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# Rorty's Public-Private Distinction as a Pragmatic Tool

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on interpreting Rorty's defense of the public-private distinction. Traditionally, scholarship has been divided regarding how to interpret the distinction oscillating between 'strict-divide' and 'loose-divide' interpretations. The paper concludes that Rorty intended the loose interpretation and strives to explain how such an interpretation functions within his overall philosophical project.

## Keywords

Richard Rorty – public-private distinction – neo-pragmatism – liberalism – Democracy – virtue liberalism – social progress – postmodernism

## 1 Introduction

This paper focuses on Richard Rorty's espousal of the importance of the public-private distinction in liberal democracies, thereby emphatically emphasizing this distinction as a vehicle for promoting unity and liberty, as evidenced by his declaration in the introduction of *Irony, Contingency, and Solidarity*, "this book tries to show how things look if, we drop the demand for a theory which unifies the public and private, and are content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable" (Rorty 1989, xv). Essentially, for Rorty, the distinction amounts to the difference between *private vocabularies*, 'what you say in the

process of self creation – personal liberty’ and *public vocabularies*, ‘what you say to others while engaging with group concerns – social justice.’

Traditionally, scholarship interpreting the distinction revolved around two competing views – what I will call the ‘strict-divide’ interpretation and the ‘loose-divide’ interpretation. Scholars supporting the strict interpretation assert that Rorty’s public-private distinction is impermeable (Fraser 1990; McCarthy 1990; and Halton 1992). For instance Halton states, “[Rorty] inverts the Greek conceptions of *oikos* and *polis*, or private household and public realm, and asserts an unbridgeable disjunction between them” (Halton 1992, 346). Whereas, those favoring the loose interpretation argue that Rorty envisioned the public-private distinction as a porous divide, i.e., permitting the occasional encroachment and influence(s) of private vocabularies upon public discourse and *vice versa* (Fish 1999; Dellwing 2012; Curtis 2015; and Llanera 2016). As Dellwing states, “there are no wholesale constraints on what is private and what is public save what others say in conversation, and these conversations are games, played out in concrete situations” (Dellwing 2012, 74).

The strict interpreters argue that Rorty believed that the public-private distinction is a prescriptive ideal necessary for liberal democracy to flourish. “The way to achieve this liberal utopia, *i.e.*, a society in which ‘chances for fulfillment of idiosyncratic fantasies will be equalized’ is through the clear separation of the spheres of public and private life. This is the crux of Rorty’s conception of the liberal utopia” (Coombs 2013, 319). Conversely, loose interpreters view Rorty’s defense of the public-private distinction as a pragmatic conceptual tool designed to illustrate that in life we sometimes use vocabularies for different purposes and that at least, up to present, liberal democracies have been well served by recognizing that vocabularies can play these divergent roles.

Clearly both interpretations have their respective strengths and weaknesses. The strict interpretation offers a clear *prescriptive ideal*, which is nevertheless plainly *inconsistent* with Rorty’s neo-pragmatic philosophical project. While, the loose interpretation lacks *prescriptive specificity*; yet, it remains *consistent* with Rorty’s general philosophical position. Accordingly, in determining which interpretation Rorty intended (or ought to have intended) there are tangible intercessions or tradeoffs, which require careful conceptual consideration.

Ultimately, after a brief analysis of the positions, the paper hopes to definitively dismiss the strict interpretation as being wholly inconsistent with Rorty’s own views and overall philosophical project. However, the second half of the work will investigate the more difficult philosophical

challenge of explaining just how the loose interpretation can fulfill Rorty's prescriptive objective of prioritizing liberal democracy over philosophy.

Fortunately for our purposes, recent scholarship by Curtis (2015) and Llanera (2016) offer insightful analysis regarding functions that the permeable interpretation of the public-private distinction may play in Rorty's pragmatic liberal project. However, properly integrating the divide within Crutis' *liberal virtue ethics model* and Llanera's *theme of self-enlargement*, nevertheless, still pose conceptual difficulties that *this work* will examine.

In the pragmatic spirit, it is important to emphasize that the motivation for the current project is not purely theoretical, but stems from real-world concerns regarding the advance of anti-liberal ideologies (e.g., far-right, alt-right, neo-Nazis, etc.) within liberal democratic states.<sup>1</sup> The early 21<sup>st</sup> century has experienced a steady proliferation (and reappearance) of once defunct fringe elements percolating anti-liberal sentiments, which are inundating recent global socio-political public discourse(s). Thus, determining proper and effective frameworks for responding to these trends is a matter of grave import, harkening back to Santayana's famous pragmatic warning: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (Santayana 1905, 284).

In this light, I contend (as Rorty assuredly would have) that a useful method for facing our current challenges is to seriously engage with past luminaries and champions of liberalism, seeking-out inspiration, perspective, and guidance regarding how best to proceed. Consequently, *this work* endeavors to illuminate ways in which Rorty's public-private distinction might assist in meeting the challenges effecting the present. In support of this objective it is helpful to offer a succinct analysis of Rorty's philosophical project.

## 2 Summary of Rorty's Philosophical Project

Defending the priority of liberal democracy over philosophy can be seen as the central aspiration motivating Rorty's *oeuvre*. This point maybe difficult to recognize from a simple scan of Rorty's voluminous publications; as much of

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<sup>1</sup> According to Reuters since 2014 there has been a 20% increase in hate groups (defined as organizations or groups that demonize specific classes of people in order to marginalize, scapegoat, or oppress them) (Simpson 2018).

his work focuses on rather technical developments in epistemology, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of language in the context of 20<sup>th</sup> century analytic philosophy. Nevertheless, Rorty's political orientation should be unsurprising, since as a pragmatist the importance of ideas are compensated, expended, or cashed out in terms of their practical social consequences. As such, in the spirit of Rorty, I will attempt to condense millennia of philosophy (as he often did) in a few sentences in an attempt to reveal why he believed that liberal democracy must take priority over philosophy.

According to Rorty, (capital "P") Philosophy, at least since Plato, worked under the assumption that theory could lead us to *Truth* (transcendental non-contingent, ahistorical, universal facts). *Truth* once *discovered* would help us *successfully* (morally/expediently) navigate the world, i.e., distinguish reality from mere appearance. But to *find* universal answers, Philosophy needed to avoid contingency; meaning it must *represent* the *essential* nature of reality (the world out there) (Rorty 1979, 1989).

As science advanced in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, philosophy began to take a backseat. That is until, Descartes and more importantly Kant, reoriented philosophy along epistemological lines, i.e., shifting the ancient discussion of appearance versus reality to the modern Cartesian problematic conflict of subject versus object.<sup>2</sup> As Rorty explained, Kant instead of searching for *Truth* out there, focused on how each human mind actively *makes* the world. "Kant wanted to consign science to the realm of second-rate truth – truth about a phenomenal world" (1989, 4).

