Private irony and liberal hope

All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. I shall call these words a person's "final vocabulary."

It is "final" in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse. Those words are as far as he can go with language; beyond them there is only helpless passivity or a resort to force. A small part of a final vocabulary is made up of thin, flexible, and ubiquitous terms such as "true," "good," "right," and "beautiful." The larger part contains thicker, more rigid, and more parochial terms, for example, "Christ," "England," "professional standards," "decency," "kindness," "the Revolution," "the Church," "progressive," "rigorous," "creative." The more parochial terms do most of the work.

I shall define an "ironist" as someone who fulfills three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old.

I call people of this sort "ironists" because their realization that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed, and their renunciation of the attempt to formulate criteria of choice between final vocabularies, puts them in the position which Sartre called "meta-stable": never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware.
that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves. Such people take naturally to the line of thought developed in the first two chapters of this book. If they are also liberals — people for whom (to use Judith Shklar’s definition) “cruelty is the worst thing they do” — they will take naturally to the views offered in the third chapter.

The opposite of irony is common sense. For that is the watchword of those who unselfconsciously describe everything important in terms of the final vocabulary to which they and those around them are habituated. To be commonsensical is to take for granted that statements formulated in that final vocabulary suffice to describe and judge the beliefs, actions and lives of those who employ alternative final vocabularies. People who pride themselves on common sense will find the line of thought developed in Part I distasteful.

When common sense is challenged, its adherents respond at first by generalizing and making explicit the rules of the language game they are accustomed to play (as some of the Greek Sophists did, and as Aristotle did in his ethical writings). But if no platitude formulated in the old vocabulary suffices to meet an argumentative challenge, the need to reply produces a willingness to go beyond platitudes. At that point, conversation may go Socratic. The question “What is x?” is now asked in such a way that it cannot be answered simply by producing paradigm cases of x-hood. So one may demand a definition, an essence.

To make such Socratic demands is not yet, of course, to become an ironist in the sense in which I am using this term. It is only to become a “metaphysician,” in a sense of that term which I am adapting from Heidegger. In this sense, the metaphysician is someone who takes the question “What is the intrinsic nature of (e.g., justice, science, knowledge, Being, faith, morality, philosophy)?” at face value. He assumes that the presence of a term in his own final vocabulary ensures that it refers to something which has a real essence. The metaphysician is still attached to common sense, in that he does not question the platitudes which encapsulate the use of a given final vocabulary, and in particular the platitude which says there is a single permanent reality to be found behind the many temporary appearances. He does not redescribe but, rather, analyzes old descriptions with the help of other old descriptions.

The ironist, by contrast, is a nominalist and a historicist. She thinks nothing has an intrinsic nature, a real essence. So she thinks that the occurrence of a term like “just” or “scientific” or “rational” in the final vocabulary of the day is no reason to think that Socratic inquiry into the essence of justice or science or rationality will take one much beyond the
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language games of one’s time. The ironist spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game. She worries that the process of socialization which turned her into a human being by giving her a language may have given her the wrong language, and so turned her into the wrong kind of human being. But she cannot give a criterion of wrongness. So, the more she is driven to articulate her situation in philosophical terms, the more she reminds herself of her rootlessness by constantly using terms like “Weltanschauung,” “perspective,” “dialectic,” “conceptual framework,” “historical epoch,” “language game,” “redescription,” “vocabulary,” and “irony.”

The metaphysician responds to that sort of talk by calling it “relativistic” and insisting that what matters is not what language is being used but what is true. Metaphysicians think that human beings by nature desire to know. They think this because the vocabulary they have inherited, their common sense, provides them with a picture of knowledge as a relation between human beings and “reality,” and the idea that we have a need and a duty to enter into this relation. It also tells us that “reality,” if properly asked, will help us determine what our final vocabulary should be. So metaphysicians believe that there are, out there in the world, real essences which it is our duty to discover and which are disposed to assist in their own discovery. They do not believe that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed — or, if they do, they deplore this fact and cling to the idea that reality will help us resist such seductions.

By contrast, ironists do not see the search for a final vocabulary as (even in part) a way of getting something distinct from this vocabulary right. They do not take the point of discursive thought to be knowing, in any sense that can be explicated by notions like “reality,” “real essence,” “objective point of view,” and “the correspondence of language of reality.” They do not think its point is to find a vocabulary which accurately represents something, a transparent medium. For the ironists, “final vocabulary” does not mean “the one which puts all doubts to rest” or “the one which satisfies our criteria of ultimacy, or adequacy, or optimality.” They do not think of reflection as being governed by criteria. Criteria, on their view, are never more than the platitudes which contextually define the terms of a final vocabulary currently in use. Ironists agree with Davidson about our inability to step outside our language in order to compare it with something else, and with Heidegger about the contingency and historicity of that language.

This difference leads to a difference in their attitude toward books. Metaphysicians see libraries as divided according to disciplines, corresponding to different objects of knowledge. Ironists see them as divided
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according to traditions, each member of which partially adopts and partially modifies the vocabulary of the writers whom he has read. Ironists take the writings of all the people with poetic gifts, all the original minds who had a talent for redescription — Pythagoras, Plato, Milton, Newton, Goethe, Kant, Kierkegaard, Baudelaire, Darwin, Freud — as grist to be put through the same dialectical mill. The metaphysicians, by contrast, want to start by getting straight about which of these people were poets, which philosophers, and which scientists. They think it essential to get the genres right — to order texts by reference to a previously determined grid, a grid which, whatever else it does, will at least make a clear distinction between knowledge claims and other claims upon our attention. The ironist, by contrast, would like to avoid cooking the books she reads by using any such grid (although, with ironic resignation, she realizes that she can hardly help doing so).

