevertheless find herself in the non-pluralist camp? Is there an incentive for self-creation or -experimentation?
 - Or the ironist is just a closet ethicist?

Irony, meliorism and solidarity

- *If* irony is possible, the practical difference between the ironist and the meliorist (2) may often amount to very little
 - Both may conform to common practice, but also experiment, attempt to revise
- But meliorism entails incentive for solidarity and cooperation (a “common fate”); irony doesn’t
 - Rorty: science as a model for solidarity

Conclusion, or, suggestions

1. Doubt is unsuitable and fallibilism too weak as interpretations of contingency
2. Two forms of meliorism: we/world improve
3. Strong contingency as the denial of *fate*
4. Strong irony as (1) appropriation of strong contingency combined with (2) self-creation
5. The possibility of (strong) irony hinges on whether meliorism is required for self-creation
6. Meliorism, not irony, entails solidarity