Yet even after the Cartesian mental-turn inward, the search for ahistorical *Truth* was not abandoned; Kant and his philosophical successors (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and other German idealists) still maintained that the mind had inherent faculties that Philosophy strove to determine. "They persisted in seeing mind, spirit, the depths of the human self, as having an intrinsic nature ... Higher truth, the truth about mind, the province of philosophy, was still a matter of discovery rather than creation" (4). Likewise, although the logical positivists (roughly the Vienna and Berlin Circles of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century) repudiated the metaphysical excesses of German idealism, they

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<sup>2</sup> The Cartesian philosophical revolution (i.e., the birth of Modern Philosophy) is famously captured in the *cogito* (i.e., I think therefore I am), in which Descartes carves an internal mental space that is supposedly entirely unassailable (i.e., metaphysically distinct) from external reality.

nevertheless maintained that through methodologically refining the criteria and logic of language (e.g., Schlick's verificationism 1926, Carnap's confirmationism 1936–1937, or Ayer's weak verificationism 1946) and carefully conducting empirical observation (i.e., science) that humanity could gain superior access and insight into understanding the *True* structure of Nature.

But according to Rorty, the Platonic-Kantian Philosophical quest for *Truth* came to a halt due to the groundbreaking insights of Quine and Sellars in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Rorty 1979). Since Kant, Philosophy had become comfortable working with two distinct foundations for *Truth* – analytic (things known to be true simply by their meaning) and synthetic (things known to be true by experiential relation with the world). Quine unmoored the analytic foundation by showing that nothing was *True* by virtue of meaning alone, since experiential-input(s) have the potential of forcing revision(s) to *any* of our belief(s) (Quine 1951). Subsequently, by proving that there is no justifiable causal link between sensory experiences and what we say; Sellars further disassembled *Truth's* synthetic foundation, dismantling it, so that, we recognize that we do not *know* certain things to be true simply by being in some sensory state (or “myth of the given”) (Sellars 1956). Thus, for Rorty, these and other *advances* (i.e., the philosophical works of Heidegger, Dewey, Wittgenstein, Kuhn, and Davidson, which undermined our confidence in ever accessing non-human authority) entirely discredited Philosophy's rationalist *search* for universal, ahistorical, foundational *Truth* (Rorty 1989).

Also, these philosophical trends and developments culminated in Rorty's exploring disquotational (e.g., Tarski's famous insight that the proposition, “Snow is white” is true if and only if snow is white) and quietist (i.e., later-Wittgensteinian view that if a concept lacks a practical role to play in a linguistic community, then it ought to be discarded to dispel confusion) conceptions of *truth*. Until ultimately, for pragmatic reasons, he settled on a cautionary use of the concept, in which there is little causal distinction between *truth* and *justification*. “We do not have any way to establish the truth of a belief ... except by reference to the justification we offer for thinking what we think. The philosophical distinction between justification and truth seems not to have practical consequences. That is why pragmatists think it is not worth pondering” (Rorty 2007, 44).

For this reason, Rorty desired to strip *truth* of its Platonic-Kantian baggage and reaffirm its practical everyday discursive usage. “[S]ince Plato the meaning(s) of normative terms like *good*, *just* and *true* have been problems only for philosophers. Everybody else knows how to use them and does not

need an explanation of what they mean" (45).

Rightly, Rorty recognized that this philosophical shift would have wide ranging consequences. Most troublingly for Rorty is the realization that the Enlightenment theorists (e.g., Locke, Diderot, Jefferson, Montesquieu, Voltaire and others) used the same discredited rationalist method(s), as *the* justification for liberal democracy (Rorty 1988). Accordingly, if as Rorty contends, the quest for Philosophical *Truth* has been debunked, then liberal democracy can no longer rely on such theoretical justification for its legitimacy.

Some theorists (e.g. Horkheimer and Adorno) worry that liberal democracy will be unable to survive the collapse of the Enlightenment legitimation project (Horkheimer 1947 and Adorno 1966). Nevertheless, Rorty's concludes that the loss of rational legitimation is not a problem; since, at present, we no longer need, nor should rely on, Philosophical *Truth* to justify liberal democracy. In fact, he argues that the loss of the quest for *Truth* is actually beneficial; in that embracing Peircean and Neurathian fallibilism (i.e., the doctrine that all of our beliefs are open to revision) safeguards liberal societies from threats of totalitarianism and authoritarianism.<sup>3</sup> As Putnam admits regarding the prospect of embracing Rorty's view of *truth*, "we will behave better if we become Rortians – we maybe more tolerant, less prone to fall for various varieties of religious intolerance and political totalitarianism" (Putnam 1990, 24).

### 3 The Problem: Defending Liberal Democracy without Truth

The problem is that if we accept (as Rorty recommends) the removal of both the empiricist constraints from perceptual experience (Sellars) and the analytic constraints about the relations of words (Quine), then inquiry is left with no limiting constraints beyond *talk*, "no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, the mind, or the language, but only those

<sup>3</sup> It is important to emphasize that pragmatists correctly recognize that during inquiry it is necessary to leave *some* background assumptions stable and unchallenged. Hence, pragmatists argue that the Cartesian project premised on universal and total epistemic doubt is misguided, since it relies on an impossible methodology centered on discarding *all* our beliefs *simultaneously*. Nevertheless, pragmatic fallibilism leaves open the possibility that *overtime* each and every one of our beliefs maybe scrutinized and revised as we continue to experience the world and identify novel topics of uncertainty.

retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers" (Rorty 1982, 165). To reiterate, for Rorty 'truth' becomes conversational acceptability, "what our peers will, *ceteris paribus*, let us get away with saying" (1979, 175).

However, such a conclusion means that there is no *final* 'fact of the matter' and that all 'truth' is *made* through ongoing conversations. Thus, what if future interlocutors reject tenants of liberal democracy? Succinctly, does Rorty by accepting the perspective of 'truth as justification' leave us potentially vulnerable to surrendering liberal democracy? Does he open the door for sacrificing exactly what he most wanted to defend?

As previously stated, Rorty famously maintains that our commitments to liberal democratic institution(s) precede philosophical concerns (1988). His initial defense of this view is rather hand-waving, as he simply relies on a historical parallel, which serve to explicate that liberalism was not abandoned after the post-Enlightenment defeat of theological justification, so there is no reason to assume it will be discarded after the loss of Philosophical justification (which he argues has already occurred) (1988).

