Richard Rorty, Liberal Democracy, and the Plural Self

In the introduction to his groundbreaking book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Rorty endorses John Dewey’s vision for the ideal society, in which “culture is no longer dominated by the ideal of objective cognition but by that of aesthetic enhancement” (Rorty 1979, p. 13). Following Dewey, Rorty rejects the idea of “Truth” as the aim of inquiry, and replaces it with a conception of “aesthetic enhancement” as the aim of communicative interactions across difference. This aesthetic enhancement—which Dewey refers to as “growth”—is for Dewey “the only moral ‘end’” (*MW* 12, p. 181), and thus is central to his moral conception of democracy as a personal and social ideal. “Growth” is Dewey’s term for human flourishing; it is a process by which experienced differences are harmonized, both within the community and within the self, into a greater whole. While this notion of growth represents a powerful attempt to overcome divisions that are destructive of community life, it also has totalizing implications that are deeply problematic from a democratic perspective. Despite the positive role he assigns to diversity (as a spur to further growth), Dewey lays too much stress on unification. He ultimately regards diversity not as a permanent positive feature of democratic society but rather as something valuable only insofar as it can be transcended to form a greater, more harmonious, whole.

As a social pragmatist, Dewey views the self largely as a product of acculturation to a social group. Further, he observes that in a pluralistic society like ours, “every individual is a member of many groups” (*LW* 2, p. 328). We might think that individuals whose identities have been shaped by two or more groups with distinct beliefs and values would have divided personalities containing within them a multiplicity of selves. However, Dewey argues that “fullness of integrated personality is ... possible of achievement, since the pulls and responses of different groups [in a democratic community] reënforce one another and their values accord” (p.
What Dewey fails to appreciate is that, because actual processes of identity formation often are rooted in historical violence between social groups with unequal power, some individual and community identities cannot be unified without further violence or oppression. Nevertheless, I argue that citizens situated between opposing cultural groups can, precisely because of their multiplicitous subjectivities, develop as individuals while forging the relations of mutual trust, respect, and understanding necessary to help build a better democracy.

Indeed, as I hope to show, Rorty develops a (loosely Freudian) conception of the plural self that helps us see multiplicitous subjectivity as an indispensable resource for self-development. Unfortunately, though, Rorty explicitly denies that containing a plurality of normative and conceptual perspectives within the self has social utility. He argues that liberal democratic culture requires homogeneity in the public sphere, even as we are left free to experiment with pluralism and novelty in our private lives. However, as critics have pointed out, Rorty’s strategy relies on maintaining an untenable division between the private and public spheres. After briefly discussing the case against Rorty’s privatization of the plural self, I construct a positive case for the view that the plural self does have social utility, and that it is especially useful for democratic politics. In making my case I turn to Latina lesbian theorist of plural identity, Gloria Anzaldúa, and her conception of “mestiza consciousness”—a mode of consciousness characteristic of individuals whose identities are forged within multiple and conflicting group-specific normative and conceptual frameworks. Contrary to Rorty’s merely aesthetic conception of the plural self, Anzaldúa’s “new mestiza,” like Dewey’s ideal democratic citizen, is inherently political, as she must actively and publicly negotiate between the demands of competing groups. However, unlike Dewey, Anzaldúa does not assume that the pulls and responses of different groups will reinforce one another so that fullness of integrated personality
will always be possible (or even desirable, all things considered).

