

Living in a World of Irony

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In 1993, I published a book about the postmodern condition (Bergquist, 1993). I speculated in this book that there are three ways to interpret this condition. First, postmodernism may be a transitional phase that is setting the stage for another, longer-term societal condition. Second, postmodernism might itself be that longer-term societal condition. Third, all of this categorization of societal forms may be nothing more than semantics. Perhaps, nothing of substance has really changed in our society – in which case we are living in essentially the same kind of community that has existing for many years (or centuries).

In typical postmodern fashion, no conclusions were drawn in 1993 about which of these three scenarios seems most viable. We are now in a much better place to speculate about postmodernism and about what the next societal condition might look like. As a preliminary step in this direction, I propose in the present series of essays that at the other end of postmodernism resides a new societal condition – the ironic condition. Much as a philosopher (Lyotard) helped to define the postmodern era in a book entitled, *The Postmodern Condition* (Lyotard, 1984), so another philosopher, Richard Rorty (1989), pointed at about the same time to a new era of irony in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*.

The ironist, according to Rorty (1989, p. xv) is the “sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her most central beliefs and desires.” By “contingency” Rorty is referring to the contextual and transitory nature of all belief systems – a stance adopted by the postmodernists and constructivists: “[the ironist] is someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance.” (Rorty, 1989, p. xv)

While Rorty begins his description of the ironic perspective by pointing to the subjectivity (contingency) of all belief systems, he moves well beyond the postmodernists by suggesting that irony is a “process of coming to see other human beings as ‘one of us’ rather than as ‘them’.” Rorty offers a utopian vision based in irony.

Rorty’s utopia would be based on human solidarity and the capacity of all people to be sensitive to the particular circumstances – and in particular the pain and suffering – of “other, unfamiliar sorts of people.” “Such increased sensitivity,” according to Rorty (1989, p. xvi), “makes it more difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves by thinking ‘They do not feel it as we would,’ or ‘There must always be suffering, so why not let them suffer.’”

Rorty replaces the modern notion of enduring truth with this utopian thought in its continually evolving form (Rorty, 1989, p. xvi):

A historicist and nominalist culture of the sort I envisage would settle . . . for narratives which connect the present with the past, on the one hand, and with utopian futures, on the other. More importantly, it would regard the realization of utopias, and the envisaging of still further utopias, as an endless process – an endless, proliferating realization of Freedom, rather than a convergence toward an already existing Truth.

It is important at this point to note that Rorty’s notion of irony goes well beyond the usual presentation of irony as simply tossing around seemingly contradictory ideas or actions in a novel or movie (such as the stern father who ends up getting drunk at a company Christmas party or monsters who end up being afraid of kids).

These are silly and often quite sweet and insightful instances of what I would call *Fleeting Irony*. They rarely represent the form or level of Irony that Rorty has introduced and that I engage throughout this set of essays. Furthermore, this Fleeting Irony certainly does not touch the level of irony that impacts on our daily 21st Century life – a level of Irony that I am about to identify as Hard Irony.

Soft and Hard Irony

As suggested in the title of this essay and this set of essays, I will be engaging Rorty's concept of irony throughout the multi-dimensional analysis that is to follow. While trying to be accurate in my use of Rorty's provocative and insightful analysis, I will first be tinkering with his idea of contingency, by noting that inherent in contingency is an encounter with contradictory ideas and experiences, each of which seems to valid and worthy of commitment.

I will be offering two versions of Rorty's irony. I will sometimes be engaging something I am calling *Soft Irony*. This is the stance one might take in observing that there are contradictions all around us in our 21st Century world. I will provide many examples of these contradictions and will make the case that we truly live in Irony.

There is a second category that I will be exploring. This is what I am calling *Hard Irony*. This is a form of irony that moves beyond the more detached observational stance to be found in Soft Irony. The challenge of Hard Irony resides at a more personal level. We are not only living in and observing a world filled with contradiction, we are fully embracing these contradictions ourselves. As Rorty has noted, we must operate with contingency and welcome in the "other."

We must embrace and believe fully in a set of contradictory ideas and frames of reference – knowing full well that these contradictions exist in our head and heart. This is deeply embedded and deeply felt Irony. It is Hard Irony in the most immediate sense: it is irony that is hard to swallow and hard to live with. We are truly *Living in Irony*.

Conclusions

Hopefully, in the extended analysis of irony I offer in this series of essays, there is some guidance for each of us regarding not only what it means to live in irony, but also how this condition of contemporary, 21st Century life opens new opportunities for us – or at least enables us to live in what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls a state of "flow" (a

concept to which I turn later in this book). We are faced with the opportunity and challenge inherent in the process of flexible, contingent head and heart.

References

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