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British irony, global justice: a pragmatic reading of Chris Brown, Banksy and Ricky Gervais

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Abstract. The article provides a critical analysis of the concept of irony and how it relates to global justice. Taking Richard Rorty as a lead, it is suggested that irony can foreground a sense of doubt over our own most heartfelt beliefs regarding justice. This provides at least one ideal sense in which irony can impact the discussion of global ethics by pitching less as a discourse of grand universals and more as a set of hopeful narratives about how to reduce suffering. The article then extends this notion via the particular – *and particularly* – ethnocentric case of British Irony. Accepting certain difficulties with any definition of British Irony the article reads the interventions of three protagonists on the subject of global justice – Chris Brown, Banksy and Ricky Gervais. It is argued that their considerations bring to light important nuances in irony relating to the importance of playfulness, tragedy, pain, self-criticism and paradox. The position is then qualified against the (opposing) critiques that irony is either too radical, or, too conservative a quality to make a meaningful impact on the discussion of global justice. Ultimately, irony is defended as a critical and imaginative form, which can (but does not necessarily) foster a greater awareness of the possibilities and limits for thinking/doing global justice.

"The comic frame, in making a man the student of himself, makes it possible for him to 'transcend' occasions when he has been tricked or cheated, since he can readily put such discouragements into his 'assets' column, under the heading of 'experience'. . . . In sum, the comic frame should enable people to be observers of themselves, while acting.[1]

Blackadder: Baldrick, have you no idea what irony is?
Baldrick: Yes, it's like goldy and bronzy only it's made out of iron."

Introduction

Recent years have seen a growing interest in Richard Rorty's concept of *irony* and its potential role in a political theory of global ethics.[2] In a similar, but unrelated, set of

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[1] Kenneth Burke, 'Comic Correctives', in *Attitudes Towards History*, cited from R. Rorty, 'The End of Leninism, Havel, and Social Hope', in R. Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 240.

[2] C. Brown (1999), 'Universal Human Rights: A Critique', in T. Dunne and N. Wheeler (eds), *Human Rights in Global Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 103–27. Molly Cochran, 'The Liberal Ironist, ethics and International Relations Theory', *Millennium: Journal of International*

arguments irony has been celebrated for its potential to de-stabilise and de-naturalise hegemonic discourses of globalisation.[3] At one level, this growing interest in irony might be understood in terms of a liberal recognition of the relativity of one's own position.[4] On this view, irony is only the latest version of the age-old liberal respect for the validity of alternative arguments. At another level though, it may also suggest a greater sensitivity, on the part of political theorists, to the important role of 'non-rational' forms of political intervention like irony, but also aesthetics, and narrative. To wit, Rorty argues, it is due to the political impact of, what he termed, 'ironist' writers like Orwell and Nabokov, that 'the novel, the movie, and the TV program have, gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress'.[5]

The article contributes to this emergent interest in the political role of irony by interrogating a particular(ly) ethnocentric version – *British Irony* – as a potential 'vehicle of moral change and progress' by asking how it confronts the question of global justice.

The famous British sense of humour can draw on any mix of irony, self-deprecation, absurdity, a slightly unfortunate affection for punning, and an overwhelming sense of futility (often related to the weather). But irony is perhaps the chief element in the mix. It is the quality we invoke when expressing incredulity at blank-faced Americans. And irony allows us to use such generalisation, because we know it is just for fun, or, perhaps better, because we acknowledge a capacity for racism, but will not repress the fact, and let it spill over through xenophobia.[6] However, this extension is more than a merely semantic gesture. Important resources exist in the specific contingencies of the evolution of British irony.

The rise to popularity of British irony is historically tied to the end of empire and therefore intimately bound up with the experience and protracted self analysis brought on by imperial decline. As Stuart Ward, argues: 'Ideas about British 'character' . . . became difficult to sustain as the external prop of the imperial world was progressively weakened. Notions of duty, service, loyalty, deference, stoic endurance and self restraint and gentlemanly conduct were insidiously undermined by the steady erosion of the imperial edifice'.[7] The comedy high point of such

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Studies, 25:1 (1996), pp. 29–52. O. Parker and J. Brassett, 'Contingent Borders, Ambiguous Ethics: Migrants in (International) Political Theory', *International Studies Quarterly*, 49:2 (2005), pp. 233–53. Will Smith, 'Cosmopolitan Citizenship: Virtue, Irony and Worldliness', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 10:1 (2007), pp. 37–52. Bryan Tuner, 'Cosmopolitan Virtue, Globalization and Patriotism', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 19:1–2 (2002), pp. 45–63.

[3] Marieke De Goede, 'Carnival of Money: Politics of dissent in an era of globalizing finance', in Louise Amoore (ed.), *The Global Resistance Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 379–91. See also J. Brassett, 'A Pragmatic Approach to the Tobin Tax Campaign: The Politics of Sentimental Education', *European Journal of International Relations*, forthcoming (2008).

[4] Ernest Gellner (1996), *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals* (London: Penguin, 1989). J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, new edn (London: Penguin Classics). See also C. Brown, 'Universal Human Rights: A Critique', in T. Dunne and N. Wheeler (eds), *Human Rights in Global Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 103–27.

[5] R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. *xvi*.

[6] *Borat: the Movie* is only the latest in a long tradition of such racial therapy. See also Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, on anti-Semitism *Derek and Clive Ad Nauseam* (London: Virgin Records). This approach is of course prevalent in the US also with Lenny Bruce's treatment of the word 'nigger' providing perhaps the most famous example, *Let the Buyer Beware* (New York: Sony Audio CD, 2004).

[7] Stuart Ward, *British Culture and the End of Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 12.

self-critique can arguably be found in Monty Python and sketches such as the 'Upper Class Twit of the Year' and the 'Ministry of Silly Walks', but there were of course deeper issues at hand:

> Liberal assumptions about the humanitarian benefits of British 'civilisation' were equally subject to critical attention whenever coercion was needed to stem the tide of imperial decline. In the immediate aftermath of Suez, for example, the Duke of Edinburgh, made a television appearance for British children where he assured his audience that 'this great family of nations of ours . . . sticks together not by force but because we like each other'.[8]

In the emptiness of those last words we see perhaps one example of the opportunity afforded to comedians of the 1960's satire boom.

Irony is how Britons deal with their collective sense of loss: loss of empire, loss of the moral high ground, loss of economic and military credibility, loss of ignorance to Empire's excesses. In this way, irony can be more than the merely playful recognition of our own certain fragilities then. In this article, it will be suggested that irony is one of the greatest ethical resources on offer to (perhaps from) the British: an abject collective sense of ethical limits. The argument is developed over three sections that seek to both develop Rorty's concept of irony, by thinking it through the prism of British irony, and highlight some ways in which the limits of global ethics might be understood and contested.

Section 1 begins with a brief discussion of the concept of irony. It draws on the work of Richard Rorty to suggest that irony is an important ethical quality, on its own terms.[9] A capacity for self-reflective distance, a general sense of doubt about our own most heartfelt beliefs, and an appreciation of the 'comic frame',[10] are all important qualifications, on the very *possibility* of ethics. In Rorty's usage, irony means nothing can underwrite a liberal belief in ethical values like justice, democracy, and equality. But such awareness should only foster a greater sensitivity to the suffering of others by recognising that it is not Truth, or God which gives power to ethics, but the practical effects of seeing more and more people as fellow sufferers. As he suggests, 'my doubts about the effectiveness of appeals to moral knowledge are doubts about causal efficacy, not about epistemic status'.[11] As well as developing the importance of irony therefore, Rorty further suggests a turn to narrative, film, art, poetry and other forms of cultural production as equally important for the development of ethical sentiments.[12]

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[8] Ibid., p. 12.

[9] R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[10] R. Rorty, 'The End of Leninism, Havel, and Social Hope', in R. Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 240.

[11] R. Rorty, 'Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality', in *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 172.

[12] Quintessentially see R. Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers Volume 4* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 42–8. Of course, Rorty's grouping of ironist theorists like Nietzsche and Derrida, with what he termed ironist writers like Nabokov is not unproblematic. This might appear as a semantic circumvention of the tough questions posed by post-structural philosophy, a way of placing such insights in the category of 'merely art' or 'merely culture'. In this paper, I proceed against such a view and instead regard philosophy and culture as co-extensive/co-constitutive. Rorty's move against the philosophy-culture distinction was designed to ward against the undue privileging of a 'philosophical' over any other type of argument/intervention. The pragmatic questions, as Rorty saw it, were how to make social institutions more just and less cruel. It didn't really matter to him whether this was achieved via theoretical tracts or songs, or both, and many other possible resistances besides.