Before turning to Rorty’s, Dewey’s, and Anzaldúa’s competing (but overlapping) conceptions of the self, it will be helpful to see how Rorty’s vision for a postmodern bourgeois liberal democracy motivates him to embrace the aestheticized culture he attributes to Dewey and why, contrary to Dewey, he thinks aesthetic enhancement must be privatized. Rorty’s vision for the ideal liberal democratic citizen is “postmodern” in the sense expressed in Jean Francois Lyotard’s definition of the postmodern as “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard 1984, p. xxiv). Postmodern citizens no longer believe in the grand narratives and foundational principles that served to legitimize classical liberalism. Rorty terms the postmodern citizen who is conscious of the contingency of her own self-narrative, or “final vocabulary,” an “ironist.” An ironist has “continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses,” “she realizes that argument phrased in her present final vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve those doubts,” and “she does not think that her final vocabulary is closer to reality than others” (Rorty 1989, p. 73). Because the ironist is aware of the contingency of her own final vocabulary, she is unable to take her own beliefs (or anyone else’s) too seriously—including beliefs in liberal democratic values.

For Rorty, the core of liberalism is the shared belief that “cruelty is the worst thing we do.”1 And yet, he observes that “the best way to cause people long-lasting pain is to humiliate them by making the things that seemed most important to them look futile, obsolete, and powerless” (p. 89). Consider the humiliation American Indians feel when redescribed within a discourse that constructs them as “savages,” the humiliation Mexican immigrants feel when redescribed as “illegals,” or the humiliation religious people feel when redescribed as

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1 Rorty cites Judith Shklar’s definition of a liberal is someone for whom cruelty is the worst thing we do.
“superstitious.” Because ironists are especially skilled at redescription; they have the ability to wield this power to devastating effect. More troubling still, public ironism opens the door to persuasive but anti-liberal rhetoric (see Melkonian 1999). If we read an ironist theorist like Nietzsche for political inspiration rather than private enjoyment, we risk taking up illiberal and anti-democratic political attitudes.

Rather than counter “passionate visionaries” (Melkonian 1999, p. 64) like Nietzsche with increasingly sophisticated theories of liberalism, Rorty recommends that we just get on with the business of following “[John Stuart] Mill’s suggestion that governments devote themselves to optimizing the balance between leaving people’s private lives alone and preventing suffering” (1989, p. 63). Rorty’s hope, then, is to promote public unity on the liberal dictum that cruelty is the worst thing we do while also making room for a plurality of incommensurable self-conceptions among (and within) individual citizens’ private consciences (p. xv). His primary tool for accomplishing this is to suggest that we maintain a sharp division between the private sphere, in which we are free to pursue our own projects of self-creation, and the public sphere, in which we express solidarity on the shared goal of preventing suffering.

But is it really possible, in practice, to separate private irony from the public realm? First, notice that Rorty himself is unable to sustain this distinction. While his books and articles aim to make bourgeois liberalism look good, in them he makes clear that his liberal democratic values are only justifiable within the terms of a certain socially and historically contingent vocabulary. In other words, Rorty, despite himself, practices a form of public ironism. As Daniel Conway has observed, while Rorty “has deemed irony a ‘private matter,’” through his writings he nevertheless has “inscribed irony onto the final vocabularies of political theorists” (Conway 1991, p. 206). In the very act of articulating his private/public distinction, Rorty demonstrates the
permeability of these categories. Moreover, Rorty is typical of ironist intellectuals; they tend to write books and articles that are read, discussed, and absorbed by “public” intellectuals, including social and political theorists.

Second, notice that the private/public distinction is at odds with Rorty’s neopragmatist commitment to the ubiquity of language. To the extent that our private selves are effects of language, our selves are always already socially constituted. As Honi Haber argues, “if we agree to the poststructuralist theory of the self and language ... then we must also agree to the thesis that the private sphere and the cultural sphere which include the ‘private’ cannot be delineated. Both the private and the public are political constructs” (Haber 1994, p. 61). This is not a merely theoretical point; how the public and private are conceptualized has real political consequences. As feminist philosophers have noted, patriarchal and other systems of oppression have historically depended on instituting the very private/public division that Rorty advocates—hence the feminist slogan, the personal is political. In short, Rorty ignores the Foucauldian insight that not only is language ubiquitous but, because it inscribes itself in language, so is power.