For a metaphysician, “philosophy,” as defined by reference to the canonical Plato—Kant sequence, is an attempt to know about certain things — quite general and important things. For the ironist, “philosophy,” so defined, is the attempt to apply and develop a particular antecedently chosen final vocabulary — one which revolves around the appearance-reality distinction. The issue between them is, once again, about the contingency of our language — about whether what the common sense of our own culture shares with Plato and Kant is a tip-off to the way the world is, or whether it is just the characteristic mark of the discourse of people inhabiting a certain chunk of space-time. The metaphysician assumes that our tradition can raise no problems which it cannot solve — that the vocabulary which the ironist fears may be merely “Greek” or “Western” or “bourgeois” is an instrument which will enable us to get at something universal. The metaphysician agrees with the Platonic Theory of Recollection, in the form in which this theory was restated by Kierkegaard, namely, that we have the truth within us, that we have built-in criteria which enable us to recognize the right final vocabulary when we hear it. The cash value of this theory is that our contemporary final vocabularies are close enough to the right one to let us converge upon it — to formulate premises from which the right conclusions will be reached. The metaphysician thinks that although we may not have all the answers, we have already got criteria for the right answers. So he thinks “right” does not merely mean “suitable for those who speak as we do” but has a stronger sense — the sense of “grasping real essence.”

For the ironist, searches for a final vocabulary are not destined to converge. For her, sentences like “All men by nature desire to know” or “Truth is independent of the human mind” are simply platitudes used to
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inculcate the local final vocabulary, the common sense of the West. She is an ironist just insofar as her own final vocabulary does not contain such notions. Her description of what she is doing when she looks for a better final vocabulary than the one she is currently using is dominated by metaphors of making rather than finding, of diversification and novelty rather than convergence to the antecedently present. She thinks of final vocabularies as poetic achievements rather than as fruits of diligent inquiry according to antecedently formulated criteria.

Because metaphysicians believe that we already possess a lot of the "right" final vocabulary and merely need to think through its implications, they think of philosophical inquiry as a matter of spotting the relations between the various platitudes which provide contextual definitions of the terms of this vocabulary. So they think of refining or clarifying the use of terms as a matter of weaving these platitudes (or, as they would prefer to say, these intuitions) into a perspicuous system. This has two consequences. First, they tend to concentrate on the thinner, more flexible, more ubiquitous items in this vocabulary — words like "true," "good," "person," and "object." For the thinner the term, the more platitudes will employ it. Second, they take the paradigm of philosophical inquiry to be logical argument — that is spotting the inferential relationships between propositions rather than comparing and contrasting vocabularies.

The typical strategy of the metaphysician is to spot an apparent contradiction between two platitudes, two intuitively plausible propositions, and then propose a distinction which will resolve the contradiction. Metaphysicians then go on to embed this distinction within a network of associated distinctions — a philosophical theory — which will take some of the strain off the initial distinction. This sort of theory construction is the same method used by judges to decide hard cases, and by theologians to interpret hard texts. That activity is the metaphysician's paradigm of rationality. He sees philosophical theories as converging — a series of discoveries about the nature of such things as truth and personhood, which get closer and closer to the way they really are, and carry the culture as a whole closer to an accurate representation of reality.

The ironist, however, views the sequence of such theories — such interlocked patterns of novel distinctions — as gradual, tacit substitutions of a new vocabulary for an old one. She calls "platitudes" what the metaphysician calls "intuitions." She is inclined to say that when we surrender an old platitude (e.g., "The number of biological species is fixed") or "Human beings differ from animals because they have sparks of the divine with them") or "Blacks have no rights which whites are bound to respect"), we have made a change rather than discovered a fact. The
Ironist, observing the sequence of "great philosophers" and the interaction between their thought and its social setting, sees a series of changes in the linguistic and other practices of the Europeans. Whereas the metaphysician sees the modern Europeans as particularly good at discovering how things really are, the ironist sees them as particularly rapid in changing their self-image, in re-creating themselves.

The metaphysician thinks that there is an overriding intellectual duty to present arguments for one's controversial views — arguments which will start from relatively uncontroversial premises. The ironist thinks that such arguments — logical arguments — are all very well in their way, and useful as expository devices, but in the end not much more than ways of getting people to change their practices without admitting they have done so. The ironist's preferred form of argument is dialectical in the sense that she takes the unit of persuasion to be a vocabulary rather than a proposition. Her method is redescription rather than inference. Ironists specialize in redescribing ranges of objects or events in partially neologistic jargon, in the hope of inciting people to adopt and extend that jargon. An ironist hopes that by the time she has finished using old words in new senses, not to mention introducing brand-new words, people will no longer ask questions phrased in the old words. So the ironist thinks of logic as ancillary to dialectic, whereas the metaphysician thinks of dialectic as a species of rhetoric, which in turn is a shoddy substitute for logic.

I have defined "dialectic" as the attempt to play off vocabularies against one another, rather than merely to infer propositions from one another, and thus as the partial substitution of redescriptions for inference. I used Hegel's word because I think of Hegel's *Phenomenology* both as the beginning of the end of the Plato—Kant tradition and as a paradigm of the ironist's ability to exploit the possibilities of massive redescriptions. In this view, Hegel's so-called dialectical method is not an argumentative procedure or a way of unifying subject and object, but simply a literary skill — skill at producing surprising gestalt switches by making smooth, rapid transitions from one terminology to another.

Instead of keeping the old platitudes and making distinctions to help them cohere, Hegel constantly changed the vocabulary in which the old platitudes had been stated; instead of constructing philosophical theories and arguing for them, he avoided argument by constantly shifting vocabularies, thereby changing the subject. In practice, though not in theory, he dropped the idea of getting at the truth in favor of the idea of making things new. His criticism of his predecessors was not that their propositions were false but that their languages were obsolete. By inventing this
sort of criticism, the younger Hegel broke away from the Plato–Kant sequence and began a tradition of ironist philosophy which is continued in Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida. These are the philosophers who define their achievement by their relation to their predecessors rather than by their relation to the truth.