Section 2 develops an empirical extension of Rorty's concept of irony as a specifically ethical quality. While Rorty was very concerned with the contingency of knowledge throughout his career he said strangely little about the contingency of irony in different contexts. That is to say, the self doubt which he associates with the figure of the 'liberal ironist'[13] is surely experienced in different ways by members of different communities? Or, more bluntly, the British conception of irony is distinct from the American. Therefore the article examines three contemporary British interventions on the question of global justice, which respectively hail from political theory, 'graffiti' and comedy.[14] Firstly, it interrogates the use of irony by Chris Brown in his discussions of human rights, IR theory, and his recognition of the need for selective judgment in the face of ambivalence.[15] In particular it draws out Brown's understanding of indeterminacy and tragedy in discussions of global justice. Secondly, it 'reads' the role of ironic inversion, in the political graffiti and blogs of Banksy. Beyond the sometimes cynical first impression, that some of Banksy's inversions make (a starving Ethiopian child with a Burger King hat, for instance), a subtle, yet deeply hopeful, concern with human suffering can be detected.[16] Returning to Rorty, this ability to increase our sensitivity to suffering, and to do it in our own 'back yard' – opposite our office window, and in our theme parks – forms a politically important contribution to the expansion of the scope of ethical concern. And thirdly, the article turns to the discussion of global justice, as it was developed through recent charity/global justice campaigns like Comic Relief and Make Poverty History (MPH).[17] In particular, the specific interventions of Ricky Gervais are read as a sophisticated critique of the way we frame the 'Us' and the 'Them' of popular campaigns for global justice. The popular appeal of such moments arguably means that British irony is closely inter-twined with, *and impacting upon*, the public discussion of global justice.

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[13] R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 73. This point is discussed at some length below.

[14] This grouping of political theory with graffiti and humour requires some explanation. On the one hand, it speaks to Rorty's concern with how cultural assumptions permeate knowledge – witness his preoccupation with the Continental/Anglo-Saxon divide in philosophy. As a cultural trait British irony simply infuses the work of the three protagonists in this paper. On the other hand, it is a direct extension of what Rorty meant by the term 'philosophy as cultural politics'. Rorty sought to show how the important aspects of philosophy are not whether it can solve deep philosophical problems about truth or dilemmas between appearance and reality, but rather whether it can affect people's lives. He followed Dewey to suggest that philosophers 'were never going to be able to see things under the aspect of eternity; they should instead try to contribute to humanity's ongoing conversation about what to do with itself. The progress of this conversation has engendered new social practices, and changes in the vocabularies deployed in moral and political deliberation. To suggest further novelties is to intervene in cultural politics'. On this view, philosophy is potentially co-extensive with cultural practices like the novel and art. While some may wish to maintain a separation between the two Rorty argues 'The professionalization of philosophy, its transformation into an academic discipline, was a necessary evil. But it has encouraged attempts to make philosophy into an autonomous quasi-science. These attempts should be resisted. The more philosophy interacts with other human activities- not just natural science, but art, literature, religion and politics as well – the more relevant to cultural politics it becomes, and the more useful. The more it strives for autonomy, the less attention it deserves.' R. Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers, Volume 4* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. *ix–x*. What follows should be read as a modest attempt to blur the philosophy-culture distinction.

[15] C. Brown, 'Universal Human Rights: A Critique', in T. Dunne and N. Wheeler (eds), *Human Rights in Global Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). See also 'Selective Humanitarianism: in defense of inconsistency', in D. K. Chatterjee and D. E. Scheid (eds), *Ethics and Foreign Intervention* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003), pp. 31–50.

[16] Banksy, *Wall and Piece* (London: Century, 2005).

[17] See also J. Brassett, 'Cosmopolitanism vs Terrorism? Discourses of Ethical Possibility Before and After 7/7', in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, forthcoming (2008).

The discussion avowedly places 'us', both the author and the reader, on uncomfortable territory. Speaking about 'British Irony' is a potentially violent conceit. Why the British? *Who* are the British?[18] Why is their self-conscious wrestling with a colonial past of any benefit to the broader discussion of global ethics? Is not the thought that comedy is a resource for ethics, quite patronising, almost hurtful? One might persuasively consider, for instance, that water, food, security, shelter, indeed social welfare in general, might be a better place to start. However, the intention is not to overlook such points. Instead, the aim is to draw out and discuss the particular, and extant, theme of irony as it infers upon global ethics. The practical concerns of the pragmatic approach mean that if irony is in the mainstream of the British discussion of global justice, how might we engage it so as to foster greater sensitivity to suffering?[19] But also, what might we learn about the indeterminacies of global ethics from the comedy of Ricky Gervais? Ignoring irony would not only restrict from the important political impact/agency of the comic frame. It would also risk losing sight of the ambiguity, limitations and ambivalences of global ethics, which the dominant framings of global justice sometimes overlook. Irony in all forms can be instructive as well as effective.

Thus Section 3 draws these points together to (agonistically) think through the 'politics of the comic frame'. A central argument is that British irony 'can' provide an important set of qualifications and interventions on public discussions of global justice.[20] Firstly, irony generates an important critical self-distance. Especially in the context of broad-based public campaigns, which can sometimes sacrifice deeper debate to a simple campaign message, irony can be a useful qualification. Secondly, irony, in the British context, brings forward the possibility of indeterminate moral problems. This is, in Chris Brown's usage at least, a route to undermining the certainties of analytical political theory in the pursuit of a more engaged political theory of global ethics. And thirdly, a less pronounced point, but worthy of thinking through, there is certain solidarity in British irony, *the idea that we all get the joke.* It is often assumed that Britain is an individualistic society, but the commonalities of understanding which emerge from the (sophisticated) ironic positions examined here, suggests some form of community in critique (at least) of global ethics.

While the ironists used here differ in their relationship with power – Brown and Gervais are happy to critique from within, while Banksy has a more ambivalent position – they all in some way express the critical power of irony. On the one hand, irony can be playful: chiding us to drop the straight faced moral seriousness that sometimes freezes ethical (self-) critique. On the other hand, irony can connect up with tragedy. The indeterminacy of moral situations is more than an intellectual curiosity, it can open our discourse to the human suffering, that we are all connected to, and, in a sense, partake in. It is on this basis that irony can retain the (difficult) dual role of being both a critical yet deeply hopeful and imaginative contribution to the politics of global ethics.[21]

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[18] For instance, it could well be argued that the British sense of humor is the privilege of the English, while the Welsh, the Scots, the Irish, the Cornish, etc. cannot draw, as readily, on the luxury of a colonial history.

[19] Within the confines of this article I will use 'pragmatic approach' as a synonym for a 'Rortian approach'. This should not be taken to overlook the complex debates which surround Rorty's place within pragmatist philosophy. See for instance M. Festenstein, *Pragmatism and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997).

[20] As the final section addresses there is no sense in which irony 'must' generate straightforward interventions on global ethics. Differences in both intention and reception mean that 'irony' (like many political concepts) does not lead to straightforward lessons or outcomes.

Rorty's irony: between critique and imagination

Much of Richard Rorty's career was spent trying to persuade initiates that the broad differences between Anglo-American and Continental philosophy were less important, than the potential benefits of a healthy engagement.[22] In particular, his key work in political theory *Contingency Irony and Solidarity* (1989) was a grand attempt to reconcile the implications of post-structural thought, with the ongoing reformism of the liberal tradition. For the purposes of this article, what is interesting in this effort is his concern to draw back from some of the radically anarchistic implications of post-structural thought, the oft-cited charge of ethical relativism, to celebrate the role of *irony* as a critical, yet imaginative, contribution to ethical conversation. In this sense, and not un-controversially, he re-described the importance of post-structural thought:

> Skeptics like Nietzsche have urged that metaphysics and theology are transparent attempts to make altrusim look more reasonable than it is. [. . .] Their point is that at the 'deepest' level of the self there is *no* sense of human solidarity, that this sense is a 'mere' artefact of human socialisation. So such skeptics become antisocial. They turn their backs on the very idea of a community larger than a tiny circle of initiates.[23]

Rorty's point was that, while there is a lot of 'anti-social' noise amongst post-structural authors, this is perhaps due to the fact that they ask a different set of questions, to liberals. He suggested that post-structural authors are concerned to explore what private perfection might be like, their 'cause' is to pick away at the most totalising aspects of modern public discourses, to protect and foster an arena of existential freedom, an arena in which, Nietzsche urged, we might become the 'poets of our own lives'.[24]

The liberal approach to ethics, expounded by writers like Rawls and Habermas, is engaged in a very different, *shared* social effort: 'the effort to make our institutions and practices more just and less cruel' (Ibid. *xiv*). They have little time for the endless focus on particularity and 'closure' which occupies post-structural thought. Rorty therefore attempted to show how, if we understand these two approaches as simply animated by different objectives, they could exist quite happily side by side, occasionally *conversant*.

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[21] Here my understanding of irony differs from Simon Critchley's understanding of humour. There are paralells, when for instance, he argues that 'By producing a consciousness of contingency, humour can change the situation in which we find ourselves, and can even have a critical function with respect to society.' However, he goes on to identify a form of reactionary ethnic humour where 'the British laugh at the Irish, the Canadians laugh at the Newfies, the Americans laugh at the Poles [. . .] Such humour is not laughter at power, but the powerful laughing at the powerless'. S. Critchley, *On Humour* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 10–12. My suggestion is that irony is not simply parochial, nor is irony simply a mechanism to make us feel shame (See ibid., p. 74). Rather it suggests a way in which we 'might' individually and collectively become aware of the ethical ambiguities and paradoxes that we live with, and through which global ethics is negotiated.