As political constructs, it is interesting to note the ways in which different groups have attempted to institutionalize the private/public distinction to best serve their own political interests. In the United States, conservatives and liberals frame the private and the public differently. Conservatives view market transactions as the realm of private self-creation while they view lifestyle issues as matters of public concern; and liberals reverse these categories (see Topper 1995, p. 962). What counts as public and private is up for grabs, and the battle over the descriptions, redescriptions, and re-redescriptions of the private and the public interpenetrates both spheres. The personal is political and the political is personal.

Despite the force of these objections, Rorty argues that because there is no antecedently
given human essence that binds us all together, the projects of human solidarity and private perfection are necessarily at odds. He writes,

The attempt to fuse the public and the private lies behind both Plato’s attempt to answer the question ‘Why is it in one’s interest to be just?’ and Christianity’s claim that perfect self-realization can be attained through service to others. Such metaphysical or theological attempts to unite a striving for perfection with a sense of community require us to acknowledge a common human nature. They ask us to believe that what is most important to each of us is what we have in common with others—that the springs of private fulfillment and of human solidarity are the same…. But there is no way to bring self-creation together with justice on 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. (1989, p. xiii)

However, I see no reason why we cannot reject (“on the level of theory”) metaphysical notions of a preexisting basis for solidarity residing within each of us as individuals while also affirming (on the level of practice) that self-enrichment and community building can proceed together as mutually reinforcing projects. Indeed, from the perspective of Dewey’s social pragmatism, the two projects can only work in tandem. For Dewey, community is not rooted in a common human essence, but rather is created through social processes that at the same time form us as individuals. Dewey notes that individuality requires a social context, a harmonious interplay between “private” motives and “public” meaning: “individuality is the product of definite social relationships and publicly acknowledged functions” (Dewey LW 5, p. 67). The private self, then, cannot be conceived apart from some social context.

On the Deweyan view of the private/public distinction I urge, the private and the public
are relational rather than oppositional categories. While Dewey rejects a firm private/public dichotomy, in *The Public and its Problems*, he makes use of a context-sensitive distinction between the two spheres. He notes that “human acts have consequences upon others” and that “the consequences are of two kinds” (*LW* 2, p. 243). On the one hand, there are consequences that “affect the persons directly engaged in a transaction,” and, on the other hand, there are consequences that “affect others beyond those immediately concerned” (p. 243). Transactions that affect *only* the persons directly engaged may unproblematically be regarded as private. However, Dewey notes that few (if any) transactions have such narrowly constrained effects. All other transactions, those that affect others one way or another, are *potentially* public in nature. For Dewey, “the line between private and public is to be drawn on the basis of the extent and scope of the consequences of acts which are so important as to need control” (p. 245). Because determining which effects are important enough to warrant public control is subject to debate, the line between the private and the public can never be drawn once and for all. Rather, the distinction itself is a matter of public concern and social experimentation.

While feminist, poststructuralist, and Deweyan critiques call into doubt Rorty’s approach to the project of creating solidarity amidst diversity, I argue that critical attention to the liberal ironist’s moral psychology nevertheless helps us to appreciate how, pace Dewey, internalizing difference can function as a form of personal growth. I contend that once we free self-creation from the merely private role Rorty assigns it, we can begin to develop a more complete picture of the moral psychology of the democratic citizen—a citizen who, in virtue of having developed connections to multiple and conflicting group-specific identities, can both critically distance herself from “her own” situated perspective and forge meaningful and potentially transformative connections with oppositionally situated groups. Further, since ironism can be corrosive to our
shared democratic commitments, and since Rorty’s strategy of insulating the “public” sphere against “private” ironism is undermined by the permeability of the public/private distinction, I suggest that we follow Gloria Anzaldúa and look toward ambivalence as a third way between ironic detachment from and wholehearted commitment to “the unified will of the community” (cf. Dewey \( EW \) 1, p. 241). On the view I urge, the ambivalent democratic citizen tempers the extremes of the Rortyan ironist and the wholehearted Deweyan democrat, while drawing indispensible resources from each for personal and social growth.