A more up-to-date word for what I have been calling “dialectic” would be “literary criticism.” In Hegel's time it was still possible to think of plays, poems, and novels as making vivid something already known, of literature as ancillary to cognition, beauty to truth. The older Hegel thought of “philosophy” as a discipline which, because cognitive in a way that art was not, took precedence over art. Indeed, he thought that this discipline, now that it had attained maturity in the form of his own Absolute Idealism, could and would make art as obsolete as it made religion. But, ironically and dialectically enough, what Hegel actually did, by founding an ironist tradition within philosophy, was help de-cognitivize, de-metaphysize philosophy. He helped turn it into a literary genre.1 The young Hegel's practice undermined the possibility of the sort of convergence to truth about which the older Hegel theorized. The great commentators on the older Hegel are writers like Heine and Kierkegaard, people who treated Hegel the way we now treat Blake, Freud, D. H. Lawrence, or Orwell.

We ironists treat these people not as anonymous channels for truth but as abbreviations for a certain final vocabulary and for the sorts of beliefs and desires typical of its users. The older Hegel became a name for such a vocabulary, and Kierkegaard and Nietzsche have become names for others. If we are told that the actual lives such men lived had little to do with the books and the terminology which attracted our attention to them, we brush this aside. We treat the names of such people as the names of the heroes of their own books. We do not bother to distinguish Swift from saeva indignatio, Hegel from Geist, Nietzsche from Zarathustra, Marcel Proust from Marcel the narrator, or Trilling from The Liberal Imagination. We do not care whether these writers managed to live up to their own self-images.2 What we want to know is whether to adopt those

1 From this point of view, both analytic philosophy and phenomenology were throwbacks to a pre-Hegelian, more or less Kantian, way of thinking – attempts to preserve what I am calling “metaphysics” by making it the study of the “conditions of possibility” of a medium (consciousness, language).

2 See Alexander Nehamas, Nietzsche: Life as Literature, p. 234, where Nehamas says that he is not concerned with “the miserable little man who wrote [Nietzsche's books].” Rather he is concerned (p. 8) with Nietzsche's “effort to create an artwork of himself, a literary character who is also a philosopher [which is also] his effort to offer a positive view without falling back into the dogmatic tradition.” In the view I am suggesting, Nietzsche may have been the first philosopher to do consciously what Hegel had done unconsciously.
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images – to re-create ourselves, in whole or in part, in these people's image. We go about answering this question by experimenting with the vocabularies which these people concocted. We redescribe ourselves, our situation, our past, in those terms and compare the results with alternative redescriptions which use the vocabularies of alternative figures. We ironists hope, by this continual redescription, to make the best selves for ourselves that we can.

Such comparison, such playing off of figures against each other, is the principal activity now covered by the term "literary criticism." Influential critics, the sort of critics who propose new canons – people like Arnold, Pater, Leavis, Eliot, Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling, Frank Kermode, Harold Bloom – are not in the business of explaining the real meaning of books, nor of evaluating something called their "literary merit." Rather, they spend their time placing books in the context of other books, figures in the context of other figures. This placing is done in the same way as we place a new friend or enemy in the context of old friends and enemies. In the course of doing so, we revise our opinions of both the old and the new. Simultaneously, we revise our own moral identity by revising our own final vocabulary. Literary criticism does for ironists what the search for universal moral principles is supposed to do for metaphysicians.

For us ironists, nothing can serve as a criticism of a final vocabulary save another such vocabulary; there is no answer to a redescription save a re-re-redescription. Since there is nothing beyond vocabularies which serves as a criterion of choice between them, criticism is a matter of looking on this picture and on that, not of comparing both pictures with the original. Nothing can serve as a criticism of a person save another person, or of a culture save an alternative culture – for persons and cultures are, for us, incarnated vocabularies. So our doubts about our own characters or our own culture can be resolved or assuaged only by enlarging our acquaintance. The easiest way of doing that is to read books, and so ironists spend more of their time placing books than in placing real live people. Ironists are afraid that they will get stuck in the vocabulary in which they were brought up if they only know the people in their own neighborhood, so they try to get acquainted with strange people (Alcibiades, Julien Sorel), strange families (the Karamazovs, the Casaubons), and strange communities (the Teutonic Knights, the Nuer, the mandarins of the Sung).

Ironists read literary critics, and take them as moral advisers, simply because such critics have an exceptionally large range of acquaintance. They are moral advisers not because they have special access to moral truth but because they have been around. They have read more books
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and are thus in a better position not to get trapped in the vocabulary of any single book. In particular, ironists hope that critics will help them perform the sort of dialectical feat which Hegel was so good at. That is, they hope critics will help them continue to admire books which are prima facie antithetical by performing some sort of synthesis. We would like to be able to admire both Blake and Arnold, both Nietzsche and Mill, both Marx and Baudelaire, both Trotsky and Eliot, both Nabokov and Orwell. So we hope some critic will show how these men’s books can be put together to form a beautiful mosaic. We hope that critics can redescribe these people in ways which will enlarge the canon, and will give us a set of classical texts as rich and diverse as possible. This task of enlarging the canon takes the place, for the ironist, of the attempt by moral philosophers to bring commonly accepted moral intuitions about particular cases into equilibrium with commonly accepted general moral principles.3

It is a familiar fact that the term “literary criticism” has been stretched further and further in the course of our century. It originally meant comparison and evaluation of plays, poems, and novels – with perhaps an occasional glance at the visual arts. Then it got extended to cover past criticism (for example, Dryden’s, Shelley’s, Arnold’s, and Eliot’s prose, as well as their verse). Then, quite quickly, it got extended to the books which had supplied past critics with their critical vocabulary and were supplying present critics with theirs. This meant extending it to theology, philosophy, social theory, reformist political programs, and revolutionary manifestos. In short, it meant extending it to every book likely to provide candidates for a person’s final vocabulary.