Fortunately in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, he subsequently develops the argument further, maintaining that it is not theoretical justifications that legitimate(s) or maintains liberal democracy, but rather, "common vocabularies and common hopes ... [particularly] the hope that life will eventually be freer, less cruel, more leisured, richer in goods and experiences, not just for our descendants but for everybody's descendants" (1989, 86). Accordingly, Rorty assumes that for people like *us* (who have been acculturated in 'our' historical moment with similar social hopes) any interlocutor that articulates undemocratic and anti-liberal vocabulary(ies) will have little to no chance at conversational acceptability. "We heirs of the Enlightenment think of enemies of liberal democracy as 'mad' ... They are crazy because the limits of sanity are set by what we can take seriously" (1988, 266). Yet, global twenty-first century political realities (particularly among right-wing nationalistic neo-fascists) have surprisingly unleashed torrents of anti-liberal rhetoric aimed at limiting certain groups' aspirations for freedom, social inclusion, and democracy.

In short, Rorty accepts that we are left with no objective basis for justifying liberal democratic socio-political norms and institutions after abandoning Philosophical rationalism's quest for universal, ahistorical, objective *Truth*. As such, Rorty asks that we admit that our claims of moral, epistemic, and historical 'progress' that we have continually heralded as strengths and achievements of liberalism are not actually grounded in any foundationally independent *Truth*, but instead are dependent on contingent 'truth(s)' arising from our particular ways of life, i.e., we cannot step outside of our

present historical moment and use a meta-theoretical vocabulary to somehow judge our social practices and determine a prescribed universally right course of action. Thus, for Rorty accepting the primacy of liberal democracy over and above philosophy means that we first come to admire and appreciate certain socio-political traditions and only after already embracing them can philosophical 'justifications' occur.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, Rorty in moments of rhetorical flourish perchance overstates his case in claiming that liberal democratic institutions are self-perpetuating, edifying and have perhaps permanently solidified.<sup>5</sup> For instance, here are two of Rorty's bolder and often-criticized comments, in which he expresses his deep faith in the resiliency and triumph of liberal democratic norms and institutions. "I think that contemporary liberal society already contains the institutions for its own improvement ... My hunch is that western social and political thought may have had the last conceptual revolution it needs" (Rorty 1989, 5). Or as he stated in an interview with Zbigniew Stanczyk, "I don't think there will be any big intellectual revolutions from now on. The educated political classes of all countries are going to be thinking in the terms of the European Enlightenment [liberal democratic], and civilization is going to be Eurocentric" (1997).

However, quite troublingly is the fact that since Rorty's death (2007), we have witnessed a steady increase in anti-liberal activism (e.g., far-right, alt-right, neo-Nazis, etc.) within liberal democratic states, which directly challenge(s) Rorty's optimism that there will be no further conceptual revolutions or changes to our basic socio-political structure. These trends are deeply disconcerting in that they directly attack, defy, and repudiate Rorty's core liberal tenant that, "cruelty is the worst thing we do" (1989, xv).

Consequently, these recent shifts in our current geopolitical climate compel one to question the credibility and veracity of Rorty's brimming hopefulness and (over)confidence in assuredly assuming the stability of liberal democracy. Or at least these events require further explanation, illustrating why Rorty believes, "contemporary liberal society already contains the institutions for its own improvement [maintenance]" (1989, 5)? And importantly, they push us to consider how or if Rorty's project is able to combat these anti-liberal movements zealously bent on reinterpreting or

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<sup>4</sup> Rorty is espousing Hegel's famed dictum: "The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk" (Hegel, 1821).

<sup>5</sup> Or at worst achieved a sort of petrification.



ignoring foundational documents (e.g., constitutions and laws) and hallowed precepts (e.g., the right to vote, freedom of the press, an unfettered judiciary, the avoidance of foreign hegemony, norms of civility, etc.) that have historically anchored freedom, liberty, and democracy?

Wisely, Rorty recognized and portended these concerns: "Does this mean that we have to hold open the possibility that we might come to be Nazis by a process of rational persuasion? Yes" (1998, 54). Since the central aim of Rorty's overall project is to preserve the priority of liberal democracy over philosophy, one might be perplexed with his affirmative response, i.e., why does he confirm the possibility that liberals can be persuaded to embrace Nazi ideology?

But as has been demonstrated, the reason for Rorty's response lies in his belief that we have no recourse to objective *Truth* to refute Nazi ideology; instead we face a clash of vocabularies, in which the winner will be the most persuasive. Nevertheless, Rorty confidently wagers that liberally educated citizens are unlikely to be persuaded to embrace anti-liberal worldviews. His core reason for believing that liberalism will prevail in any "war of metaphors" stems from his understanding of the public-private distinction. Thus, to judge whether or not we find Rorty's confidence in liberalism justified, it is necessary to analyze precisely what the distinction entails within his overall philosophical project.

#### 4 Public-Private Distinction

The public-private distinction has been central to the liberal project from the beginning. Liberalism began historically in reaction to the rise of absolute monarchies in Europe (1610–1789). Absolutism is a governing arrangement in which a monarch rules freely, with no laws or legally organized opposition (Kimmel 1988). Thus, in the wake of the fear and discontent regarding the growing power of the state to unrestrictedly and unilaterally intrude upon peoples' lives; liberalism arose (during the Enlightenment) as an ideology designed to establish and protect various rights and freedoms by insisting on a zone of privacy shielding individuals from state interference, i.e., establishing a divide between public (state can interfere) and private (state cannot interfere) (Kimmel 1988).

Rorty adopted the public-private terminology that long predated him and used it in a related approach (still focused on carving out spaces to shelter individuals from outside interference; while concurrently protecting public discourse from anti-liberal and anti-democratic discourse); but in a broader

sense (unmooring the concept from the civil, political, and legal realm) as an expression of what he saw as the potential for opposition between private desires and public needs (Rorty 1988, 1989). Accordingly, he argues that private thought (moral – how to find meaning in ones' life) can conflict with participating in public dialogue on social issues (ethical – how to minimize cruelty).

Rorty maintained that Plato in the *Republic* had led philosophy astray, by attempting to conceptualize, synthesize, and fuse private and public objectives within one coherent theory (Rorty 1989).<sup>6</sup> Instead, he argues that we should be, “content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable” (1989, xv).

Rorty offers a crystalline analysis of the divide in Chapter Three (“The Contingency of Liberal Community”) of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. In the chapter, he expertly illustrates what he sees to be the central importance of the public-private distinction by comparing himself to Foucault (“an ironist is [one] who is unwilling to be a liberal”) and Habermas (“a liberal [is one] who is unwilling to be an ironist”) (61–68). Rorty explains that he simultaneously agrees with Foucault’s misgivings about applying liberalism (recognizing that cruelty is the worst thing we do) to private vocabularies and with Habermas’ misgivings regarding ironism (recognizing the contingency of our beliefs) entering public vocabularies (1989). His tactic for satisfying both aims is emphasizing the need to separate public-private vocabularies (1989).