[22] For an extended review of Rorty's thought see J. Brassett, 'Richard Rorty', in J. Edkins and N. Vaughan-Williams (eds), *Critical Theorists and International Relations*, forthcoming (2008).

[23] R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. *vii*.

[24] R, Rorty, 'Justice as a Larger Loyalty', in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers, Volume 4* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 110.

Of course, along the way 'posties' and Enlightenment liberals have ruffled each other's feathers. Each side has done a good job of setting their project in terms of opposition towards the other.[25] But, Rorty argued, to conclude from these frictions that we must choose between camps would be to make a theoretical problem out of a dispute between personalities. Instead he argues, 'We shall only think of these two kinds of writers as *opposed* if we think that a more comprehensive philosophical outlook would let us hold self-creation and justice, private perfection and human solidarity, in a single vision.'[26] For Rorty '[t]he 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'.[27] The task is therefore to allow them both, the theoretical and political space to flourish.

Rorty sketches a figure of the 'liberal ironist'. They are liberal because they agree with Judith Shklars definition of a liberal as someone who thinks that 'cruelty is the worst thing we do'. They are ironist because they seek to face up to the contingency of their own most heartfelt beliefs and desires. For Rorty the liberal ironist meets three broad criteria:

> (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 realises that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophises 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.[28]

Therefore irony appears to Rorty as an essentially, and avowedly, ethical quality: a deep recognition of the limits of our contingent position, that nothing can underwrite our belief in justice and democracy. Moreover, irony appears as a kind of reflective self-distance, which is aware of the ethical attractiveness of other views, be it religion, or anarchism. And here lies the precariousness of the position.

Rorty concedes that the irony he celebrates, is often viewed as 'intrinsically hostile not only to democracy but to human solidarity' (Ibid. *xv*). But he argues, 'Hostility to a particular historically conditioned and possibly transient form of solidarity is not hostility to solidarity as such'.[29] There is nothing to suggest that post-metaphysical forms of solidarity could not exist. There is nothing to suggest that solidarity cannot be 'imagined' in alternative ways. For *liberal* ironists, ethics and justice is an (infinitely) ongoing project of contest and deliberation, *not a final destination*:

> 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 ones way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old.[30]

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[25] J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1987).

[26] R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. *xiv*.

[27] Ibid., p. *xiv*.

[28] Ibid., p. 73.

[29] Ibid., p. *xv*.

[30] Ibid., p. 73.

The method of Rorty's liberal ironist is therefore engaged and reformist. This act of 'playing the new off against the old' infers a (plural) process of re-description. If other arguments or 'vocabularies' come along that match up, or improve on current circumstances (say feminism or environmentalism), then liberals can re-describe their own vocabulary. For Rorty, re-description is a reform minded experimental approach to achieving solidarity, a solidarity, which 'is to be achieved not by inquiry, but imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection, but created. . . . [It] is a matter of detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like.'[31] And irony is perhaps well placed to take a hand in this 'redescription of what we ourselves are like'.

It is a simple and alluring proposition that once truth is dropped as a goal of enquiry the task becomes one of engaging in the trial and error process of suggesting possibilities, while remaining sensitive to their limitations. Ethics, and ethical discourses, can therefore be rejuvenated by an engagement with irony and self doubt, '. . . the self-doubt which has gradually, over the last few centuries, been inculcated into the inhabitants of the democratic states – doubt about their own sensitivity to the pain and humiliation of others, doubt that present institutional arrangements are adequate to deal with this pain and humiliation, curiosity about possible alternatives. [32] And this is how Rorty connects up irony with global ethics: greater doubt about our own conceptions of ethics, about their universal veracity, can bread sensitivity to the (alternative modes of) suffering of others, curiosity about alternatives.

An idea which is perhaps underplayed in Rorty, but which is by no means absent, is that proceeding without doubt, without such irony, can in practice generate suffering *per se.* One the one hand, much of what is dressed up as global ethics appears to 'those on the receiving end' of such efforts, as mere arrogance: the self deluding apology of liberal imperialism. On the other hand, and in a more destructive way, the unreflective exportation of Western ideas regarding citizenship, sovereignty, market structures and 'human' rights effects an ontological violence on recipients. [33] As Rorty described in 'Justice as a Larger Loyalty', his aim in all of this, was to breathe some new life into old ideas about global justice:

> If we Westerners could get rid of the notion of universal moral obligations created by membership in the species, and substitute the idea of building a community of trust between ourselves and others, we might be in a better position to persuade non-Westerners of the advantages of joining in that community. We might be better able to construct the sort of global moral community that Rawls describes in 'The Law of Peoples.' In making this suggestion, I am urging, as I have on earlier occasions, that we need to peel apart Enlightenment liberalism from Enlightenment rationalism.
>
> I think that discarding the residual rationalism that we inherit from the Enlightenment is advisable for many reasons. Some of these are theoretical and of interest only to philosophy professors, such as the apparent incompatibility of the correspondence theory of truth with a naturalistic account of the origin of human minds. Others are more practical. One practical reason is that getting rid of rationalistic rhetoric would permit the West to

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[31] Ibid., p. *xvi*.

[32] Ibid., p. 198.

[33] See for instance, B. Jahn, 'Kant, Mill, and Illiberal Legacies in International Affairs', *International Organization*, 59 (2005), pp. 177–207; Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'Beyond a Cosmopolitan Ideal: The Politics of Singularity', *International Politics*, 44:1 (2006), pp. 107–124.

approach the non-West in the role of someone with an instructive story to tell, rather than in the role of someone purporting to be making better use of a universal human capacity.[34]

Having briefly outlined Rorty's definition of Irony as a (particularly liberal) sense of self-doubt about ultimate ends, which while privately orientated, plays an indispensable role in the critique of present institutional arrangements, the next section will go on to interrogate a particular manifestation of this quality, namely: *British Irony*.

British irony, global justice: Brown, Banksy and Gervais

The definition of irony provided by Rorty has interesting implications for global ethics. Looked at bluntly, a degree of doubt over final vocabularies is a healthy antidote to the moral universalism that sometimes accompanies discussions of democracy, justice and freedom after 9/11 (and after the fall of the Berlin Wall). The idea that there is, or could be a singular blueprint for global ethics, is effectively jettisoned by the self-reflective distance created by irony. However, there are some potential blank spots in Rorty's account. For instance, if irony is a social contingency 'which has gradually, over the last few centuries, been inculcated into the inhabitants of the democratic states', could we say a little more about the different experiences of such states? As the introduction suggested irony in a British context may be qualitatively distinct from irony in the 'ideal' or American context which Rorty dealt with.[35] Equally, while Rorty was happier than most political philosophers to get his feet dirty with socio-political practices, like the novel and the newspaper Op Ed, there is probably more that can be said. Taking imagination seriously, as Rorty suggests we should, requires an engagement with more than the straightforward gamut of liberal 'high' culture of books, art, and laudably engaged bourgeois reformers. Cultural production and the politics of mediation is now structured by new forms like the internet, 24 hour news television and ongoing contests over the correct use of public spaces. There is therefore a pragmatic requirement to adapt Rorty's ideas to such changing circumstances.

Partly, in response to these points, the aim of this section is to look at a particular – and *particularly* – ethnocentric version of irony, namely: British irony, to explore how it is deployed in the various and different realms of political theory, political graffiti and comedy. This is done via a reading of Chris Brown, Banksy and Ricky Gervais. The aim is not to 'define' British irony. As the Introduction suggested, there are too many dilemmas with the project to 'essentialise' British Irony. Rather, this section draws out some ways in which British irony can contribute to thinking about global ethics that will be then connected up with long running debates about power and resistance in the final section.

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[34] R. Rorty, 'Justice as a Larger Loyalty', in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers, Volume 4* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 55.

[35] Equally national or contextual experiences and traditions of irony, but also satire as experienced in say Sweden, or Australia, or Spain, or Mexico may have much to offer the critique of global ethics.

The 'irony' of Chris Brown

For anyone who has followed the work of Chris Brown, it may seem hard to attribute a systematic view to a thinker who has rather marked himself out by refusing to embrace a definitive theoretical position. Brown has, rather, enjoyed the role of overseer and interlocutor for ethical reflection in the hard-nosed (but changing) world of IR theory. As IR has changed, as such, Brown himself has developed, formerly seeing his task as one of convincing his colleagues of the relevance of 'normative' theory, and latterly, and partly due to his and others' successes in the previous task, of interjecting with cautionary reflections on the 'limits' and limitations of ambitious and/or universal ethical projects.[36] So it is the latter Brown with which this article is principally concerned, the Brown who has realised the irony of global ethics:

> Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* opens with the comedian telling the story of two guests in a Catskills Hotel: 'The food here is terrible', says one; 'Yes and such small portions', replies the other. Anyone who has regularly engaged in discussions about humanitarian intervention . . . will be familiar with the structure of this exchange. After deconstructing the mistakes made by interventions in Somalia, East Timor, Kosovo and Sierra Leone, the conversation segues seamlessly and without apparent irony into an account of how awful it is that no one has intervened in the Sudan or the Congo.[37]

In such moments Brown highlights the irony of many ethical interventions in IR, motivated as they are, by a strong moral critique of existing practices – here be it humanitarian intervention, but equally, with issues of human rights and global (in)justice[38] – which then vaunt the ethical possibilities of such practices. We might similarly note the way cosmopolitan democrats make so much hay out of the anti-democratic challenges of globalisation, only to then posit a globalisation of democracy as the answer. But Brown's, is more than a paradoxical move. Rather, he attempts to give light to the popular communitarian idea that ethics is socially produced and mediated. He draws directly on Rorty to argue, against the universalism of many human rights arguments, that 'rights are best seen as a by-product of a functioning ethical community and not as a phenomenon that can be taken out of this context and promoted as a universal solution to the political ills of an oppressive world'.[39] In this way, Browns' irony touches on the contingency of global ethics.