Once the range of literary criticism is stretched that far there is, of course, less and less point in calling it literary criticism. But for accidental historical reasons, having to do with the way in which intellectuals got jobs in universities by pretending to pursue academic specialties, the name has stuck. So instead of changing the term “literary criticism” to something like “culture criticism,” we have instead stretched the word “literature” to cover whatever the literary critics criticize. A literary critic in what T. J. Clarke has called the “Trotskyite-Eliotic” culture of New

3 I am here borrowing Rawls’s notion of “reflective equilibrium.” One might say that literary criticism tries to produce such equilibrium between the proper names of writers rather than between propositions. One of the easiest ways to express the difference between “analytic” and “Continental” philosophy is to say that the former sort trades in propositions and the latter in proper names. When Continental philosophy made its appearance in Anglo-American literature departments, in the guise of “literary theory,” this was not the discovery of a new method or approach but simply the addition of further names (the names of philosophers) to the range of those among which equilibrium was sought.
York in the ’30s and ’40s was expected to have read *The Revolution Betrayed* and *The Interpretation of Dreams*, as well as *The Wasteland, Man’s Hope*, and *An American Tragedy*. In the present Orwellian-Bloomian culture she is expected to have read *The Gulag Archipelago, Philosophical Investigations*, and *The Order of Things* as well as *Lolita* and *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. The word “literature” now covers just about every sort of book which might conceivably have moral relevance—might conceivably alter one’s sense of what is possible and important. The application of this term has nothing to do with the presence of “literary qualities” in a book. Rather than detecting and expounding such qualities, the critic is now expected to facilitate moral reflection by suggesting revisions in the canon of moral exemplars and advisers, and suggesting ways in which the tensions within this canon may be eased—or, where necessary, sharpened.

The rise of literary criticism to preeminence within the high culture of the democracies—its gradual and only semiconscious assumption of the cultural role once claimed (successively) by religion, science, and philosophy—has paralleled the rise in the proportion of ironists to metaphysicians among the intellectuals. This has widened the gap between the intellectuals and the public. For metaphysics is woven into the public rhetoric of modern liberal societies. So is the distinction between the moral and the “merely” aesthetic—a distinction which is often used to relegate “literature” to a subordinate position within culture and to suggest that novels and poems are irrelevant to moral reflection. Roughly speaking, the rhetoric of these societies takes for granted most of the oppositions which I claimed (at the beginning of Chapter 3) have become impediments to the culture of liberalism.

This situation has led to accusations of “irresponsibility” against ironist intellectuals. Some of these accusations come from know-nothings—people who have not read the books against which they warn others, and are just instinctively defending their own traditional roles. The know-nothings include religious fundamentalists, scientists who are offended at the suggestion that being “scientific” is not the highest intellectual virtue, and philosophers for whom it is an article of faith that rationality requires the deployment of general moral principles of the sort put forward by Mill and Kant. But the same accusations are made by writers who know what they are talking about, and whose views are entitled to respect. As I have already suggested, the most important of these writers is Habermas, who has mounted a sustained, detailed, carefully argued polemic against critics of the Enlightenment (e.g., Adorno, Foucault) who seem to turn their back on the social hopes of liberal societies. In
Habermas’s view, Hegel (and Marx) took the wrong tack in sticking to a philosophy of “subjectivity” – of self-reflection – rather than attempting to develop a philosophy of intersubjective communication.

As I said in Chapter 3, I want to defend ironism, and the habit of taking literary criticism as the presiding intellectual discipline, against polemics such as Habermas’s. My defense turns on making a firm distinction between the private and the public. Whereas Habermas sees the line of ironist thinking which runs from Hegel through Foucault and Derrida as destructive of social hope, I see this line of thought as largely irrelevant to public life and to political questions. Ironist theorists like Hegel, Nietzsche, Derrida, and Foucault seem to me invaluable in our attempt to form a private self-image, but pretty much useless when it comes to politics. Habermas assumes that the task of philosophy is to supply some social glue which will replace religious belief, and to see Enlightenment talk of “universality” and “rationality” as the best candidate for this glue. So he sees this kind of criticism of the Enlightenment, and of the idea of rationality, as dissolving the bonds between members of liberal societies. He thinks of the contextualism and perspectivalism for which I praised Nietzsche, in previous chapters, as irresponsible subjectivism.

Habermas shares with the Marxists, and with many of those whom he criticizes, the assumption that the real meaning of a philosophical view consists in its political implications, and that the ultimate frame of reference within which to judge a philosophical, as opposed to a merely “literary,” writer, is a political one. For the tradition within which Habermas is working, it is as obvious that political philosophy is central to philosophy as, for the analytic tradition, that philosophy of language is central. But, as I said in Chapter 3, it would be better to avoid thinking of philosophy as a “discipline” with “core problems” or with a social function. It would also be better to avoid the idea that philosophical reflection has a natural starting point – that one of its subareas is, in some natural order of justification, prior to the others. For, in the ironist view I have been offering, there is no such thing as a “natural” order of justification for beliefs or desires. Nor is there much occasion to use the distinctions between logic and rhetoric, or between philosophy and literature, or between rational and nonrational methods of changing other people’s minds. If there is no center to the self, then there are only

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4 Where these webs of belief and desire are pretty much the same for large numbers of people, it does become useful to speak of an “appeal to reason” or to “logic,” for this simply means an appeal to a widely shared common ground by reminding people of propositions which form part of this ground. More generally, all the traditional metaphysical distinctions can be given a respectable ironist sense by sociologizing them – treating them as distinctions between contingently existing sets of practices, or strategies employed within such practices, rather than between natural kinds.
different ways of weaving new candidates for belief and desire into ante-cendently existing webs of belief and desire. The only important political distinction in the area is that between the use of force and the use of persuasion.