Rorty is against incorporating Foucault’s ironism into public institutions, since he fears that it may undermine the liberal belief that cruelty is the worst thing we do. Thus, the solution for Rorty is that vocabularies of self-actualization and creation must remain private. “*Privatize* the Nietzschean-Sartrean-Foucauldian attempt at authenticity and purity, in order to prevent yourself from slipping into a political attitude which will lead you to think that there is some social goal more important than avoiding cruelty” (65).

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<sup>6</sup> In *The Republic*, Plato dialectically derides the concept of democracy by questioning the feasibility of any democratic régime’s ability to properly rule a state. His conclusions stand in stark opposition to Rorty’s unswerving preference for democracy over the rule of Plato’s experts (e.g., Philosopher Kings). Integral to the Plato’s view is that by permitting poorly educated non-elites to rule, democracy inexorably gravitates towards tyranny by unavoidably fostering unwise and unmerited despotic governments, which by their very nature are cruelly trapped under the whims of popular opinion and demagoguery stemming from their inability to properly consider and grasp the *Good*.

Whereas, Rorty criticizes Habermas' dream (that undistorted and domination-free discourse in the public-sphere can lead to foundational justifications and universally valid legitimation) as just the latest example of Philosophy's misguided quest for *Truth*. "The residual difference I have with Habermas is that his universalism makes him substitute such convergence for ahistorical grounding, whereas my insistence on the contingency of language makes me suspicious of the very idea of the 'universal validity' that such convergence is supposed to underwrite" (67).

As such, Rorty agrees with Habermas' assessment that ironism ought to be avoided in public discourse. However, Rorty is comfortable compartmentalizing vocabularies of self-creation to the private sphere, whereas Habermas is not. "For Habermas, however, this compartmentalization of the self, this division of one's final vocabulary into two independent parts, is itself objectionable. To him, such a compartmentalization looks like a concession to irrationalism" (68).

Essentially, Rorty believes that it is possible and beneficial to keep vocabularies for deliberation about public good(s), socio-political arrangements, and the diminishment of suffering, separate from the vocabularies developed in pursuit of personal fulfillment and self-realization. "There is no way to bring self-creation together with justice at the level of theory. The vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange" (xiv).

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that for Rorty the public-private distinction is prescriptive. "We *should* stop trying to combine self-creation and politics, especially if we are liberals" (120). But to grasp the normative import, we must further develop our understanding of the role that public-private distinction is supposed to play in preserving liberal democracy. Specifically, how is Rorty's distinction able to preclude private anti-liberal vocabularies (e.g., far-right, alt-right, and Nazi ideologies) from destroying the priority of liberal democracy over philosophy?

## 5 Strict Interpretation

An initial waive of scholarship captivated by Rorty's use of words such as, "forever incommensurable" and "necessarily" when describing the public-private distinction came to interpret the prescription as a strict division, in which these vocabularies should remain forever separate (Fraser 1990; McCarthy 1990; and Halton 1992). Promoting a "clear and sharp boundary"

between the two spheres of discourse is helpful in that it offers a straightforward framework for understanding how the distinction preserves the priority of liberal democracy over philosophy (Fraser 1990). “The main feature in liberal society, then, is to keep such revisions of one’s final [private] vocabulary from spilling over into what one wants to put into [public] action for other members of society” (Weaver 1996, 237).

Furthermore, defenders of the strict interpretation argue that it is astutely designed to be self-reinforcing; thereby, supposedly generating support for liberal democracy by demonstrating to those opposed to it that it provides them with the maximum chance of self-actualization. “The point of his [Rorty’s] distinction between the private and public ... is to create an increasingly attractive description of liberalism and its institutions, to demonstrate to those cynical about liberalism that it holds the greatest promise for their own self-creation” (Erez 2013, 198).

If the divide is optimally strict, then this is supposed to ensure the greatest level of private freedom of expression, in that the state will bar public vocabularies from entering into and impinging upon or restricting the sphere of private self-creation. Thus, the hope behind the strict interpretation is that these maximal levels of private freedom will engender the strongest public support for liberal democracy, even from potential (private) critics. “Liberal democracies perpetuate their own efficacy via the reflexive process of free encounters, giving rise to more free institutions and *vice versa*” (Coombs 2013, 319).

In theory the impermeability of the strict division enables the possibility of entirely barring certain speech from entering the public sphere and *vice versa*. Obviously, without a strict division it is possible that public discourse could seep in and curtail private expression and that private expression could enter public discourse and undermine liberal principles, norms, and institutions.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, an advantage of strict interpretation is that it offers a clearly defined mechanism (i.e., rigidly separating public discourse about social justice from being influenced by private metaphor creation) for preventing these worries. As such, the approach prescribes a straightforward method for achieving

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<sup>7</sup> The threat as we have seen in the twenty-first century, is that anti-liberal vocabularies embellished with jargon, colloquialism, pithy epithets, fuming tirades, and clichés have effectively reinforced and echoed aggrieved masses’ darkest fears and prejudices; thereby, diminishing and threatening long established liberal bulwarks of freedom and democracy.

Rorty's desired aim of prioritizing liberal democracy's supremacy over philosophy.

Thus, it is clear how the strict interpretation of the public-private distinction is supposed to play a central role in Rorty's defense of liberal democracy; in that it functions to exclude anti-liberal discourse from the public sphere (e.g., censor Nazi sympathizers), while promoting maximum private self-expression (e.g., allow neo-Nazis to express themselves freely at home). But the problem with the strict interpretation is that it is untenable both empirically and from within Rorty's neo-pragmatic framework.

The view requires that private vocabularies can form independently from preexisting public vocabularies and *vice versa*. However, for this to be achievable requires an "atomistic" conception of the self, one that maintains that individuals are capable of autonomously shaping themselves free from outside constraints (Taylor 1985). Since, without an atomistic metaphysical understanding of the self, in which individuals can shape themselves in a "top-down" intentional fashion, private self-creation could never arise independent of public-influences; thus, making the strict interpretation impossible.

Unfortunately for the strict interpretation, Rorty expressly denies an atomistic conception of the self and offers his own account that, "insists that socialization, and thus historical circumstance, goes all the way down" in direct opposition to atomism (Rorty 1989, xiii). Essentially, Rorty embraces a Deweyan model of the self in which the individual is a social product of a community and communities constitute the dynamic interaction of socially constructed individuals with each other and their environment (Rorty 1982, 1989).

