

# Liberal Ironism in Postmodern Philosophy: Richard Rorty's Subversive Pragmatism

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**Abstract-** *This paper explores Richard Rorty's concept of liberal ironism as a central thread in postmodern philosophy and its implications for ethics, politics, and education. Rooted in a rejection of metaphysical foundations, Rorty's subversive pragmatism promotes a democratic ethos grounded in contingency, solidarity, and imaginative redescription. The liberal ironist is one who doubts the universality of their own beliefs yet remains committed to liberal values such as freedom, justice, and the minimization of cruelty. Each section of the paper addresses a key dimension of this idea—from the death of metaphysics to the coexistence of public hope and private irony. Drawing on Rorty's major works (Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity; Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature; Achieving Our Country), as well as contemporary scholarship, the analysis demonstrates how Rorty redefines selfhood, community, and civic responsibility in non-foundational terms. In the context of post-truth politics and populism, Rorty's liberal ironism offers a timely response: not through rigid doctrines, but through empathy, narrative, and solidarity. The paper concludes that liberal ironism, while often misunderstood as relativism, is a morally serious and politically hopeful response to the pluralistic conditions of modern democratic life.*

**Index Terms-** *Liberal Ironism, Richard Rorty, Postmodern Philosophy, Solidarity, Subversive Pragmatism*

contingency of their most central beliefs, including moral commitments, yet remains committed to liberal ideals such as justice, freedom, and the minimization of cruelty. This dual orientation—deep epistemological doubt coupled with strong political commitment—is what Rorty frames as “subversive pragmatism.”

The liberal ironist is postmodern in rejecting metaphysical justifications for truth or morality. As Rorty writes, “a liberal society is one which is content to call ‘true’ whatever the upshot of such free and open encounters turns out to be” (Rorty, 1989, p. 51). In this sense, the ironist is subversive: not because she undermines democratic values, but because she rejects the need to ground them in universal reason or natural rights.

Rorty's formulation has generated substantial commentary. Bacon (2017) describes liberal ironism as a strategy of “normative restraint,” allowing democratic pluralism to flourish without recourse to dogma. Similarly, Foley (2008) suggests that Rorty's vision “relies on literary imagination” rather than philosophical systems to sustain moral progress. Thus, liberal ironism opens a space where solidarity is achieved not through foundational truths but through shared narratives and evolving vocabularies. In this way, Rorty's subversive pragmatism becomes a distinctive response to both modernist rationalism and postmodern nihilism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Mapping the Terrain of Liberal Ironism:

Richard Rorty's notion of liberal Ironism sits at the confluence of postmodern skepticism and pragmatic liberalism. Introduced in his seminal work *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), the term refers to a type of individual who recognizes the

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on Richard Rorty's liberal ironism has emphasized its unique position in postmodern philosophy, blending pragmatism with anti-foundational ethics. Rorty's rejection of objective truth and metaphysical certainty has drawn comparisons with Nietzsche, Derrida, and Dewey. In

Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (1989), Rorty proposes a model of the ironist who is skeptical of their own final vocabulary yet remains politically committed to liberal democracy. Bacon (2017) interprets this as a strategy of normative restraint, while Shusterman (1994) links it to Deweyan pragmatism. Forstenzer (2018) applies Rorty's thought to post-truth politics, viewing it as a response to populism and epistemic cynicism. Critics like Bragues (2006) question whether Rorty's position can support political action without objective justification. Others, such as Hung (2007) and Kwak (2004), explore its implications for civic education. While the literature captures both the promise and limitations of Rorty's ideas, few studies have comprehensively analyzed how liberal ironism functions across personal identity, political theory, and public discourse in today's sociopolitical context.

### III. RESEARCH GAP

Despite existing scholarship on Rorty's liberal ironism, there is a lack of integrated analysis connecting its ethical, educational, and political dimensions—especially in light of rising post-truth populism. This study fills that gap by examining liberal ironism as a unified framework for civic life in a pluralistic society.

### IV. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant for understanding how liberal values can endure in an era marked by skepticism, relativism, and populist backlash. Rorty's liberal ironism offers a unique moral and political response that avoids dogma while promoting empathy and solidarity. By analyzing Rorty's key texts alongside contemporary scholarship, the paper shows how irony and democratic hope can work together. It also offers insights into how civic education, public discourse, and political action can remain meaningful without relying on absolute truths. This contributes to both philosophical debates and practical conversations on democratic resilience in the 21st century.