Habermas, and other metaphysicians who are suspicious of a merely "literary" conception of philosophy, think that liberal political freedoms require some consensus about what is universally human. We ironists who are also liberals think that such freedoms require no consensus on any topic more basic than their own desirability. From our angle, all that matters for liberal politics is the widely shared conviction that, as I said in Chapter 3, we shall call "true" or "good" whatever is the outcome of free discussion – that if we take care of political freedom, truth and goodness will take care of themselves.

"Free discussion" here does not mean "free from ideology," but simply the sort which goes on when the press, the judiciary, the elections, and the universities are free, social mobility is frequent and rapid, literacy is universal, higher education is common, and peace and wealth have made possible the leisure necessary to listen to lots of different people and think about what they say. I share with Habermas the Peircelike claim that the only general account to be given of our criteria for truth is one which refers to "undistorted communication," but I do not think there is much to be said about what counts as "undistorted" except "the sort you get when you have democratic political institutions and the conditions for making these institutions function."6

The social glue holding together the ideal liberal society described in the previous chapter consists in little more than a consensus that the point of social organization is to let everybody have a chance at self-creation to the best of his or her abilities, and that that goal requires, besides peace and wealth, the standard "bourgeois freedoms." This conviction would not be based on a view about universally shared human ends, human rights, the nature of rationality, the Good for Man, nor anything else. It would be a conviction based on nothing more profound than the historical facts which suggest that without the protection of something like the institutions of bourgeois liberal society, people will

5 This is not to say that "true" can be defined as "what will be believed at the end of inquiry." For criticism of this Peircian doctrine, see Michael Williams, "Coherence, Justification and Truth," Review of Metaphysics 34 (1980): 243–272, and section 2 of my "Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth," in Ernest Lepore, ed. Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson, pp. 333–355.

6 In contrast, Habermas and those who agree with him that Ideologiekritik is central to philosophy think that there is quite a lot to say. The question turns on whether one thinks that one can give an interesting sense to the word "ideology" – make it mean more than "bad idea."
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be less able to work out their private salvations, create their private selfimages, reweave their webs of belief and desire in the light of whatever new people and books they happen to encounter. In such an ideal society, discussion of public affairs will revolve around (1) how to balance the needs for peace, wealth, and freedom when conditions require that one of these goals be sacrificed to one of the others and (2) how to equalize opportunities for self-creation and then leave people alone to use, or neglect, their opportunities.

The suggestion that this is all the social glue liberal societies need is subject to two main objections. The first is that as a practical matter, this glue is just not thick enough – that the (predominantly) metaphysical rhetoric of public life in the democracies is essential to the continuation of free institutions. The second is that it is psychologically impossible to be a liberal ironist – to be someone for whom “cruelty is the worst thing we do,” and to have no metaphysical beliefs about what all human beings have in common.

The first objection is a prediction about what would happen if ironism replaced metaphysics in our public rhetoric. The second is a suggestion that the public-private split I am advocating will not work: that no one can divide herself up into a private self-creator and a public liberal, that the same person cannot be, in alternate moments, Nietzsche and J. S. Mill.

I want to dismiss the first of these objections fairly quickly, in order to concentrate on the second. The former amounts to the prediction that the prevalence of ironist notions among the public at large, the general adoption of antimetaphysical, antiessentialist views about the nature of morality and rationality and human beings, would weaken and dissolve liberal societies. It is possible that this prediction is correct, but there is at least one excellent reason for thinking it false. This is the analogy with the decline of religious faith. That decline, and specifically the decline of people’s ability to take the idea of postmortem rewards seriously, has not weakened liberal societies, and indeed has strengthened them. Lots of people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries predicted the opposite. They thought that hope of heaven was required to supply moral fiber and social glue – that there was little point, for example, in having an atheist swear to tell the truth in a court of law. As it turned out, however, willingness to endure suffering for the sake of future reward was transferable from individual rewards to social ones, from one’s hopes for paradise to one’s hopes for one’s grandchildren.7

7 Hans Blumenberg takes this transfer as central to the development of modern thought and society, and he makes a good case.
The reason liberalism has been strengthened by this switch is that whereas belief in an immortal soul kept being buffeted by scientific discoveries and by philosophers' attempts to keep pace with natural science, it is not clear that any shift in scientific or philosophical opinion could hurt the sort of social hope which characterizes modern liberal societies—the hope that life will eventually be freer, less cruel, more leisureed, richer in goods and experiences, not just for our descendants but for everybody's descendants. If you tell someone whose life is given meaning by this hope that philosophers are waxing ironic over real essence, the objectivity of truth, and the existence of an ahistorical human nature, you are unlikely to arouse much interest, much less do any damage. The idea that liberal societies are bound together by philosophical beliefs seems to me ludicrous. What binds societies together are common vocabularies and common hopes. The vocabularies are, typically, parasitic on the hopes—in the sense that the principal function of the vocabularies is to tell stories about future outcomes which compensate for present sacrifices.

Modern, literate, secular societies depend on the existence of reasonably concrete, optimistic, and plausible political scenarios, as opposed to scenarios about redemption beyond the grave. To retain social hope, members of such a society need to be able to tell themselves a story about how things might get better, and to see no insuperable obstacles to this story's coming true. If social hope has become harder lately, this is not because the clerks have been committing treason but because, since the end of World War II, the course of events has made it harder to tell a convincing story of this sort. The cynical and impregnable Soviet Empire, the continuing shortsightedness and greed of the surviving democracies, and the exploding, starving populations of the Southern Hemisphere make the problems our parents faced in the 1930s—Fascism and unemployment—look almost manageable. People who try to update and rewrite the standard social democratic scenario about human equality, the scenario which their grandparents wrote around the turn of the century, are not having much success. The problems which metaphysically inclined social thinkers believe to be caused by our failure to find the right sort of theoretical glue—a philosophy which can command wide assent in an individualistic and pluralistic society—are, I think, caused by a set of historical contingencies. These contingencies are making it easy to see the last few hundred years of European and American history—centuries of increasing public hope and private ironism—as an island in time, surrounded by misery, tyranny, and chaos. As Orwell put it, "The democratic vistas seem to end in barbed wire."