A number of interesting and valuable points can be made about this rendering. Firstly, the latter Brown has stepped away from a view of ethics as a supplement to IR, something perhaps evident in his earlier work. As Rob Walker has argued, this is a problem with many approaches that see ethics as something which (when properly adduced) can be added on to the 'substance' of world politics.[40] On this view ethics is supposed to act as a potential doctor for IR.[41] Instead for Brown, ethics and IR are con-constitutive. Ethics constitutes the vagaries of humanitarian intervention, and the successes of liberal society constitute the possibility of human rights. As he states, '[t]he idea that there is, or could be, a clear divide between normative and positive theory is profoundly misleading; all theories of international relations are, simultaneously, both positive and normative theories'.[42] Secondly, Brown's irony is an argument that moral ambiguity is no invitation to nihilism. At the same time as ethics is contingent, we may still like to advocate a particular approach. He draws on Ernest Gellner who vaunts the possibility of fostering a contingent belief in liberal ideals, while recognising that 'preaching across cultural boundaries seems . . . in most circumstances a fairly pointless exercise'.[43] For Brown, this recognition of the precariousness of moral frameworks may not provide easy answers, but it does express a way of thinking/acting beyond the confines of an ethical community. Again commenting on Rorty: 'It may be that talk of 'sentimental education' seems a woefully inadequate response to . . . human wrongs but it is difficult to see what other moral vocabulary is available to us once we reach the limits of an ethical community.'[44] And finally, perhaps the key contribution of Chris Brown is his recognition of the indeterminacy of ethics, the fact that at certain points no decision can ever be totally correct, or ethical. Sometimes this is playful as in his consideration of the ambivalence of imperialism. In one moment he suggests:

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[36] Compare for instance, Chris Brown, 'Not My Department? Normative Theory and International Relations', *Paradigms*, 2 (1987), or indeed, *International Relations Theory: New Normative Approaches* (Hemel Hempstead, 1992), with the tone of Brown (1999) or 'Narratives of Religion, Civilisation and Modernity', in *Worlds in Collision: Terror and the Future of Global Order*, eds K. Boothe, T. Dunne and N. Wheeler (Palgrave, 2002a), pp. 293–302.

[37] C. Brown, 'What, exactly, is the problem to which the 'five-part test' is the solution?', in *International Relations*, 19:2 (2005), p. 225.

[38] C. Brown, 'Tragedy, "Tragic Choices" and Contemporary International Political Theory', *International Relations* 21:1 (2007), pp. 5–13.

[39] C. Brown, 'Universal Human Rights: A Critique', in T. Dunne and N. Wheeler (eds), *Human Rights in Global Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 120).

> The definitive discussion of the balance sheet of empire occurs in the film *Monty Python's 'The Life of Brian'.* It is AD33 (Saturday Afternoon, about teatime). Reg, Chairperson of the Peoples' Front of Judea rhetorically, but unwisely asks a party meeting what, in return for 'bleeding us white', the Romans have ever given us? A few minutes later he summarises the results of the discussion.
> REG: All right . . . All right . . . but apart from better sanitation and medicine and education and irrigation and public health and roads and a freshwater system and baths and public order what have the Romans done for us . . .?
> XERXES: Brought peace!
> REG: What!? Oh . . . Peace, Yes . . . Shut up![45]

Sometimes, Brown takes indeterminacy in an avowedly tragic direction. Following the story of Antigone, he defines tragedy as a 'sense that human action sometimes, perhaps often, involves a choice between two radically incompatible but equally undesirable outcomes, that we will be, from one perspective, acting wrongly . . .'[46] And he seeks to read such ambivalence against contemporary work on global ethics that goes on in analytical political theory. As he asserts:

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[40] R. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Walker, 'Polis, Cosmopolis, Politics. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 28:2 (2003), pp. 267–87.

[41] K. Hutchings, 'Feminist ethics and political violence', *International Politics*, 44:1 (2007), pp. 90–106.

[42] C. Brown, 'The Normative Framework of Post-Cold War International Relations', in Stephanie Lawson (ed.), *The New Agenda for International Relations: From Polarisation to Globalisation in World Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), pp. 148.

[43] Gellner cited C. Brown, 'Universal Human Rights: A Critique', in *Human Rights in Global Perspective*, ed. T. Dunne and N. Wheeler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 123.

[44] C. Brown, 'Universal Human Rights: A Critique', in *Human Rights in Global Perspective*, ed. T. Dunne and N. Wheeler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 120.

[45] *International Relations Theory: New Normative Approaches* (Hemel Hempstead, 1992), p. 188, fn 6.

[46] C. Brown, 'Tragedy, "Tragic Choices" and Contemporary International Political Theory', in *International Relations*, 21:1 (2007), pp. 5–6.

> It is striking how readily the rhetoric of 'Something must be done' appeals when people are faced with evidence of oppression and grinding poverty, but it is equally striking how this support usually evaporates when something actually *is* done. The reason for this is not, I suggest, fickleness, or even uncomplicated self-interest, but rather the fact that the original appeal, by failing to acknowledge the moral complexities of the situation, wins a cheap, but transient victory'.[47]

And he continues, at length:

> It is, of course, easy to direct such a charge at figures such as Bob Geldof or Bono, but it applies equally, I think, to the more intellectually substantial writers who have been pressing the case for global social justice for a quarter century at least with very little, if any, impact. These theorists have approached the problem with little sense that there are genuinely tragic choices to be made; instead they have tried to refine away the clashes of duty of which any sensitive observer – or citizen – will be all too conscious. They try to draw us into a line of reasoning which will take us to a place where we have no alternative but to acknowledge the force of their conclusions, but we . . . know there is something missing, that analytical clarity has been bought at a price, that part of the story is being suppressed. The missing dimension here is, I suggest, a sense of the tragic nature of the dilemmas we face – and perhaps of human existence itself.[48]

Banksy's painful irony

Irony is a multifaceted quality. As British irony moves from humour through to a recognition of contingency and an engagement with indeterminacy, we might also discern a sense in which irony becomes painful. This is an important extension. Such pain, such tragedy is celebrated by Chris Brown for an ability to make us recognise the 'messy' realm of human existence. It is for Brown a move beyond the cold analytical reason of political theory, to a political-ethics of indeterminacy, a 'sense that human action sometimes, perhaps often, involves a choice between two radically incompatible but equally undesirable outcomes'. And this clearly ties with Rorty's notion that a degree of doubt over our most heartfelt beliefs can be a useful qualification to ethics, although tragedy takes us somewhat further into the public realm than some of Rorty's seemingly private and individual quibbles. But what do we do with this recognition? How can such indeterminacy be engaged? One avenue is to continually identify the messiness, contradictions, and the tragic irony of global ethics. This is a key aspect of the work of the Graffiti artist Banksy.

Banksy is an avowedly anonymous graffiti artist who has managed to translate underground credibility into massive popular appeal.[49] Along the way his focus and subject have shifted from local ghetto issues such as the ongoing and protracted issues of the legality of graffiti, and his constant questioning of the private appropriation of public spaces via advertising, to more global issues.[50] Keynote subjects for Banksy now include global poverty, the securitisation of modern life, Guantanamo bay, the war on terror as well as ongoing considerations of the nature of protest and resistance *per se*.

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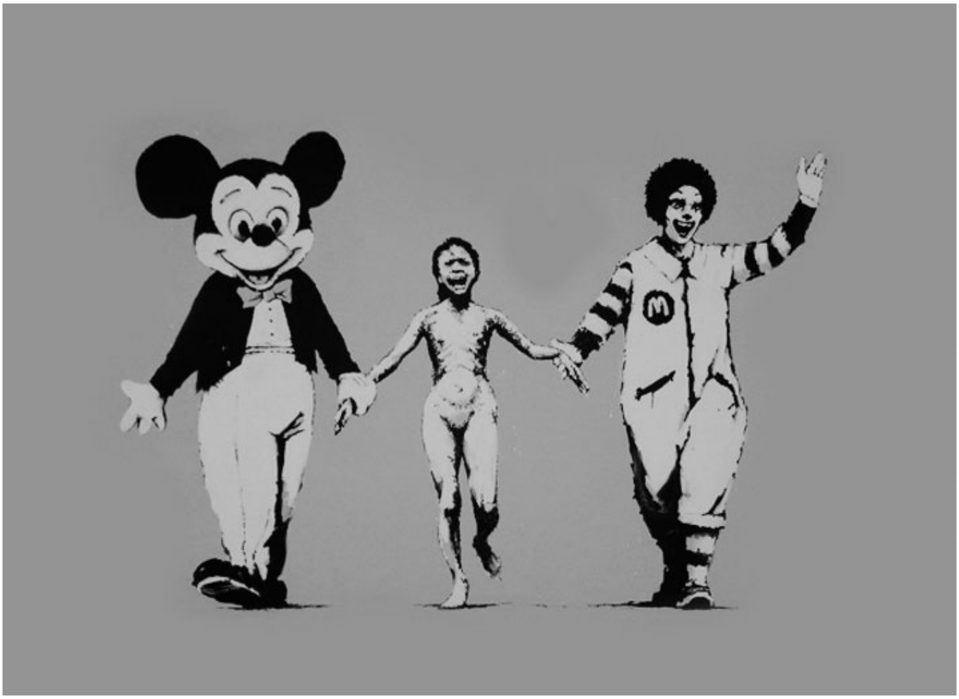
[47] Ibid., p. 12.