In opposition to atomism's "top-down" intentional model of the self (i.e., that individuals can will to alter the world independent of outside influences), we can summarize Dewey's view in *Experience and Nature*, which emphasizes the constant feedback between the individual's will and the world, (Dewey 1925). According to the Deweyan model, the environment (including other actors) occasionally presents difficulties that disrupt the agent's ordinary goings-on within their environment. When the normal everyday course of events is disrupted, it pushes the agent towards intentional action to deal with said challenge(s). These coping actions alter the state of the environment, thus setting the stage for potential difficulties and so the cycle begins anew. This depiction of the self is a two-way street, in which the state of the environment shapes the agent's intentions and actions; and the agent's intentions and actions shape the state of the environment.

As such, atomism fails the Deweyan model because its purely "top-down"

understanding of private intentions does not recognize the vital and dynamic role community influences play in intention formation. Consequently, Rorty by accepting a Deweyan and historically contingent understanding of the self, in which private vocabularies inevitably influence public vocabularies and public vocabularies inevitably influence private vocabularies, forecloses the prospect of embracing a strict interpretation of the public-private distinction.

Eventually, Rorty recognized the philosophical weakness of the strict interpretation of the public-private distinction and went so far as to explicitly refute it in interviews, “I don’t think private beliefs can be fenced off [from the public sphere]; they leak through so to speak, and influence the way one behaves toward other people ... I don’t think the two are synthesizable; but that doesn’t mean that the one doesn’t eventually interact with the other” (Rorty 2006, 50.). As he states in his autobiography, “[I never made] the absurd claim that politics and art, the pursuit of justice and the pursuit of idiosyncratic bliss, have, or should have no effects upon one another” (2007, 20). As such, we have conclusive confirmation that he intended the loose interpretation of the public-private distinction.

## 6 Loose Interpretation

The loose interpretation of the public-private distinction is designed to illustrate that in life we sometimes use vocabularies for different purposes. The loose interpretation like the strict interpretation holds that we should not expect absolute coherence between our vocabularies. But unlike the strict interpretation, it also illuminates what we should expect, in that ‘what we say in public’ is responsive and influenced by ‘what we say in private’ – and *vice versa*. While this seems descriptively accurate, can the loose interpretation play the prescriptive role of preserving liberal democracy over philosophy as Rorty has articulated?

Prescriptively, the flexible interpretation of the distinction stipulates that we ought to be comfortable with ourselves and others switching between incompatible vocabularies in different contexts. For instance, a goal of the distinction is to liberate us from feeling that something is wrong, if our private idiosyncratic thoughts occasionally conflict with our public credos. As Rorty states, “we are good citizens of a modern, pluralistic, democratic society precisely because we do not try to make all the parts of our lives fit together—and, in particular, because we do not insist that our fellow-citizens share our own symbols of ultimate concern, our own sense of the

significance of our own lives" (1997, 28).

But is this interpretation adequate for maintaining the priority of liberal democracy to philosophy? Since, unlike the strict interpretation, with its ideal principle of complete separation between public and private vocabularies, the loose interpretation seems unable to specify a target demarcation that can orient, guide, or ensure the priority of liberal democracy over philosophy.

In fact per the tenants of the loose interpretation any demarcation between the two spheres seems suspect, as private vocabularies can never arise independent of public discourse; but also, that public discursive ideals (including the priority of democracy's preeminence over philosophy) can never be walled off from the influence of ever evolving private vocabularies. Thus, one may worry that the loose interpretation seems wholly unable to provide an ideal target end-state, or principle of demarcation that can assist the Rortian project in combating anti-liberal tendencies.

However, it is important to emphasize that such concerns (i.e., the loose interpretations inability to offer an ideal target end-state, or principle of demarcation) are antithetical to Rorty's pragmatic project. Since Rorty, unlike other theorists (e.g., Rawls) does not demand ideal principle(s) or defined end-state(s) to guide social progress.<sup>8</sup> In fact Rorty's pragmatism is strongly opposed to *ideal-first* methodologies and instead favors *in media res* critiques that strive to orient policy discussions from where we currently stand. He is more interested in "continuing the conversation" and becoming comfortable letting it flow as the interlocutors see fit, than in theorizing final and ultimate solutions (1979, 394).

For Rorty, utopian principles are nothing more than useful rules of thumb that help guide social critique and commentary. As such, these principles should not be viewed as universal, necessary, ahistorical *Truths*; but instead ought to be recognized as contingent discursive artifacts, which are constantly (re)interpreted, (re)employed, and (re)modified by actors in particular circumstances. "The only way we can criticize current social rules is by reference to utopian notions which proceed by taking elements [contingently embraced] in the tradition and showing how unfulfilled they

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<sup>8</sup> Sen illustrates further difficulties with *ideal-first* theorizing aimed at determining a target end-state: (1) such approaches do not provide guidance regarding the best route for achieving the target; (2) they are unable to balance conflicting ideals and principles, and (3) they fail to consider all that might be learned along the journey (Sen 2009).

are” (Rorty 2006, 25).

In fact, the view that one must locate ideal principles prior to political engagement is antithetical to Rorty’s paramount pragmatic aim of prioritizing liberal democracy over philosophy. In that, unwavering pursuit of ideal target end-states are *prima facie* cases of prioritizing philosophical principles over the value of liberal democratic practices themselves. As Rorty eloquently explains: “Asking for pragmatism’s blueprint of the future [an ideal target end-state] is like asking Whitman to sketch what lies at the end of that illimitable democratic vista. The vista, not the endpoint, is what matters” (1999, 28).

Accordingly, Rorty’s main problem with *ideal-first* theorizing is that it clings to the mistaken Platonic-premise that socio-political institutions, norms, and policy decisions receive legitimation from their correspondence to philosophically determined ideals, principles, and end-states. Instead, Rorty pushes us to accept that social progress entails *coping* with present conditions, instead of trying to *copy* ideal or fundamental principle(s) or achieve a predetermined universal end-state.

Conclusively, *ideal first* methodologies are in direct opposition to Rorty’s project, which consistently emphasizes that philosophy should accept that ‘progress’ is always contingent (arising within a particular historic moment). Consequently, per Rorty’s pragmatic perspective it is fine that the loose interpretation of the public-private distinction eschews ideal target end-states and final principles of demarcation.

Nevertheless, accepting that all parts of our public vocabulary are open for revision may sound disconcerting for liberals, since such a conclusion entails that *any* traditional tenant of liberal democracy (including the public-private distinction itself) could be overturned. Moreover, upon realizing this one might be perplexed regarding what exactly remains of the public-private distinction under the loose interpretation? Additionally, one might wonder how such a pervasive interpretation is able to assist the Rortian project in defending liberal democracy from anti-liberal tendencies? These questions will be the topic of exploration for the remainder of the work.