I shall come back to this point about the loss of social hope when I
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discuss Orwell in Chapter 8. For the moment, I am simply trying to disentangle the public question "Is absence of metaphysics politically dangerous?" from the private question "Is ironism compatible with a sense of human solidarity?" To do so, it may help to distinguish the way nominalism and historicism look at present, in a liberal culture whose public rhetoric — the rhetoric in which the young are socialized — is still metaphysical, from the way they might look in a future whose public rhetoric is borrowed from nominalists and historicists. We tend to assume that nominalism and historicism are the exclusive property of intellectuals, of high culture, and that the masses cannot be so blasé about their own final vocabularies. But remember that once upon a time atheism, too, was the exclusive property of intellectuals.

In the ideal liberal society, the intellectuals would still be ironists, although the nonintellectuals would not. The latter would, however, be commonsensically nominalist and historicist. So they would see themselves as contingent through and through, without feeling any particular doubts about the contingencies they happened to be. They would not be bookish, nor would they look to literary critics as moral advisers. But they would be commonsensical nonmetaphysicians, in the way in which more and more people in the rich democracies have been commonsensical nontheists. They would feel no more need to answer the questions "Why are you a liberal? Why do you care about the humiliation of strangers?" than the average sixteenth-century Christian felt to answer the question "Why are you a Christian?" or than most people nowadays feel to answer the question "Are you saved?" Such a person would not need a justification for her sense of human solidarity, for she was not raised to play the language game in which one asks and gets justifications for that sort of belief. Her culture is one in which doubts about the public rhetoric of the culture are met not by Socratic requests for definitions and principles, but by Deweyan requests for concrete alternatives and programs. Such a culture could, as far as I can see, be every bit as self-critical and every bit as devoted to human equality as our own familiar, and still metaphysical, liberal culture — if not more so.

But even if I am right in thinking that a liberal culture whose public rhetoric is nominalist and historicist is both possible and desirable, I cannot go on to claim that there could or ought to be a culture whose public rhetoric is ironist. I cannot imagine a culture which socialized its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialization. Irony seems inherently a private matter. On my

8 Nietzsche said, with a sneer, "Democracy is Christianity made natural" (Will to Power, no. 215). Take away the sneer, and he was quite right.

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definition, an ironist cannot get along without the contrast between the
final vocabulary she inherited and the one she is trying to create for
herself. Irony is, if not intrinsically resentful, at least reactive. Ironists
have to have something to have doubts about, something from which to
be alienated.

This brings me to the second of the two objections I listed above, and
thus to the idea that there is something about being an ironist which
unsuits one for being a liberal, and that a simple split between private
and public concerns is not enough to overcome the tension.

One can make this claim plausible by saying that there is at least a
prima facie tension between the idea that social organization aims at
human equality and the idea that human beings are simply incarnated
vocabularies. The idea that we all have an overriding obligation to dimin-
ish cruelty, to make human beings equal in respect to their liability to
suffering, seems to take for granted that there is something within
human beings which deserves respect and protection quite independent-
ly of the language they speak. It suggests that a nonlinguistic ability, the
ability to feel pain, is what is important, and that differences in vocabu-
laries are much less important.

Metaphysics – in the sense of a search for theories which will get at
real essence – tries to make sense of the claim that human beings are
something more than centerless webs of beliefs and desires. The reason
many people think such a claim essential to liberalism is that if men and
women were, indeed, nothing more than sentential attitudes – nothing
more than the presence or absence of dispositions toward the use of
sentences phrased in some historically conditioned vocabulary – then
not only human nature, but human solidarity, would begin to seem an
eccentric and dubious idea. For solidarity with all possible vocabularies
seems impossible. Metaphysicians tell us that unless there is some sort of
common ur-vocabulary, we have no “reason” not to be cruel to those
whose final vocabularies are very unlike ours. A universalistic ethics
seems incompatible with irony, simply because it is hard to imagine
stating such an ethic without some doctrine about the nature of man.
Such an appeal to real essence is the antithesis of irony.

So the fact that greater openness, more room for self-creation, is the
standard demand made by ironists on their societies is balanced by the
fact that this demand seems to be merely for the freedom to speak a kind
of ironic theoretical metalanguage which makes no sense to the man in
the street. One can easily imagine an ironist badly wanting more free-
dom, more open space, for the Baudelaires and the Nabokovs, while not
giving a thought to the sort of thing Orwell wanted: for example, getting
more fresh air down into the coal mines, or getting the Party off the backs of the proles. This sense that the connection between irony and liberalism is very loose, and that between metaphysics and liberalism pretty tight, is what makes people distrust irony in philosophy and aestheticism in literature as "elitist."

This is why writers like Nabokov, who claim to despise "topical trash" and to aim at "aesthetic bliss," look morally dubious and perhaps politically dangerous. Ironist philosophers like Nietzsche and Heidegger often look the same, even if we forget about their use by the Nazis. By contrast, even when we are mindful of the use made of Marxism by gangs of thugs calling themselves "Marxist governments," the use made of Christianity by the Inquisition, and the use Gradgrind made of utilitarianism, we cannot mention Marxism, Christianity, or utilitarianism without respect. For there was a time when each served human liberty. It is not obvious that irony ever has.

The ironist is the typical modern intellectual, and the only societies which give her the freedom to articulate her alienation are liberal ones. So it is tempting to infer that ironists are naturally antiliberal. Lots of people, from Julien Benda to C. P. Snow, have taken a connection between irony and antiliberalism to be almost self-evident. Nowadays many people take for granted that a taste for "deconstruction" — one of the ironists' current catchwords — is a good sign of lack of moral responsibility. They assume that the mark of the morally trustworthy intellectual is a kind of straightforward, unselfconscious, transparent prose — precisely the kind of prose no self-creating ironist wants to write.