[48] Ibid., p. 12.

[49] See *The New Yorker*, Banksy Was Here: The invisible man of graffiti art. Lauren Collins, 14 May 2007: ⟨http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/05/14/070514fa_fact_collins?currentPage=6⟩.

[50] I am grateful to Chris Holmes for his advice on this point.



Picture 1. (Child with Ronald McDonald) http://www.banksy.co.uk/indoors/napalm.html

Such a journey is not unproblematic. There is a question of whether a graffiti artist can ever cross over into the 'mainstream' and sell their work, or whether the act of graffiti is itself the subversive act *par excellance.* Somewhat analogous to the debate over whether a punk band can call itself punk if it gets a record deal there are those within the graffiti community who sneer at the way Banksy has started to sell work, and takes up invitations such as the Glastonbury toilets.[51] Further, while techniques which work in the ghetto can translate to audiences like the BBC or the Guardian it is less clear how they are received and perceived in US theme parks and Palestine. Perhaps fittingly for a graffiti artist who works with irony and paradox there is often ambiguity in both the practices and reception of Banksy's particular ethical resistance. As Banksy himself suggested in an interview for the New Yorker:

> 'I think it was easier when I was the underdog, and I had a lot of practise at it. The money that my work fetches these days makes me a bit uncomfortable, but that's an easy problem to solve – you just stop whingeing and give it all away. I don't think it's possible to make art about world poverty and then trouser all the cash, that's an irony too far, even for me.' He went on, 'I love the way capitalism finds a place – even for its enemies. It's definitely boom time in the discontent industry. I mean, how many cakes does Michael Moore get through?'[52]

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[51] *The Guardian* 'The Art of Worship', Esther Addley, 14 June 2007: ⟨http://music.guardian.co.uk/glastonbury2007/story/0,,2102958,00.html⟩.

[52] *The New Yorker*, Banksy Was Here: The invisible man of graffiti art by Lauren Collins, 14 May 2007: ⟨http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/05/14/070514fa_fact_collins?currentPage=6⟩.

In order to address these and other questions Banksy's work and subjects will be introduced before developing certain critical ideas related to the role of ambiguity in Banksy's work. From a Rortian perspective the identification of such dilemmas is potentially a sign of the strength, not the weakness of irony. In 'ideal' form it may become part of the healthy interplay of critique and imagination, to continually confront such indeterminacies in political discourse.[53]

Central to Banksy's work is an attempt to re-frame global issues through the use of irony, and ironic inversion. His work interrupts mainstream narratives of global ethics, *of an unfair world that needs reform*, by juxtaposing familiar icons of western capitalism (for example Disney, Ronald McDonald) with icons of western imperialism (for example bombed villagers in Vietnam). In another he places a starving Ethiopian child in a Burger King hat.[54] Compared to the considered political theory of Chris Brown, this might seem to segue into a form of painful shock therapy? It might be asked whether this sort of Irony is *too radical*, *too destructive* to have a valuable impact on the discussion of global ethics? In Rorty's parlance perhaps this is best left as private reflection (for those who can), rather than a contribution to the public discussion of global ethics. Indeed, this might return us to the precariousness of Rorty's liberal irony by asking the question of whether liberal institutions can be successfully reconciled with *real doubt* over their validity or value.

However, two factors recommend against this line and proffer us to consider how British irony is a far more 'public' practice than some of Rorty's restrictions would allow. Firstly, and quite straightforwardly, Banksy is becoming extremely famous. He has a strong media presence and the BBC in particular has a dedicated editorial interest in his work. Indeed, the BBC was one of the first movers on publicising Banksy's most recent murals in Palestine with News 24 running headline stories of how the 'ironic graffiti artist' hoped to provoke debate about the treatment of Palestians as a result of the Israel–Palestine Wall.[55] Such treatments are at least an anecdotal illustration of how well received Banksy is by mainstream liberal society in Britain. While some have expressed questions about the legaility of some of his work and there is a body of left critique which questions the way he has 'sold out' some of his principals, it is clear that Banksy's work is intelligible and acceptable within the frame of mainstream political discourse in the UK. And secondly, a point that will be developed below via discussion of specific pieces, Banksy is involved in a sustained public conversation that intersects with broad-based popular opposition to the War on Terror, global inequality and other pressing global problems. Entirely in keeping

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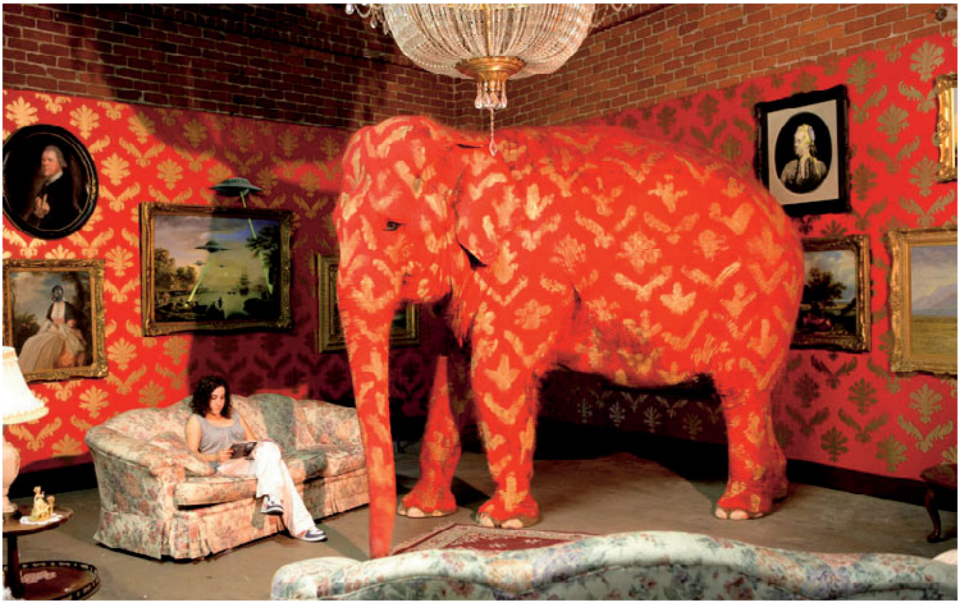
[53] As Rorty argued 'The Platonist tradition insists that collisions of good with good are always illusory, because there is always one right thing to do. Pieces of the puzzle that obstinately refuse to fit are discarded as mere appearance. But for pragmatists intellectual and moral conflict is typically a matter of beliefs that have been acquired in the attempt to serve one good purpose getting in the way of beliefs that were developed in the course of serving another good purpose. [. . .] Since pragmatists agree with James that the true is the good in the way of belief, and since they take the conflict of good with good as inevitable, they do not think that universalist grandeur and finality will ever be attained. Ingenious compromises between old goods will produce new sets of aspirations and new projects, and new collisions between those aspirations and projects forever. We shall never escape what Hegel called 'the struggle and labor of the negative,' but that is merely to say that we shall remain finite creatures of specific times and places' (2007, pp. 81–2).

[54] Banksy, *Wall and Piece* (London: Century, 2005).

[55] See for instance: ⟨http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts/4748063.stm⟩. Typing Banksy into the BBC website search produces over 13 pages of news items, radio clips and television reports.



Picture 2. (Elephant) http://www.banksy.co.uk/indoors/ele02.html

with Rorty's notion of a contribution to public politics, Banksy may not provide ready solutions to some of the problems he identifies, but he certainly provides credible pointers as to the kinds of power structures and hypocrisy that global ethical agendas must contend with.

A point which Rorty recognised but made painfully little of in his work was that irony could play a role in the public sphere.[56] One need only consider the interventions of post-structural writers in IR on questions of famine, US foreign policy, human rights, democracy, and migration to realise the potential power of ironic critique for thinking about public political issues.

This installation in a Los Angeles art gallery, for instance, came with a leaflet which read 'There is an Elephant in the Room. There's a problem that we never talk about.' Banksy painted an elephant in the colours of the wallpaper as a symbol of the way we have come to accept global poverty. The piece is also significant because it made the news in Los Angeles. Despite the fact that everyone interviewed claimed they liked the piece and found it thought provoking, the news story ran with the question of whether or not it was harmful to animals.[57] While Banksy affirms that no harm was done to the animal such events provoke a key question for ironic interventions which relates to mediation and reception. While Banksy can control the kinds of messages which 'go out' from his website and other 'products', there is little that can be done about either how his work is reported in the media or how people receive his work.