### V. OBJECTIVES

This study aims to critically examine Richard Rorty's concept of liberal ironism, explore its implications for ethics, politics, and civic education, and evaluate its relevance in the context of post-truth and populist challenges. It seeks to present liberal ironism as a coherent and applicable philosophical strategy for pluralist societies.

### VI. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in textual analysis. It involves close reading of Richard Rorty's primary texts—*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, and *Achieving Our Country*—to extract key arguments. These are contextualized and critically evaluated using secondary literature published up to 2021. The study also incorporates thematic content analysis of scholarly commentaries to trace evolving interpretations. Emphasis is placed on triangulating Rorty's philosophical claims with current sociopolitical contexts, particularly post-truth discourse and democratic theory. The analysis avoids metaphysical assumptions and remains consistent with Rorty's anti-foundational pragmatism.

#### 2. Postmodernism and the Death of Metaphysics :

Richard Rorty's philosophical project is deeply aligned with the postmodern challenge to metaphysics. His critique, especially in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), undermines the assumption that knowledge must mirror reality—a legacy Rorty traces from Descartes to Kant to analytic philosophy. In rejecting the idea of foundational epistemology, Rorty proposes a therapeutic view of philosophy: not as a discipline that discovers truth, but as one that redescribes vocabularies for coping with the world.

Postmodernism, characterized by its “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1984), finds in Rorty a natural ally. As Rorty writes in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), “there is no way to step outside our language so as to find some transcultural vantage point” (p. 6). This reflects the influence of Nietzsche and Derrida, who both questioned the possibility of absolute meaning. Rather than

searching for the “really real,” Rorty suggests that philosophical discourse should abandon the “God’s-eye view” and embrace contingency as its guiding principle.

Ryu (2001) describes this move as a “philosophical conversion,” in which Rorty shifts from representationalism to cultural constructionism. Knowledge becomes a matter of interpretive practice rather than objective correspondence. Best and Kellner (2001) similarly frame Rorty’s thought as part of the broader postmodern turn: one that views reason, truth, and subjectivity as historically and linguistically contingent rather than fixed or universal.

In this context, Rorty’s subversive pragmatism aligns with postmodern skepticism but avoids despair. While he dismantles metaphysics, he does not descend into nihilism. Instead, he replaces metaphysical yearning with an ethic of liberal hope, grounded in narrative, community, and irony. For Rorty, the death of metaphysics is not a loss but an opportunity to reimagine philosophy’s role as cultural conversation rather than epistemic adjudication.

### 3. Ironism as a Mode of Selfhood:

Rorty’s figure of the liberal ironist is not merely a political thinker but a distinct psychological type. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), he defines the ironist as someone who “has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses” (p. 73). Final vocabularies refer to the core moral and philosophical terms through which one interprets experience—terms that ironists recognize as historically contingent rather than universally valid.

This form of selfhood resists metaphysical closure. The ironist embodies an ongoing process of self-redescription, constantly reinterpreting her identity through new linguistic and cultural lenses. For Rorty, this self-critical openness is a virtue: “The ironist spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe” (p. 74).

Kwak (2004) highlights how Rorty’s ironism promotes an educational ethos centered on self-reflection rather than doctrinal authority. Similarly, Hung (2007) argues that the ironist’s identity is

dialogical and democratic, fostering civic engagement without moral absolutism.

Ultimately, Ironism as a mode of selfhood cultivates a kind of humility: one grounded not in universal reason but in the awareness that even our deepest convictions are revisable narratives rather than final truths.

4. Contingency of Language, Self, and Community At the heart of Richard Rorty’s liberal Ironism lies the concept of contingency—the view that our beliefs, identities, and moral vocabularies are not grounded in universal reason but are shaped by historical and cultural accidents. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), Rorty argues that “there is no skyhook, no way to escape time and chance, to find a language which somehow takes us closer to the real” (p. 16). For Rorty, language is not a mirror of nature but a human invention—useful for conversation, not for discovering timeless truths.