Although some of these inferences may be fallacious and some of these assumptions ungrounded, nevertheless there is something right about the suspicion which irony arouses. Ironism, as I have defined it, results from awareness of the power of re-description. But most people do not want to be redescribed. They want to be taken on their own terms — taken seriously just as they are and just as they talk. The ironist tells them that the language they speak is up for grabs by her and her kind. There is something potentially very cruel about that claim. For 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.9 Consider what happens when a child’s precious possessions — the little things around which he weaves fantasies that make him a little different from all other children — are redescribed as "trash," and thrown away. Or consider what happens when these possessions are made to

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look ridiculous alongside the possessions of another, richer, child. Something like that presumably happens to a primitive culture when it is conquered by a more advanced one. The same sort of thing sometimes happens to nonintellectuals in the presence of intellectuals. All these are milder forms of what happened to Winston Smith when he was arrested: They broke his paperweight and punched Julia in the belly, thus initiating the process of making him describe himself in O'Brien's terms rather than his own. The redescribing ironist, by threatening one's final vocabulary, and thus one's ability to make sense of oneself in one's own terms rather than hers, suggests that one's self and one's world are futile, obsolete, powerless. Redescription often humiliates.

But notice that redescription and possible humiliation are no more closely connected with ironyism than with metaphysics. The metaphysician also redescribes, even though he does it in the name of reason rather than in the name of the imagination. Redescription is a generic trait of the intellectual, not a specific mark of the ironist. So why do ironists arouse special resentment? We get a clue to an answer from the fact that the metaphysician typically backs up his redescription with argument — or, as the ironist redescribes the process, disguises his redescription under the cover of argument. But this in itself does not solve the problem, for argument, like redescription, is neutral between liberalism and antiliberalism. Presumably the relevant difference is that to offer an argument in support of one's redescription amounts to telling the audience that they are being educated, rather than simply reprogrammed — that the Truth was already in them and merely needed to be drawn out into the light. Redescription which presents itself as uncovering the interlocutor's true self, or the real nature of a common public world which the speaker and the interlocutor share, suggests that the person being redescribed is being empowered, not having his power diminished. This suggestion is enhanced if it is combined with the suggestion that his previous, false, self-description was imposed upon him by the world, the flesh, the devil, his teachers, or his repressive society. The convert to Christianity or Marxism is made to feel that being redescribed amounts to an uncovering of his true self or his real interests. He comes to believe that his acceptance of that redescription seals an alliance with a power mightier than any of those which have oppressed him in the past.

The metaphysician, in short, thinks that there is a connection between redescription and power, and that the right redescription can make us free. The ironist offers no similar assurance. She has to say that our chances of freedom depend on historical contingencies which are only occasionally influenced by our self-redescriptions. She knows of no power of the same size as the one with which the metaphysician claims
acquaintance. When she claims that her redescription is better, she cannot give the term "better" the reassuring weight the metaphysician gives it when he explicates it as "in better correspondence with reality."

So I conclude that what the ironist is being blamed for is not an inclination to humiliate but an inability to empower. There is no reason the ironist cannot be a liberal, but she cannot be a "progressive" and "dynamic" liberal in the sense in which liberal metaphysicians sometimes claim to be. For she cannot offer the same sort of social hope as metaphysicians offer. She cannot claim that adopting her redescription of yourself or your situation makes you better able to conquer the forces which are marshaled against you. On her account, that ability is a matter of weapons and luck, not a matter of having truth on your side, or having detected the "movement of history."

There are, then, two differences between the liberal ironist and the liberal metaphysician. The first concerns their sense of what redescription can do for liberalism; the second, their sense of the connection between public hope and private irony. The first difference is that the ironist thinks that the only redescriptions which serve liberal purposes are those which answer the question "What humiliates?" whereas the metaphysician also wants to answer the question "Why should I avoid humiliating?" The liberal metaphysician wants our wish to be kind to be bolstered by an argument, one which entails a self-redescription which will highlight a common human essence, an essence which is something more than our shared ability to suffer humiliation. The liberal ironist just wants our chances of being kind, of avoiding the humiliation of others, to be expanded by redescription. She thinks that recognition of a common susceptibility to humiliation is the only social bond that is needed. Whereas the metaphysician takes the morally relevant feature of the other human beings to be their relation to a larger shared power — rationality, God, truth, or history, for example — the ironist takes the morally relevant definition of a person, a moral subject, to be "something that can be humiliated." Her sense of human solidarity is based on a sense of a common danger, not on a common possession or a shared power.

What, then, of the point I made earlier: that people want to be described in their own terms? As I have already suggested, the liberal ironist meets this point by saying that we need to distinguish between redescription for private and for public purposes. For my private purposes, I may redescribe you and everybody else in terms which have nothing to do with my attitude toward your actual or possible suffering. My private purposes, and the part of my final vocabulary which is not relevant to my public actions, are none of your business. But as I am a
liberal, the part of my final vocabulary which is relevant to such actions requires me to become aware of all the various ways in which other human beings whom I might act upon can be humiliated. So the liberal ironist needs as much imaginative acquaintance with alternative final vocabularies as possible, not just for her own edification, but in order to understand the actual and possible humiliation of the people who use these alternative final vocabularies.

The liberal metaphysician, by contrast, wants a final vocabulary with an internal and organic structure, one which is not split down the middle by a public-private distinction, not just a patchwork. He thinks that acknowledging that everybody wants to be taken on their own terms commits us to finding a least common denominator of those terms, a single description which will suffice for both public and private purposes, for self-definition and for one’s relations with others. He prays, with Socrates, that the inner and the outer man will be as one — that irony will no longer be necessary. He is prone to believe, with Plato, that the parts of the soul and of the state correspond, and that distinguishing the essential from the accidental in the soul will help us distinguish justice from injustice in the state. Such metaphors express the liberal metaphysician’s belief that the metaphysical public rhetoric of liberalism must remain central to the final vocabulary of the individual liberal, because it is the portion which expressed what she shares with the rest of humanity — the portion that makes solidarity possible.