## 7 Loose Interpretation and Promoting Liberal Virtue Ethics

As previously stated, the loose interpretation mandates that any firm demarcation separating the public and private sphere is spurious. Thus, for a permeable distinction to have substantive purpose the “divide” must aim to support dual dimensions of a coherent project. To illustrate how such an



approach could potentially work we will explore Curtis' *liberal virtue ethics* and Llanera's *theme of self-enlargement*, both of which offer insightful recommendations for coherently integrating the loose interpretation of the distinction within Rorty's liberal democratic project.

In *Defending Rorty*, Curtis explicitly recognizes that Rorty's pragmatic project necessitates the loose interpretation of the public-private distinction. Since, Rorty as a pragmatist is unable to philosophically justify a firm division, "any activity or practice can potentially become a matter of public justice" (Curtis 2015, 101). According to Curtis, Rorty envisions the method of delineation as an ongoing democratic, "political processes in the public sphere thus establishing the state-enforced framework of law and rights that sets the boundaries on the activities that take place in the private sphere" (101).

However, Curtis argues that Rorty's interpretation is richer than purely procedural accounts (e.g., the approach sketched above, which interprets the divide strictly as a democratically (re)negotiated shield that places the burden of proof on those who wish to ban, outlaw, or prohibit an activity to demonstrate that the practice violates rights or causes unjustified cruelty) in that it includes additional substantive commitments. Curtis' interpretation stems from his overarching thesis that Rorty is a *virtue liberal* –i.e., he endorses the view that the liberal project requires a commitment to a way of life. As Curtis states:

Virtue liberalism insists that we understand liberal democracy to be much more than merely the deliberative political activity that takes place in the ‘public sphere.’ It is more than an arrangement of democratic institutions combined with a constitutional framework of laws protecting a set of individual rights. It is more than a theory of justice or a societal ‘overlapping consensus’ on a (merely) political morality of equality and freedom. These concepts can be useful for our attempts to describe and justify liberal democracy, but they are, as it were, only the tip of the iceberg. (7)<sup>9</sup>

Throughout his work, Curtis consistently emphasizes the substantive nature of virtue liberalism. As he states, “virtue liberalism emphasizes that it must always deeply shape ethical life” (113). Thus, such a view mandates that Rorty’s interpretation of the public-private distinction as a properly functioning liberal institution, must play a comprehensible role in promoting, developing, and maintaining liberal values, sentiments, and practices. “He does not, however, think that liberal practices and procedures must be ethically ‘minimalist,’ as *modus vivendi* and political liberals do; to the contrary, he them takes to be ‘thick’ and shot through with ethical content” (23). Essentially, Curtis is claiming that Rorty’s public-private distinction coherently inculcates liberal virtues.

However, Curtis’s account leaves rather vague the ethical content the divide strives to promote; fortunately, Rorty provides a general sense when he states, “tolerance, respect for the opinions of those around one, willingness to listen, reliance on persuasion rather than force, there are the virtues which members of a civilized society *must* possess if the society is to endure” (Rorty 1991, 37). Accordingly, from a virtue liberal perspective the preservation, protection, and flourishing of liberal society benefits from carving public and private spheres (including the impact of the carving process itself) that promote autonomy, toleration (to some degree), and law-abidingness.

Nevertheless, Curtis never develops mechanism(s), practice(s), or process(es) explaining precisely how the distinction is supposed to foster

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<sup>9</sup> As a point of clarification, I will not take it upon myself to adjudicate Curtis’ thesis that Rorty is a virtue liberal (while I do find the view compelling). Instead, the scope of the analysis will be limited to examining Curtis’ interpretation of Rorty’s virtue liberal conception of the public-private distinction on its own terms.

liberal virtues. But we can draw rough conclusions from the procedural account that he sketches: (1) the act of considering where to draw the line between liberties one desires for oneself and restrictions one can legitimately require of others, exemplifies a complex autonomous activity *vis-à-vis* the limits and value of autonomy itself; (2) the process of democratically (re)negotiating the divide encourages toleration of differing perspectives, and (3) constraining personal behavior within the specified boundaries and pursuing legal means to change said boundaries promotes rule-following and respect for the law.

Thus, Curtis offers a framework for understanding Rorty's public-private distinction as a vehicle advancing dual dimensions of a coherent virtue liberal project aimed at inculcating and expanding acceptance of liberal ethical norms. "Rorty assumes that most non-radical Leftists would accept his broad outline of the just society ...[that] Rorty hopes will expand to encompass all citizens (Curtis 2015, 143).

Consequently, the strength of Curtis' virtue liberal interpretations of the loose distinction is that it allows Rorty to access robust, coherent, and substantive liberal ethical norms to confront anti-liberal challenges in both the public and private sphere without needing the fraught metaphysical baggage of the strict interpretation. As Curtis states the end goal of the project, "result[s] in fewer and fewer Phelpses [Reverend of Westboro Baptist Church] and Butlers [Founder of the Aryan Nation]" (107).

But one might worry that if the goal of virtue liberalism is to inculcate liberal virtues, then the success of the project may paradoxically diminish the role of the public-private distinction in accessing, generating, and accruing liberal social benefits. The issue arises because the triumph of virtue liberalism entails communities with shared liberal values – meaning there will be fewer competing conceptions of the good and greater alignment between public and private aspirations. As such, there will be less need to adjudicate the terms of the divide, which in turn will paradoxically reduce occasions to practice and internalize liberal virtues, i.e., tolerance, empathy, equality, sympathy, choice, access, justice, peace and obeying public reason (since the virtue of law abidingness derives from situations in which an actor desires to violate the rule, but intentionally abstains because of a commitment to rule following).

Nevertheless, such a concern is overstated. Since, even in the most liberal of communities (where citizens have moved closer and closer in their overall normative conviction), there will nonetheless, be burdens of judgment (reasonable disagreements) offering room for reevaluation, e.g., in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century there was already general acceptance that sexual violence and

rape were impermissible, but gradually through heroic epistemic and political efforts feminists were able to expand consensus to prohibit sexual harassment, sexual discrimination, and other forms of gender injustice. Hence, a virtue liberal interpretation endeavors to walk the thin line between libertarian (purely procedural) accounts that lack substantive content and communitarian accounts that aim to *wholly* collapse and eliminate the public-private divide.

Accordingly, to forestall communitarian erasure of the divide requires that inculcating liberal virtues must be an ongoing process in which (re)negotiating the boundaries of the public and private spheres ceaselessly functions to bring to light hermeneutically novel and previously unacknowledged cruelties. Thus, with the aim of gaining a better understanding of how this process works, we will explore Llanera, “Redeeming Rorty’s Private-Public Distinction” to grasp the dynamic role of the distinction in promoting what she considers the core liberal virtue – *self-enlargement* (Llanera 2016).