From a democratic perspective, the problem with overthematizing unification, as Dewey does, is that it tends to privilege the entrenched values of the dominant group while marginalizing differences that cannot be harmonized with the hegemonic moral and political order. If growth-as-unification is the only moral end, then the practices, beliefs, and values of minority groups that cannot be unified can only be regarded as deviant, as threats to the moral health of the larger community, and therefore to be ignored, marginalized, or suppressed. Dewey’s unflinching dedication to human equality, when confronted with incommensurable culturally situated perspectives, suggests an unacknowledged commitment to hold such conflicting experiences in tension rather than attempt to subsume one perspective into another. Nevertheless, his moral ideal of self-unification devalues the identities of individuals and peoples with inherently plural or uneasily integrated selves. And, at the social level, the ideal of unification threatens to create permanent minorities who are excluded from, and resentful of, a community defined by a comprehensive shared self-conception.

Here Rorty offers a needed corrective to Dewey. For Rorty, as for Dewey, “moral development in the individual, and moral progress in the human species as a whole, is a matter of re-making human selves so as to enlarge the variety of the relationships which constitute those
selves” (Rorty 1994, p. 79). One advantage of Rorty’s particular spin on personal growth, however, is that it allows for inner multiplicity in a way that Dewey’s focus on processes of integration and unification forecloses. In “Freud and Moral Reflection,” Rorty claims that Sigmund Freud’s theory of the unconscious changed our self-image, replacing our seemingly commonsense notion that a single body contains a single self with a “picture of quasi selves lurking beneath the threshold of consciousness” (Rorty 1986, p. 262). He follows Donald Davidson² in identifying a “person” with “a coherent and plausible set of beliefs and desires” (p. 262) and endorses Davidson’s gloss on Freud, according to which “the point of ‘partitioning’ the self between a consciousness and an unconscious is that the latter can be viewed as an alternative set, inconsistent with the familiar set that we identify with consciousness, yet sufficiently coherent internally to count as a person” (pp. 262-3). Thus Freud (filtered through Davidson) provides Rorty with a model of multiplicitous subjectivity that “initiates a task that can plausibly be described as a moral obligation” (p. 264)—namely, to “Know thyself,” where this now means becoming acquainted with the plurality of “persons” who populate each individual “self.”

Like Dewey, Rorty explicitly denies that knowing ourselves involves getting in touch with a common human essence. “Far from being of what we share with the other members of our species, self-knowledge is precisely of what divides us from them: our accidental idiosyncrasies, the ‘irrational’ components in ourselves, the ones that split us up into incompatible sets of beliefs and desires” (Rorty 1986, p. 264). Only such self-knowledge will allow us to negotiate between our plural identities. “What is novel in Freud’s view of the unconscious,” according to Rorty, “is his claim that our unconscious selves are not dumb, sullen, lurching brutes, but rather the intellectual peers of our conscious selves, possible conversation partners for those selves” (p.

The unconscious, on this view, is not a reservoir of irrational animal passions, but rather a potential site for self-enrichment through transactions across (internalized) differences.

Rorty suggests that in adopting this Freudian picture of a multiplicitous self we thus “give up the urge to purification” and “develop what [Philip] Rieff [not to mention Anzaldúa] calls ‘tolerance for ambiguities’” (p. 267). In Rorty’s own terms, Freud helped us to abandon the search for our “true self” and instead develop the “ability to take a nominalistic, ironic, view of oneself” (p. 267). Freud “let us see alternative narratives and alternative vocabularies as instruments for change, rather than as candidates for a correct depiction of how things are in themselves” (Rorty 1986, p. 267). While the constellations of beliefs and desires that make up our plural self is a consequence of “particular, idiosyncratic things that have happened in the history of the race, and to ourselves,” we can exercise agency in our own self-development by playing our multiple vocabularies off against each other in order to “revise and enlarge the very vocabulary in which one is at present reflecting” (p. 268).