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[56] There is a long debate amongst critics of Rorty over how well this link between 'private irony' and 'public liberal ethics' is made. A number of critiques emphasise the methodological totality of the public-private split to the effect that Rorty effectively cuts off any chance of a thoroughgoing (ironic) critique of public institutions. However, as well as the examples cited above, I find there are numerous instances in Rorty's work where he operationalises the interplay between irony and liberalism. Indeed, on a number of occasions he was quite explicit: In one interview (1995, p. 62) he argued, 'I don't think private beliefs can be fenced off [from the public sphere]; they leak through, so to speak, and influence the way one behaves toward other people.' And in another (2002, pp. 62–3) he categorically retorts, 'I didn't say everybody had a public/private split, but some people do. There is a spectrum here. [. . .] My public/private distinction wasn't an explanation of what every human life is like. I was, instead, urging that there was nothing wrong with letting people divide their lives along the private/public line. We don't have a moral responsibility to bring the two together. It was a negative point, not a positive recommendation about how everybody should behave.'

In another famous example, Banksy took a blow up doll and dressed it as a prisoner in Guantanamo bay, replete with orange jumpsuit. He then smuggled the piece into Disney World and stood it up next to the Rocky Mountain Ride. Again the stunt made news coverage on a number of US channels, however, the story was covered as a question of security in Disney World. If you view the film of this action on Banksy's website under film studio title: 'Paranoid Pictures', you can see tourists riding past the effigy, then being stopped by the security organisers, and then the film closes with a close up of the Disney park placard which reads 'Here you leave today and enter the world of yesterday, tomorrow and fantasy.'[58] The stark irony is in the juxtaposition of an image of humanity stripped of security and dignity next to a corporate fair ground ride, closed down due to a 'security risk'.

Despite the political engagement inherent in his work, for some there may remain a lingering question as to whether Banksy is 'only' a radical interlocutor. Perhaps he is more comfortable in the guise of extreme critic, who details a painfully ironic resistance to current practices?

On the one hand, from a pragmatic perspective there is a potentially important role for this kind of critique. It can act as an important shot of adrenaline for the sometimes dry public discourses of global justice and it can (slowly) foster a more critical and reflective debate in public circles. On the other hand, there is a more hopeful side to Banksy's work that should not be ignored. One reason why his work fascinates is surely the impression that he clearly 'cares.' This is evident in his visual depictions of protesters throwing flowers instead of missiles (a stencil which has been extremely well received and reproduced by anti-globalisation protesters).[59]

This is also the Banksy who regularly stencils poetry around London, and who writes in his book 'The greatest crimes in the world are not committed by people breaking the rules but by people following the rules. It's people who follow orders that drop bombs and massacre villages. As a precaution to ever committing major acts of evil it is our solemn duty never to do what we're told, this is the only way we can be sure.'[60] Again we might suggest that Banksy errs closer to Rorty's private irony? Such positions clearly suggest moral commitment, although it may be hard to do much more than simply 'recognise' this. Banksy rarely comments on his work and prefers to leave interpretation to the viewer. However, there are clues as to his moral commitments in the section of his website called 'Manifesto', which reads:

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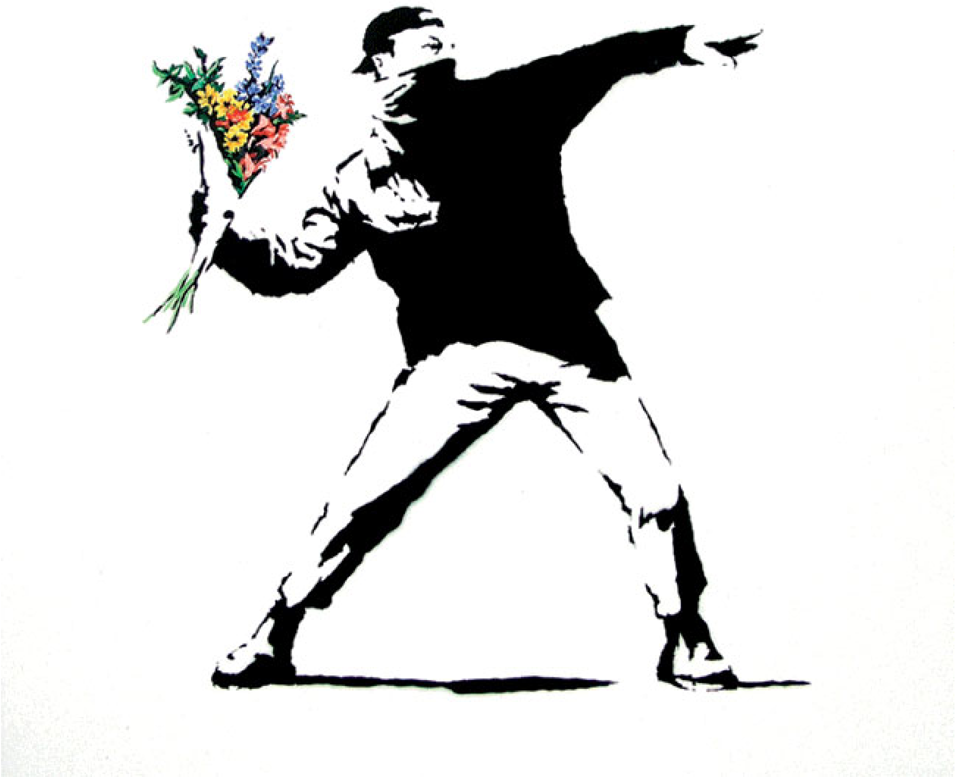
[57] ⟨www.Banksy.co.uk⟩

[58] Ibid.

[59] Thanks are due to Sian Sullivan for her advice on this point. See also S. Sullivan, 'Viva Nihilism!' On Militancy and Machismo in (Anti-)Globalisation Protest, CSGR Working Paper 158/05, February 2005.

[60] Banksy, *Wall and Piece* (London: Century, 2005), p. 50.



Picture 3. (Flowerchucker) http://www.banksy.co.uk/indoors/index2.html

An extract from the diary of Lieutenant Colonel Mervin Willett Gonin DSO who was among the first British soldiers to liberate Bergen-Belsen in 1945.
I can give no adequate description of the Horror Camp in which my men and myself were to spend the next month of our lives. It was just a barren wilderness, as bare as a chicken run. Corpses lay everywhere, some in huge piles, sometimes they lay singly or in pairs where they had fallen. It took a little time to get used to seeing men women and children collapse as you walked by them and to restrain oneself from going to their assistance. One had to get used early to the idea that the individual just did not count. One knew that five hundred a day were dying and that five hundred a day were going on dying for weeks before anything we could do would have the slightest effect. It was, however, not easy to watch a child choking to death from diptheria when you knew a tracheotomy and nursing would save it, one saw women drowning in their own vomit because they were too weak to turn over, and men eating worms as they clutched a half loaf of bread purely because they had to eat worms to live and now could scarcely tell the difference. Piles of corpses, naked and obscene, with a woman too weak to stand propping herself against them as she cooked the food we had given her over an open fire; men and women crouching down just anywhere in the open relieving themselves of the dysentery which was scouring their bowels, a woman standing stark naked washing herself with some issue soap in water from

> a tank in which the remains of a child floated. It was shortly after the British Red Cross arrived, though it may have no connection, that a very large quantity of lipstick arrived. This was not at all what we men wanted, we were screaming for hundreds and thousands of other things and I don't know who asked for lipstick. I wish so much that I could discover who did it, it was the action of genius, sheer unadulterated brilliance. I believe nothing did more for these internees than the lipstick. Women lay in bed with no sheets and no nightie but with scarlet red lips, you saw them wandering about with nothing but a blanket over their shoulders, but with scarlet red lips. I saw a woman dead on the post mortem table and clutched in her hand was a piece of lipstick. At last someone had done something to make them individuals again, they were someone, no longer merely the number tatooed on the arm. At last they could take an interest in their appearance. That lipstick started to give them back their humanity.[61]

Such inclusions speak of a deep humanism, a care for the hopes of people and a concern with their suffering. As a manifesto it speaks of an appreciation of the 'power of the human spirit' stripped of the sometimes saccharine overtones of that phrase. And it may illuminate some of Banksy's most famous works, such as his interventions at the Israeli-Palestine Wall.

Such work is of course, not uncontroversial. While the intention may be to provide hope, or at least provide a reminder of such a thing, there is something deeply problematic about the extension of western forms of resistance to such a context. In an interview for Channel 4 news Banksy argued, 'The segregation wall is a disgrace . . . the possibility I find exciting is you could turn the worlds most invasive and degrading structure into the world's longest gallery of free speech and bad art . . .'[62] However in the same interview Banksy told of a Palestinian man who told him to 'go home' and stop trying to make the wall look beautiful. In this instance, at least British irony may flirt with a form of ethical imperialism which it surely abhors?