This notion of linguistic contingency redefines the self as well. Rorty describes identity not as an essence to be discovered but as something constructed through continual self-redescription. “The self is not something hidden deep inside us,” he insists, “but something for which we can find the words” (CIS, p. 27). The liberal ironist, then, is someone who sees her moral vocabulary as one option among many—valuable, but not sacrosanct.

In *Achieving Our Country* (1998), Rorty extends this argument to politics, contending that national identity too is contingent and revisable. We build communities not through appeals to fixed truths but by “telling different stories about who we are” (Preface).

Tukiainen (2019) underscores that Rorty’s liberalism is possible only by accepting this contingency, rejecting foundationalism while still advocating shared values. Likewise, Coombs (2013) observes that for Rorty, “morality arises from familiarity, not metaphysics”—an ethos of solidarity born from shared experiences rather than objective norms.

Ultimately, Rorty’s emphasis on contingency enables a post-metaphysical ethics rooted in humility, dialogue, and imaginative redescription. It invites us

to treat our moral language as evolving rather than eternal—opening up space for tolerance and liberal pluralism.

#### 5.Liberalism Without Foundations:

Richard Rorty believed that liberalism does not need a fixed foundation. He argued that we do not need deep theories or moral laws to support democracy. Instead, we can defend liberal values like freedom and equality through history and shared hope.

In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), Rorty described his view as “postmodern bourgeois liberalism.” He meant a liberalism that comes from Western democratic traditions, not from abstract truths. He rejected ideas from philosophers like Kant or Rawls, who tried to base justice on reason or human nature. For Rorty, these efforts are no longer helpful in a postmodern world.

In his essay “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy” (1991), Rorty wrote that democracy should guide our moral thinking—not the other way around. He said we should care more about reducing cruelty than proving we are right. For him, democracy works best when people talk, listen, and change their views.

Shusterman (1994) explained that Rorty follows Dewey’s idea of politics as problem-solving. Bragues (2006) noted that Rorty’s liberalism is weak on theory but strong in practice. It accepts doubt and still supports justice.

Rorty believed that values grow through culture, not logic. He trusted in stories, not systems. His liberalism fits with a world that keeps changing.

In short, Rorty’s liberalism is not about finding truth. It is about finding better ways to live together. It does not need certainty to work. It needs imagination, kindness, and conversation.

#### 6.Solidarity as an Ethical Ideal

Richard Rorty believed that solidarity—not truth—should be the main goal of ethics. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), he argued that we don’t need universal truths to treat others with care. Instead

of trying to prove what is “right,” we should focus on reducing cruelty and helping people live freely.

For Rorty, solidarity grows from seeing others as “one of us” rather than as strangers. He wrote, “Solidarity is created by increasing our sensitivity to the pain of others” (CIS, p. xvi). This kind of moral connection doesn’t come from reason or religion—it comes from imagination, stories, and shared experiences. Literature, history, and open dialogue help us see others with empathy.

Rorty rejected the idea that ethics needs a foundation in logic or nature. He saw moral values as human inventions—useful tools, not eternal laws. As Forstner (2018) notes, Rorty believed that a strong democracy can exist without deep philosophical backing. What matters is how people treat one another in daily life, not what theories they believe.

Djedidi (2022) adds that Rorty’s view fits well in a post-truth world. It offers a way to build social bonds even when people no longer trust facts or experts. Rorty’s solidarity is not cold or abstract—it is emotional, flexible, and rooted in real lives.

In simple terms, Rorty’s ethics ask us to care more and argue less. He invites us to replace the search for final answers with the hope of better relationships. Solidarity, for him, is not about agreement. It’s about kindness and shared hopes in a changing world.

#### 7.Public Hope, Private Irony: Can They Coexist?

One of the biggest questions about Richard Rorty’s liberal ironism is whether it allows people to be truly committed to politics. If a person doubts their deepest beliefs, can they still fight for justice and democracy? Rorty answers: yes, they can—and they should.

In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), Rorty explains that private irony and public hope serve different roles. Privately, we may doubt our values, see them as changeable, and be open to new ways of thinking. But publicly, we still support freedom, fairness, and kindness. He writes, “We can separate the private and the public... and still be loyal citizens of a liberal democracy” (p. 84).