In describing self-creation as a moral obligation, one might expect that Rorty sees in it some social utility. However, he explicitly denies interest in what he terms “public morality,” which he characterizes as the “relatively simple and obvious side of morality” (p. 268). He does not deny that how we treat each other is important. But his focus is on what he views as the more interesting side of morality, “private morality,” which he characterizes as “the search for perfection in oneself” (p. 268). This perfection “can take one of two antithetical forms: a search for purity or a search for self-enlargement” (Rorty 1986, p. 269). While the search for purity is motivated by a desire “to will one thing, to intensify, to become a simpler and more transparent being,” the search for self-enlargement is motivated by a “desire to embrace more and more possibilities, to be constantly learning, to give oneself over entirely to curiosity” (p. 269). Rorty
applauds Freud for promoting an aesthetic life “that seeks to extend its own bound rather than to find its center” (p. 269). Freud, according to Rorty, “helped us become increasingly ironic, playful, free, and inventive in our choice of self-descriptions” (p. 270).

On Rorty’s reading of him, Freud orients us toward a non-teleological concept of personal growth that does not require conformity to a predefined essence but also, pace Dewey, does not insist on self-unification as the consummatory “end” of self-enriching activity. This Freudian view of the self thus offers an attractive alternative to the Deweyan view of personal growth, which, because of its emphasis on unification, cuts against the pluralistic spirit of Dewey’s larger democratic vision.

While Rorty denies that the multiplicitious view of the self he takes from Freud (via Davidson) has any public utility, richer possibilities emerge once we reframe the view in the light of Deweyan social pragmatism, which rejects the distinction between private and public morality. The social function of plural identity finds clear expression in the writings of Latina lesbian theorist Gloria Anzaldúa (whose resonance with Deweyan pragmatism has been noted by Gregory Pappas and Jeffry Edmonds). Her work demonstrates that the structural ambivalence inherent in plural identity fosters democratic virtues essential for self-development and community building. The ability to identify with conflicting perspectives allows for a richer and more internally varied self-conception that better enables us to forge connections between diverse groups in an increasingly complex and pluralistic social world.

The lived experiences of Latina lesbians such as Anzaldúa, whose identities are shaped by multiple and conflicting group affiliations, disrupt notions of identity that insist on the internal coherence of the self. As Pappas notes, Anzaldúa rejects “the either/or option between masculine/feminine as well as the one between Latina/American” (2001, p. 154). Such
intersectional subjects “can affirm their multiplicity without conceiving themselves as fragmented into pure parts” (Pappas 2001, p. 154). Anzaldúa terms this phenomenon “mestiza consciousness.”

The word “mestiza” traditionally refers to a woman of mixed race, especially Spanish and American Indian; however, Edwina Barvosa notes that the term mestiza consciousness covers any “subjectivity characterized by a diversity of different identities and worldviews that mingle and collide within the self” (2007, p. 6-7). Anzaldúa explains that, because la mestiza has internal access to conflicting conceptual and normative perspectives, she

... she can’t hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries. The borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behavior; these habits and patterns are the enemy within.... Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch horizontally and vertically. La mestiza constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes.

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly.... Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns ambivalence into something else. (1999, p. 101)

As Edmonds notes, the concept of mestiza consciousness strikes familiar pragmatist notes in its
“imaginative, pluralistic, tolerant, and reconstructive” character (2012, p. 128). Anzaldúa echoes Dewey’s view that when habits become routine or entrenched they inhibit our capacity for further growth. However, unlike Dewey, Anzaldúa sees that the new mestiza’s plural identity is what allows her to break from routine habits in an imaginative reconstruction of her identity that accommodates pluralism, but without forcing coherence. The new mestiza’s ambivalence does not inhibit growth; rather, the “Western mode” is narrowing insofar as it demands inauthentic unity. The horizontal and vertical stretching the new mestiza’s flexibility allows for is a mode of growth that defies the convergent thinking implicit in Dewey’s notion of growth as unification. Further, unlike ironism, which Rorty rightly views as having limited social utility, Anzaldúan ambivalence can play a crucial role in fostering solidarity across difference.