The 'self' irony of Ricky Gervais

Thus far, British irony has developed through a reading of Chris Brown and Banksy to suggest a reflective distance in discussions of global ethics. Recognition of contingency fosters a sense of self doubt and a capacity resist abusive power structures. On the one hand, this can be quite playful, chiding us to break with the pretence to provide knock-down moral arguments or positions on the vagaries of the world (Brown). On the other hand, it can be tragic, forcing us to face up to the indeterminacy of moral decisions (Brown), and our own, (often complicit) involvement in the systems of rationality and capitalist self-aggrandisement that cause ethical 'bads' in the world (Banksy). Despite the clear moral commitments involved with the cases of British irony considered above though, there is always indeterminacy in the intervention itself. In the case of Banksy's interventions in Palestine the paradox of the art is mirrored in the incongruity of the 'western form' of resistance and the harsh lived experiences of local people. A point that will be developed in the final section is whether or not the celebration of British irony as a point of resistance to global power structures is not itself quite patronising, almost hypocritical?

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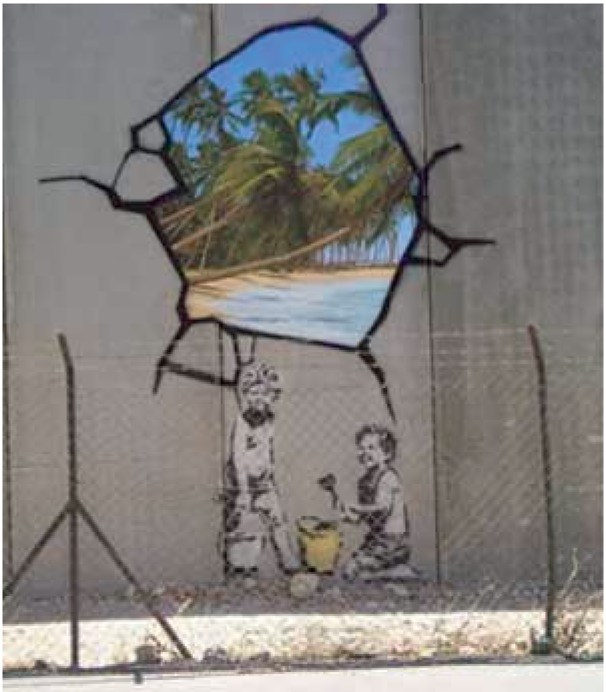
[61] ⟨www.Banksy.co.uk⟩

[62] Interview for Channel 4 News. News item available at: ⟨http://www.channel4.com/news/articles/world/banksy%20in%20palestine/109530⟩.



Picture 4. (sraeli Wall) http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts/4748063.stm

However, the final part of this section will suspend such issues for the moment in order to draw out another theme of British irony which is the idea of providing a politically and publicly important contribution to the politics of global ethics. Put bluntly, irony, in the British context at least, is not some side issue, a privately held meditation on contingency – *pace* some of Rorty's arguments. Instead, it will be argued that through the interventions of Ricky Gervais in campaigns like Comic Relief and Make Poverty History, irony serves as a vital and creative resource for thinking through the 'limits' of global ethics, on a mass public stage.

In particular, this final part will focus on a single intervention conceived and written by Gervais that was played as part of the 2007 Comic Relief campaign to raise money for charity projects in Africa. The campaign video opens with Ricky Gervais walking through a Kenyan village. He begins:

> I've been asked many times to come here to Kenya and I've always resisted it, probably because I was scared about what I might find, I thought it'd be too harrowing, and it is harrowing when half the country live in abject poverty, but despite the deprivation they don't just give up . . . they don't just roll over and sit around waiting for handouts. They do whatever they can to help themselves. They fight back.[63]

The scenes behind Ricky involve Kenyans walking around in shanty towns, with indigenous music playing in the background. He then meets Daniel Eboua who 'like most Kenyans lives below the poverty line'. They enter his house and Ricky points to all his worldly possessions which amount to a few bags and old pots and pans, a fact which he says, 'makes you feel spoilt, doesn't it? When we whinge about the things we whinge about.' And then:

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[63] Ricky Gervais, *Comic Relief 2007 Red Nose Day* (BBC Television, 16 March 2007).

Gervais: [Narrated] Even though Daniel has nothing he wanted me to have one of his most prized possessions. [Spoken] He's just given me a cassette tape of U2. [Narrated] And then came the sucker punch.
Daniel: [Spoken] When my brother was in the hospital the doctor played him this cassette. The doctor was from England and he played this. I keep it because it reminds me of my brother. My brother died.[64]

Ricky is visibly touched by this gesture and starts to cry. Some light music plays in the background, guitar chords from U2's *One Love.* And Ricky assures him 'it's not your fault'. At this point Stephen Merchant walks in and the camera pans around to reveal that everything has taken place in a film studio.

Merchant: Alright Ricky what are you up to mate, what are you doing?
Gervais: Just doing one of those comic relief appeals from Africa
Merchant: You're not in Africa though are you, this is BBC Television Centre.
Gervais: Yeh, I don't actually have to go there do I?
Merchant: You can't fake being in Africa
Gervais: Yeh, I can yeh. Get a blue screen, pop the hut up, Bob's your uncle.
Merchant: No obviously technically you can fake it. You can't fake it morally.
Gervais: Right, I'm not gonna go to a country where you need injections to get into it. *That's a good holiday.* Also you get just as good publicity faking it as actually going there yourself. Everyone's a winner.[65]

To anyone familiar with Ricky Gervais' comedy what follows is standard fayre. Ricky ironically suggests that he is one of the world's greatest living comedians. He claims the Office 'changed the genre' and compares himself favourably to John Cleese. He finishes with the suggestion of what people at home will think of him: 'hold on though, we love everything he's done, but has he got a heart of gold? *He's in Africa, the answer is yes!* . . . If he's doing that then we'll continue to buy his DVDs'. Convinced of the argument, Steven Merchant decides to take part in the video. Then Jamie Olivier – who 'hasn't been seen on TV caring about anything for at least 3 days' – also joins in. The progress is completed when Ricky sees a 'homeless' 'smack-head' that turns out to be Sir Bob Geldof. While Geldof initially describes it as a 'fucking disgrace', he is eventually persuaded to take part because he has a single coming out. When filming is finished, Daniel takes off his mask to reveal that he is in fact Bono, dressed up as an African, attempting to promote the U2 singles album which is coming out.

In *Whose Hunger?* Jenny Edkins argues that, 'If humanitarianism is technologised, intervention is no longer a question of responsibility and political decisioning but the application of a new system of international law to a case. Any challenge would have to come from a charismatic figure like Bob Geldof who can constitute (briefly) an opposing regime of truth.'[66] She therefore highlights the importance of non-rational and perhaps sentimental forms of resistance, for undermining the dominant framings of global justice as 'how do we get money to them faster'. The argument provided here suggests that the use of irony by Ricky Gervais (and indeed Bob Geldof) in the

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[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.
[66] J. Edkins, *Whose Hunger? Concepts of Famine, Practices of Aid* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 159.

Comic Relief Campaign actually takes this challenge a stage further. The initial intervention, identified by Edkins, problematises the notion of a rational institutional approach to famine. The secondary resistance, the use of ironic critique, undermines both the sense of a they as the helpless recipients of cash, and the sense of a 'we' by first chastising the role of self-marketing in the motivations of celebrities who endorse charity and then questioning the construction of good and bad around involvement in charity campaigns.

Indeed, the layers of self-distance in the Gervais sketch are highly sophisticated, at once problematising our ability to 'know' the people we want to care for and undermining the global pretensions of much Western vanity/charity. For Gervais, 'their' place and culture can only appear as a caricature of humble native pride. In this way, the Comic Relief sketch touches upon a fundamental issue for any consideration of global ethics: the dominant global imaginary provided. A key problem with many global justice debates, and here we might especially consider those currently popular within analytical political theory, is the constant repetition of the 'Us' and 'Them' dichotomy.[67] The use of such dichotomies means that justice can only be understood and addressed in terms of a divide between strong and responsible subject/citizen and a weak and helpless subject/potential recipient. As Debbie Lisle argues,

> . . . there is always a privileged subject who extends a helping hand to an already subordinate and victimised Other, and in the process entrenches the very inequalities s/he is trying to alleviate. Numerous forms of action are mobilised to try and explain, and more importantly solve, the Other's difficulties: extended media coverage, global charity appeals, fact-finding missions, official visits, emergency financial and medical aid, and the mass migration of aid workers. And each action serves to intensify the divide between the abject victims who experience pain and suffering, and the noble benefactors who alleviate it.[68]

When Bob Geldof swears in the sketch, Ricky Gervais says 'Easy there, watch your language, not in front of the . . .' his eyes then motion towards Daniel. Uncomfortable as it may be, the only way to get this joke is if you equate African poverty with a kind of helpless child like existence. Returning to Brown, perhaps one of the central challenges for getting from the rhetoric of 'something must be done' to the reality of actually doing some-thing, is to *involve* those for whom we hope to reduce suffering, in the discussion of what that suffering is, and how they might like to engage it.[69]

The politics of the comic frame

The article has outlined the important potential that Irony holds for the discussion of the politics of global ethics. Firstly, the article interrogated the philosophical pragmatism of Richard Rorty to suggest that a capacity for self-doubt and a willingness to explore alternative (ethical) vocabularies was an important if slightly precarious resource for thinking about global ethics. Secondly, it was argued, that an important extension of Rorty's position would be to think through a particular manifestation of irony in the British context. This was done via a reading of three key exponents of the 'comic frame': Chris Brown, Banksy and Ricky Gervais. This discussion of British irony took us through the comic, to realise that recognising our contingency can be both playful and tragic. The indeterminacy of ethics is often an unsettling realisation. So where does this leave us? Rorty argued that we are left with continuous politics:

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[67] Even Thomas Pogge's recent and highly sophisticated attempts to construct a theory of global justice around 'individuals' repeatedly falls back of discourses of us and them, moral outrage, and vast statistics that highlight the helpless plight of the 'wretched of the earth'. T. Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights: cosmopolitan responsibilities and reforms* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

[68] Debbie Lisle, 'Humanitarian Travels: Ethical Communication in *Lonely Planet* guidebooks', *Review of International Studies*, 34:1 (2008), p. 158.