## 8 Public-Private Distinction and the Liberal Virtue of Self-enlargement

Llanera rightly recognizes that strictly and statically dividing the public and private spheres is antithetical to Rorty’s project. “It is thus incoherent for Rorty to valorize the divide between the private and the public, particularly when he admits that their interaction is critical for human development” (Llanera 2016, 326). Thus, she seeks to ease the tension within Rorty’s public-private distinction by demonstrating that collective ends of increasing solidarity and individual ends of self-creation share a common feature – what she calls “self-enlargement” (Llanera 2016).

Self-enlargement for Llanera constitutes the remedy for “egotism,” which she describes, “as the chief obstacle to meeting the private and public ambitions of Rorty’s liberal utopia” (330). Llanera defines ‘egotists’ as, “individuals whose final vocabularies are resistant to change” (328). Thus, self-enlargement entails exposing oneself to various vocabularies and experiences to discover the contingency of one’s own perspective, i.e., *lose* oneself to open the door to freely (*re*)create oneself (Llanera 2016).

Accordingly, Llanera recognizes that projects of self-enlargement addressing individual and social egotism *result from* and are *achieved by* private self-creation and expanding public solidarity. “While self-creation and solidarity may substantially differ in motivation, what can be considered

their enemy (egotism) and the method of redemption (self-enlargement) are akin in character" (334–334). As such, she argues that we can redeem Rorty's distinction by demonstrating that public and private ends are reconcilable and mutually reaffirmed and reinforced. "While this interpretation does not amalgamate the ends of self-creation and solidarity, it proposes that there are points of compatibility or even a possible reconciliation between private and public objectives if viewed through the lens of self-enlargement" (334).

There is much to be gained by accepting that projects of self-enlargement synthesize the disparate aims of self-creation and social-solidarity in Rorty's liberal state. For one, such an interpretation eloquently explains how Rorty struck an astonishing balance between private self-creation (ironic doubt) and public solidarity (social hope) by recognizing that each pragmatic aim supports and reinforces the other.

Insightfully, Llanera emphasizes various roles that Rorty's public-private distinctions performs in furthering self-enlargement through self-creation and social solidarity: "In short, my proposal not only supports the idea that self-creation and solidarity tolerate the need for each other in a liberal society; more so, it strengthens the argument that these values can justify and stimulate each other's existence in human life while remaining loyal to Rorty's staunchest liberal views" (336).

Thus, we will proceed in two distinct directions demonstrating: (1) how social solidarity supports and strengthens self-creation and (2) how self-creation supports and strengthens social solidarity. Ultimately, the goal is to show that the public-private distinction derives its pragmatic justification from *supporting* self-creation and social solidarity *required* for self-enlargement.

The first prong demonstrates ways in which striving for social solidarity furthers private self-expression. Basically, the link bridging the two aims is the realization that access to a wide range of cultural tools (via enlarging the public sphere for the sake of inclusive social solidarity) greatly benefits projects of autonomous self-construction. "The self-creator takes this cosmopolitan, interdisciplinary route in order to be acquainted with as many human vocabularies, as many forms of life, and as many ideas as possible to use as tools for constructing an idiosyncratic self-image" (332).

Strengthening, widening, enriching, and developing the public sphere to promote solidarity *also* affords self-creators greater opportunity to examine and understand the contingency of their own perspective. Basically, the more books, newspapers, poems, paintings, sculptors, films, plays, songs, museums, speeches, and discussions are permitted in the public sphere the greater the opportunity for understanding others as well as oneself is echoed

and amplified. Thus, public exposure to novel ideas and inclusion of diverse voices for the sake of increased social solidarity concurrently expands imaginative horizons required for escaping egoistic self-conceptions by empathetically revealing a world of “Others.”

Lastly, actors pursuing social solidarity projects may come to *find* themselves through the pride and loyalty experienced in working towards a common goal. Often individuals come to understand themselves by contributing and connecting with joint social ventures larger than themselves (i.e., institutions and practices that will endure beyond their lifespan). Simply, self-creation can occur on the road to social solidarity.

Concurrently, the second prong illustrates ways in which private projects of self-creation further social solidarity. Broadly, bridging the two aims in this direction, involves demonstrating ways wherein attempts at private self-creation generate ever newer and more empathetic/sympathetic vocabularies capable of awakening awareness and amplifying social-sensitivity against unexpressed forms of pain, suffering, intolerance, and cruelty.

In oppressive societies (all societies up to present have had histories of oppression even the most tolerant, respectful, and equalitarian liberal democracies), this process plays a vital role in maximizing private-expression and social solidarity, in that individuals from subordinated groups often struggle, strive, and succeed in self-expressive (re)creation by overcoming the imposed norms of the privileged, e.g., the ‘male-identified woman,’ the ‘white man’s Negro,’ etc. In such cases, self-creation is intimately tied up with the critical scrutiny and reform/rejection of the dominant/traditional concepts from the public sphere.

Thus, at least in these instances, private self-expression entails revising public vocabularies that explicitly or implicitly serve the interests of socially dominant groups. For instance, the long history in the black civil rights movement, the women’s movement, the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) movement, etc. centered around purging or revamping long-standing inherited public conceptual frameworks that legitimize or condone inherent racism, sexism, or bigotry instead of helping to forge or further greater social solidarity.

Accordingly, under conditions of social oppression, self-creation of the historically marginalized and subordinated will often involve a rethinking and rewriting public discourses that diminish them, so that their authentic sense of self and identity (e.g., the “New Negro” of the 1920s’ Harlem Renaissance, the 1960s’ feminist contextualization of the term: “liberated woman,” or the ongoing ascendancy of the historic term “Latino” over the US-

government sanctioned term: "Hispanic," etc.) can emerge. As such, private self-enlargement in many instances necessitates critical engagement with public modes of disrespect in the hope that open and free exchange of ideas will alter the public vocabulary and engender ever-greater social solidarity (e.g., the works of W.E.B. Du Bois, Harper Lee, Maya Angelou, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Sojourner Truth, Alice Walker, Chinue Achebe, Isabel Allende, Toni Morrison, Sylvia Plath, Langston Hughes, Mary Wollstonecraft, just to name a few).

Accordingly, self-creation is often sparked, developed, and achieved during struggles to gain equal access to the public sphere and *vice versa*. In these cases, distinguishing self-creative motivations from collective pursuits of social solidarity is impossible as the two aims coalesce.

Consequently, we are able to see how the public-private distinction by protecting individual's liberty to articulate novel cruelty(ies) not yet recognized or expressed in public terms can further social solidarity. "Reweaving our vocabulary of moral deliberation in order to accommodate new beliefs (e.g., that women and blacks are capable of more than white males had thought, that property is not sacred, that sexual matters are of merely private concern)" (Rorty 1989, 196).