If we eschew Rortyan ironism in favor of Anzaldúan ambivalence, the multiplicity and openness inherent in plural identity can enable community building across deep differences. While the ironist cannot take others’ (not to mention her own) beliefs seriously, the ambivalent citizen can sincerely appreciate the pull on both sides of an issue. In virtue of their affiliation with oppositionally situated groups, multiplicitous subjects are therefore uniquely positioned to forge meaningful and potentially transformative connections across difference. The intellectual and emotional flexibility needed to maintain such a plural identity compliments Dewey’s broader democratic vision. The connections that intersectional subjects forge can enable political mobilization organized around points of commonality, despite differences and historical resentments that otherwise would foreclose cooperation.

A feature of mestiza consciousness that constitutes an invaluable democratic resource is

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3 Arguably, Dewey’s emphasis on unification reflects his position of privilege, since his identity as a Western, white, heterosexual male is normative and thus does not entail the sort of ambivalence that Anzaldúa’s Latina lesbian identity does.
its internalization of both sides of cultural conflict. “We can no longer blame you,” writes Anzaldúa, “nor disown the white parts, the male parts, the pathological parts, the queer parts, the vulnerable parts” (1999, p. 110). By embracing identities that have been constructed in opposition to one another and that are implicated in both sides of historical violence and subjugation, the new mestiza is in a position to diffuse historical resentments that threaten to calcify divisions rooted in differences of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or political ideology. In so doing, the new mestiza has the potential to foster the social trust necessary to motivate a collective effort to challenge systems of oppression that divide citizens against each other. However, in order to do so, the new mestiza must enlist the help of allies who occupy privileged social positions, and who are willing to acknowledge their complicity in maintaining systems of oppression. While this work involves a movement toward synthesis and unification of differences, some differences cannot be fully harmonized, as Anzaldúa makes clear.

Indeed, Rorty would endorse Anzaldúa’s critique of Western philosophy as dominated by “convergent thinking” that attempts to overcome all differences and locate universal Truths. He credits Freud with breaking from the Western philosophical tradition (exemplified by Plato, Descartes, and Kant), which he sees as “centered on attempts to preserve ... the notion of a ‘true self’ and the plausibility of a morality of self-purification” (p. 270). As Rorty reads him, Freud replaces an ethics directed toward convergence with an ethics directed toward self-enrichment—self-enrichment that, like the activity of mestiza consciousness, “operates in a pluralistic mode.”

Rorty’s endorsement of Freud’s view of the plural self has been criticized by Richard Shusterman, who complains that such a self is “the ideal self for postmodern consumer society, a fragmented, confused self, hungrily enjoying as many new commodities as it can, but lacking the firm integrity to challenge either its habits of consumption or the system that manipulates and
profits from them” (1994, p. 399). Shusterman’s worry is, I think, well founded, insofar as Rorty sees self-creation as a private matter disconnected from public morality. But if we reject the rigid distinction Rorty draws between the private and the public, if we follow Dewey in making explicit the link between self-creation and social progress and follow Anzaldúa in linking social progress with plural identity, then Shusterman’s critique of the de-centered self loses its bite.

The Anzaldúaan view of the self I have been urging combines the best insights of Dewey’s and Rorty’s views while avoiding the most problematic aspects of each. By placing Anzaldúa in conversation with pragmatists, a richer view of the self emerges—one that, as I hope to have shown, not only resonates with pragmatism but also serves as an attractive ideal for citizens of a pluralistic liberal democracy. A self that rejects Dewey’s insistence on unification in favor of Rorty’s acceptance of multiplicity, while embracing Dewey’s emphasis on the permeability and fluidity of the private/public distinction, can indeed challenge the complacency and injustice that exist within our postmodern consumer society.
Works Cited