But that distinction between a central, shared, obligatory portion and a peripheral, idiosyncratic, optional portion of one’s final vocabulary is just the distinction which the ironist refuses to draw. She thinks that what unites her with the rest of the species is not a common language but just susceptibility to pain and in particular to that special sort of pain which the brutes do not share with the humans — humiliation. On her conception, human solidarity is not a matter of sharing a common truth or a common goal but of sharing a common selfish hope, the hope that one’s world — the little things around which one has woven into one’s final vocabulary — will not be destroyed. For public purposes, it does not matter if everybody’s final vocabulary is different, as long as there is enough overlap so that everybody has some words with which to express

10 Habermas, for example, attempts to save something of Enlightenment rationalism through a “discourse theory of truth” which will show that the “moral point of view” is a “universal” and “does not express merely the moral intuitions of the average, male, middle-class member of a modern Western society” (Peter Dews, ed., Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jürgen Habermas [London: Verso, 1986]). For the ironist, the fact that nobody had ever had such intuitions before the rise of modern Western societies is quite irrelevant to the question of whether she should share them.
the desirability of entering into other people's fantasies as well as into one's own. But those overlapping words — words like "kindness" or "decency" or "dignity" — do not form a vocabulary which all human beings can reach by reflection on their natures. Such reflection will not produce anything except a heightened awareness of the possibility of suffering. It will not produce a reason to care about suffering. What matters for the liberal ironist is not finding such a reason but making sure that she notices suffering when it occurs. Her hope is that she will not be limited by her own final vocabulary when faced with the possibility of humiliating someone with a quite different final vocabulary.

For the liberal ironist, skill at imaginative identification does the work which the liberal metaphysician would like to have done by a specifically moral motivation — rationality, or the love of God, or the love of truth. The ironist does not see her ability to envisage, and desire to prevent, the actual and possible humiliation of others — despite differences of sex, race, tribe, and final vocabulary — as more real or central or "essentially human" than any other part of herself. Indeed, she regards it as an ability and a desire which, like the ability to formulate differential equations, arose rather late in the history of humanity and is still a rather local phenomenon. It is associated primarily with Europe and America in the last three hundred years. It is not associated with any power larger than that embodied in a concrete historical situation, for example, the power of the rich European and American democracies to disseminate their customs to other parts of the world, a power which was enlarged by certain past contingencies and has been diminished by certain more recent contingencies.

Whereas the liberal metaphysician thinks that the good liberal knows certain crucial propositions to be true, the liberal ironist thinks the good liberal has a certain kind of know-how. Whereas he thinks of the high culture of liberalism as centering around theory, she thinks of it as centering around literature (in the older and narrower sense of that term — plays, poems, and, especially, novels). He thinks that the task of the intellectual is to preserve and defend liberalism by backing it up with some true propositions about large subjects, but she thinks that this task is to increase our skill at recognizing and describing the different sorts of little things around which individuals or communities center their fantasies and their lives. The ironist takes the words which are fundamental to metaphysics, and in particular to the public rhetoric of the liberal democracies, as just another text, just another set of little human things. Her ability to understand what it is like to make one's life center around these words is not distinct from her ability to grasp what it is like to make
one's life center around the love of Christ or of Big Brother. Her liberalism does not consist in her devotion to those particular words but in her ability to grasp the function of many different sets of words.

These distinctions help explain why ironist philosophy has not done, and will not do, much for freedom and equality. But they also explain why “literature” (in the older and narrower sense), as well as ethnography and journalism, is doing a lot. As I said earlier, pain is nonlinguistic: It is what we human beings have that ties us to the nonlanguage-using beasts. So victims of cruelty, people who are suffering, do not have much in the way of a language. That is why there is no such things as the “voice of the oppressed” or the “language of the victims.” The language the victims once used is not working anymore, and they are suffering too much to put new words together. So the job of putting their situation into language is going to have to be done for them by somebody else. The liberal novelist, poet, or journalist is good at that. The liberal theorist usually is not.

The suspicion that ironism in philosophy has not helped liberalism is quite right, but that is not because ironist philosophy is inherently cruel. It is because liberals have come to expect philosophy to do a certain job — namely, answering questions like “Why not be cruel?” and “Why be kind?” — and they feel that any philosophy which refuses this assignment must be heartless. But that expectation is a result of a metaphysical upbringing. If we could get rid of the expectation, liberals would not ask ironist philosophy to do a job which it cannot do, and which it defines itself as unable to do.

The metaphysician's association of theory with social hope and of literature with private perfection is, in an ironist liberal culture, reversed. Within a liberal metaphysical culture the disciplines which were charged with penetrating behind the many private appearances to the one general common reality — theology, science, philosophy — were the ones which were expected to bind human beings together, and thus to help eliminate cruelty. Within an ironist culture, by contrast, it is the disciplines which specialize in thick description of the private and idiosyncratic which are assigned this job. In particular, novels and ethnographies which sensitize one to the pain of those who do not speak our language must do the job which demonstrations of a common human nature were supposed to do. Solidarity has to be constructed out of little pieces, rather than found already waiting, in the form of an ur-language which all of us recognize when we hear it.

Conversely, within our increasingly ironist culture, philosophy has become more important for the pursuit of private perfection rather than for any social task. In the next two chapters, I shall claim that ironist
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philosophers are private philosophers – philosophers concerned to intensify the irony of the nominalist and the historicist. Their work is ill-suited to public purposes, of no use to liberals qua liberals. In Chapters 7 and 8, I shall offer examples of the way in which novelists can do something which is socially useful – help us attend to the springs of cruelty in ourselves, as well as to the fact of its occurrence in areas where we had not noticed it.