Critics often say this makes Rorty's politics weak or unserious. O'Neill (2005) calls it "dangerously thin," arguing that without strong moral foundations, people won't stand up against injustice. But Rorty disagrees. He believes that a good society needs people who act from care, not from absolute certainty. We don't need to be sure we are right to try to make life better for others.

Bacon (2005) defends Rorty's view by saying that public commitment can grow from shared stories, emotions, and habits—not just logic or belief. The point is not to prove we are right, but to stop cruelty where we see it.

Rorty's idea works best in a pluralistic society. People think differently, but they can still work together. Private irony lets individuals stay humble and open. Public hope keeps the community moving toward justice.

So yes, for Rorty, irony and hope can live side by side. We can doubt everything—and still care deeply about others.

#### 8. Ironism in Civic Education and Discourse:

Richard Rorty believed that education should not aim to teach eternal truths but help students become more imaginative, tolerant, and self-aware. In *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999), he argued that the goal of education in a liberal democracy is not to discover universal values but to create citizens who can talk, listen, and rethink their beliefs. This fits with his idea of the liberal ironist—someone who doubts their own deepest ideas but still works to reduce cruelty.

In civic education, Rorty's ironism promotes openness rather than dogma. Kwak (2004) notes that Rorty's approach encourages teachers and students to see their beliefs as part of a larger conversation, not as final answers. Instead of focusing on moral certainty, students learn how to change their minds with empathy and care.

Hung (2007) shows that this kind of education helps build democratic habits. Students learn to value different views, question authority, and express their ideas in new ways. It's not about teaching what to

think—but how to think and feel responsibly in public life.

Kautz (1996) adds that Rorty's "postmodern self" is especially suited for modern democracies. Such a self is flexible, ironic, and willing to work with others despite deep differences.

Rorty's vision of civic education is simple but powerful: it trains people not to be certain, but to be kind, curious, and ready to grow. In a diverse society, that may be the most valuable lesson of all.

#### 9. Ironism in the Age of Post-Truth and Populism

Richard Rorty's idea of liberal ironism has become more relevant in today's age of post-truth politics. In a time where "alternative facts" and conspiracy theories are common, many people no longer trust experts, science, or shared facts. This raises a serious question: Can a worldview built on doubt, irony, and contingency survive in a world where truth itself is under attack?

In *Achieving Our Country* (1998), Rorty warned that the Left's retreat from national conversation would open space for populist anger. He predicted that "a strongman" might come to power by speaking for the people who felt ignored. He didn't use the term "post-truth," but his fears matched what later happened. Rorty believed that democratic hope, not objective facts, is what holds societies together. Even if we can't prove our beliefs, we can still build a better future by telling better stories.

Forstenzer (2018) argues that Rorty offers a way to face post-truth politics without despair. Instead of demanding absolute truth, we can build solidarity through shared language, emotion, and imagination. Bacon (2017) adds that Rorty's ethics can still guide political debate—if we focus less on winning arguments and more on caring for others.

Djedidi (2022) points out that Rorty's ideas help explain why many no longer trust elite voices. But Rorty also gives us tools to rebuild that trust—not through facts alone, but through empathy, humility, and hope.

In short, Rorty's liberal ironism does not collapse in a post-truth world—it adapts. It invites us to fight lies, not with rigid dogma, but with open minds and shared dreams.

## CONCLUSION

### The Future of Liberal Ironism

Richard Rorty's liberal ironism remains a bold response to the challenges of postmodern life. It offers a way to care about justice without claiming to know absolute truths. Though some critics argue that it lacks moral strength, Rorty believed that doubt and hope can work together. His writings in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, and *Achieving Our Country* show that democratic progress is possible without metaphysical certainty.

Today, in an era of deep division and mistrust, Rorty's subversive pragmatism feels timely. As Bacon (2017) notes, irony can support pluralism by keeping us aware of our limits. Forstenzer (2018) argues that Rorty's approach is a tool for resisting post-truth politics through empathy and storytelling. Coombs (2013) adds that liberal Ironism encourages moral growth by inviting conversation instead of conflict.

Liberal Ironism may not give firm answers, but it helps us live with difference, speak with humility, and act with care. In a fractured world, this may be its greatest strength. Rorty's legacy is not a final theory—but an open path toward solidarity.

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