Moreover, if Rorty is right and we occasionally care deeply about the public institutions and practices we engage in (which seems uncontroversial), then it is reasonable that "poets" will use their private vocabularies in support of the social attachments, institutions, and principles they find crucial to their sense of wellbeing and self-respect. Clearly, these private displays of support have the potential to impact the "poet's" social environment (including public discourse).

The above analysis demonstrates various ways in which Rorty's public-private distinction coherently advances self-enlargement through self-creation and social solidarity. The strength of Llanera's redemption of the distinction is her recognition that mutual reinforcement of self-creation and social solidarity breakdown if self-enlargement proceeds in anti-liberal fashion (i.e., projects that pit self-creation and social solidarity against each other).

As such, Llanera argues we ought to jettison interpretations of Rorty's distinction attempting to demarcate a firm divide between the two spheres and instead emphasize that promoting liberal democracy and personal freedom are reconcilable and coevolving projects of self-enlargement without fusing the pursuits. "The role of the private-public distinction would not be about sorting out to which sphere a project belongs. Its primary function would be to remind us of the limits of these projects" (Llanera 2016,

336).

But Llanera's view is limited in that it does not offer a prospective method for evaluating whether or not a particular public-private policy division will promote both aims; instead it is limited to post-partition critiques. Thus, in the concluding section, I will attempt to offer an additional conceptual scaffolding to guide our everyday attempts at (re)negotiating, (re)interpreting, and (re)evaluating features of the division.

## 9 Conclusion

The first question that we ought to consider when analyzing the liberal benefits of a proposed or existing public-private policy division is whether or not at an intrapersonal level it makes us feel liberated? The distinction is designed to increase our psycho-sociologically comfort by freeing us from feeling that something is wrong, if our private idiosyncratic thoughts occasionally conflict with our public credos.

Thus, the distinction ought to anticipate and tolerate the possibility that our personal desires may conflict with social norms and expectations, offer us reassurance that we are free to navigate our favored life-plans, and are justified in crafting our own moral attitudes; even if these efforts are occasionally at odds with prevailing social convention(s) – that is so long as we realize and accept that while engaging with others, we must avoid restricting their freedom to do the same. Simply, if the division fosters a sense of shame or feels coerced, then that is troubling and ought to give pause for further reflection.

Secondly, at an interpersonal level does the existing or proposed policy distinction remind, reinforce, and strengthen our understanding and commitment to the fact that in life there are various forms of communication. For instance, does the distinction's conception of 'private communication' admit the possibility that we can 'agree to disagree' (i.e., we do not have to accept other's vocabularies and norms), while emphasizing that in the public sphere standards of communication are different (i.e., we must accept certain conversational norms, conventions, and vocabularies)?

Normally, during private communication, we can bar others from entering the conversation and disregard their input; whereas, public conversation implies engagement with *others* to further a *common purpose*. Accordingly, liberal communicative virtues of tolerance, charity, respect, and inclusivity are of paramount importance in public discussions, but unnecessary in private.



As Price states public communication entails a norm of 'communal warranted assertability,' i.e., "the sense of engagement in common purpose that distinguishes assertoric dialogue from a mere roll call of individual opinions" (Price 2003,173). As such, the existing or proposed policy ought to accept and emphasize that public conversation(s) are governed by the norm of communal warranted assertability, while private communication(s) can occur unrestrained by such (or any) convention(s).

One benefit of understanding that the norm of communal warranted assertability is absent from private self-creation, is that it helps explain instances in which, an individual recognizes that a notion seems fully justified in their personal life, but nevertheless they believe that it should not be imposed upon others, i.e., a belief maybe defensible in one sense, but not the other. The upshot of recognizing the gap between standards of personal and communal notions is the potential to generate interpersonal respect between those who disagree.

Obviously, a functioning distinction mandates that there be a designation between public-private (i.e., what and when the norm of communal warranted assertability govern), but where the line is drawn is an open question. The public-private distinction functions as tool for experimenting regarding how the balance should be struck; accepting the impossibility of determining *a priori* how much discursive autonomy ought to be sacrificed to preserve communicative harmony. Accordingly, the current or existing proposal ought to capture that there is no forgone conclusion confirmed by science or metaphysics dictating when the norm comes into play and that instead common linguistic practice and social life will continuously (re)negotiate the divide.

Nonetheless, the divide ought to temper and assuage the threat that we will stop feeling bound by the norm of communal warranted assertability. Thus, at an interpersonal level the public-private distinction should conceptually remind us that we engage in divergent modes of communication; and therefore, an important conversational virtue that the divide ought to promote is assisting interlocutors to consistently consider and accurately determine what type of linguistic situation they are in.

Lastly, we ought to examine if the existing or proposed public-private policy partition serves as a metric for evaluating liberal democratic institutions? The distinction should aim to calibrate institutional success as achieving maximum personal liberty and minimum social suffering. However, it is important to reemphasize that *this* articulation of success only applies to our current localized historical moment; it does not represent a permanent philosophical *Truth*.

A benefit of fostering social recognition and mindfulness regarding the contingency of norms of 'success' and 'progress' stems from the fact that social policy guided by particular values maybe effective in resolving certain issues, while concurrently generating new and unforeseen difficulties (e.g., economic growth causing unintended environmental harm). Thus, a vital element for long-term societal wellbeing and flourishing involves buttressing communities' ability to adapt, update, augment, and alter their socio-cultural practices, institutions, norms, and values when confronted with novel harm(s) emanating from previously cherished tradition(s).

Accordingly, citizens with a healthy and robust sense of contingency are best able to recognize that their norms, values, traditions, and cultural practices arose out of particular historical contexts; which in turn, hopefully allows them to appreciate that if circumstances radically change, then novel responses maybe required. Simply, acknowledging contingency facilitates greater socio-cultural fluidity and adaptability necessary for meeting the challenges of an ever-evolving world. Consequently, it is important to ask, does the proposed policy further the aim of fostering communal recognition that current institutions and standards maybe 'wrong' in accordance with the standards and institutions of other communities (both temporally and geographically)?

In closing, if interlocutors answered affirmatively to the above questions while in the process of (re)considering proposed or existing element(s) or interpretation(s) of the public-private distinction, then there is strong indication that the proposal will further liberal aims and successfully serve as a bulwark against anti-liberal perspectives. Essentially, the work has attempted to demonstrate that the distinction functions primarily as a forward-looking pragmatic tool designed to coherently guide social progress in the direction of individual autonomy, social connectedness, and the promotion of liberal values and virtues. Satisfyingly, presenting the public-private distinction in this light fits seamlessly within Rorty's overall philosophical project.

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