[69] J. Brassett, Cosmopolitanism vs Terrorism? Discourses of Ethical Possibility Before and After 7/7', in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, forthcoming (2008).

> On my 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.[70]

On a pragmatic understanding, irony is a fortuitously arrived at and perpetual disposition to question and to doubt. It is an important, but not the only element in the 'conversation of mankind'.[71] Irony must be seen as an ongoing, continuous quality that can interrupt the dominant narratives of global ethics, provoking us to rethink their central assumptions and perhaps, resist them.

In the British context, irony manifests equally in political theory, graffiti and comedy. In a sense then, the famous British sense of humour is a fitting counterpoint to Rorty's suggestion that he could not imagine a culture 'whose public rhetoric was ironist' and that it seems an 'inherently private matter'. While Ricky Gervais may make us feel uncomfortable, his commentary on the limits of the global justice campaign can nevertheless be experienced on a national stage, through a national broadcaster and targeted at raising more money for charity and, perhaps, this could be an invitation to re-think Rorty's public-private distinction?[72] Beyond this broad point though, there are some ambivalences that should be addressed. There are two important and (ironically) opposite criticisms that can be levelled at the argument made here. Firstly, there is a question as to whether Irony is too radical? A theme considered in this article is whether, in a sense, irony is just too harsh, too cutting, to serve as a resource in the discussion of global ethics. As Will Smith argues, irony is ambivalent:

> On the one hand, the cultivation of irony may help us to attain critical distance and self awareness, which in turn can facilitate greater openness to others and a more flexible attitude towards the world. On the other hand, irony may be a somewhat debilitating and even cruel way of being in the world, as likely to encourage introspection as care and engagement.[73]

On this view, irony should not be bought at the price of the 'softer', more consensual aspects of global ethics, where discussion of the limits of ethical positions might go on in a supportive nurturing atmosphere? For instance, there is a possibility that an excessively ironic disposition might conflict with other important ethical qualities such as feminist care ethics,[74] or the kind of open, domination-free forums sought by deliberative democrats.[75]

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[70] R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 87–8.

[71] R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979).

[72] For a fuller discussion of the public-private division in Rorty's thought see J. Brassett, 'Richard Rorty', in J. Edkins and N. Vaughan-Williams (eds), *Critical Theorists and International Relations*, forthcoming (2008).

[73] Will Smith, 'Cosmopolitan Citizenship: Virtue, Irony and Worldliness', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 10:1 (2007), p. 42.

The second and opposite critique is perhaps the harder to deal with. While political theorists have been concerned with the potentially hurtful aspects of irony, the examples of British irony avowedly flag up the potentially conservative aspects of it. On some level, this is probably a question of taste: for a number of reasons it is currently quite unpalatable to suggest that the British have anything particularly interesting or important to say to the subject of global ethics. The British Empire, corporate globalisation, both of the Iraq wars, etc., etc., etc. all suggest that a specifically British approach to ethics may be a bit rich? This is especially so when brought into contact with a deeper and more pressing philosophical question of the relationship between irony and power. Indeed, a long tradition of critical theory holds that domination-free communication is, if not the ultimate end, then at least a necessary precondition to achieving ethics.[76] How then can ethics be meaningfully discussed by the dominator? On this view, at least two of the protagonists considered here (Chris Brown and Ricky Gervais) may have an all-too-comfortable relationship with power. Chris Brown is more than happy to 'intervene' with large questions relating to state power, siding with selectivity in American foreign policy for instance[77], and, despite the sophisticated critique, Ricky Gervais, ultimately acts within an established national media form (the BBC) to raise money for charity (the very thing his analysis questions).

Of course, each of these critiques of irony has purchase. Many would see the point of keeping prohibitions on what stands as an acceptable intervention in the public discussion of global ethics. Equally, a key attraction of global ethics, as a public discourse, is in terms of how it might offer a point of resistance to the dominant power structures of globalisation and global politics. But such critiques overlook a key point which arguably forms the basis of Rorty's philosophical outlook. That is, questions of global ethics are not ultimately solved by equalising rights of fair and open participation, or by searching out some virtuous space for reflection that is somehow 'beyond', or at least, not tainted by power. As Kimberley Hutchings argues:

> To seek a mode of dialogue in which power is bracketed out [. . .] is to underestimate the weight of moral responsibility carried in communication. This responsibility is not equivalent to the equal distribution to each person of a duty to speak for themselves and listen to others, according to the principles inherent in a shared communicative rationality. Rather, it is a responsibility, in the context of opacity of meaning and radically

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[74] F. Robinson, *Globalizing Care: Ethics, Feminist Theory and International Relations* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999). For instance, a point which could be developed is whether irony is an excessively 'masculine' quality? The personal strength required to undermine one's position publicly (Gervais), or to proceed with constant awareness of indeterminacy (Brown, Banksy), seems to fit into some fairly male personality types, 'self-awareness as self-control', of 'swallowing up the pain and toughing it out'.

[75] W. Smith and J. Brassett, 'Deliberation and Global Governance: Liberal, Cosmopolitan and Critical Perspectives', *Ethics and International Affairs*, forthcoming (2007).

[76] See for instance J. Bohman, 'International Regimes and Democratic Governance: Political Equality and Influence in Global Institutions', *International Affairs*, 75:3 (1999), pp. 499–513.

[77] 'Selective Humanitarianism: in defense of inconsistency', in D. K. Chatterjee and D. E. Scheid (eds), *Ethics and Foreign Intervention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 31–50.

inegalitarian power relations, to put your own assumptions into question and strain to imagine what it might mean to be and think differently.[78]

Instead, it is the substance and status of politics and 'the political' in global ethics that must be continually engaged from a pragmatic perspective. This is not then an invitation to license irony, and all ironic interventions. It is clear, for instance, that some uses of irony are simply hurtful, or perhaps simply unrelated to the subject of global ethics. Equally, when close or tied to power, irony can act as an apology for the status quo, a conservative shrug of the shoulders and recognition that war is, when all is said and done, *a bloody affair.* From a pragmatic point of view, such interventions must be resisted and where possible contested. But we equally should resist the view that there are 'correct standards' of discourse. This view is, no doubt, popular amongst the broad tradition of liberal political theorists, but the suggestion is badly thought through. The idea that we should restrict certain critical reflexes, such as irony, in the public realm does not circumvent the original point which is that the ironic interventions are themselves often aimed at highlighting a particular violence inherent in public discourses on global ethics.

Certainly, the interventions of Banksy and Gervais considered here suggest that irony requires certain, if not always clearly articulated moral courage. Indeed, and returning to Brown, it may be in the lack of codification that the problem lies for many political theorists? It is arguable, perhaps, that the tradition of reason-giving liberal political theory has begun to privilege the 'method' of justifying (or not) moral intuitions, at the expense of the vitality and tragedy of those intuitions themselves. At the very least, from a pragmatic perspective, the task is to respect the political moment, allowing the ironist to express their ethics. Instead of a blanket curtailment of the possibility of cruelty in irony, we should perhaps extend the same the luxury to ironists as we do to 'reason givers', which is a capacity to realise when they are doing wrong. For instance, Banksy often includes dedicated critical responses to his work. In particular, he included the comments of a Palenstinian man who felt patronised by his murals on the Israeli wall:

Old Man: You Paint the Wall, you make it look beautiful
Banksy: Thanks
Old Man: We don't want it to be beautiful, we hate this wall, go home.[79]

More importantly, we need to overcome the second view that effective resistance requires us to somehow 'distance' ourselves from power. This view that we can somehow practice critique from a standpoint that transcends questions of power and domination in Truth, the 'ideal speech situation, or some other idea(l) suggests that there are correct 'spaces' or 'practices' of resistance, be it democracy, the revolutionary working class or a post-national constellation.[80] For such ethical blueprints, the idea of British irony may appear as something of a conservative refrain, a sardonic shrug of the shoulders in the face of a world which can't be changed? On the contrary, the ongoing role of Britain and British culture in the constitution of the limits of global ethics – via security policy, DFID, the NGO community, etc. – make it all the more necessary to trace the lines of instability of such constructions. And it is here that phrasing critique in the problem's very own discourse might provide some force. As Michel Foucault argued:

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[78] K. Hutchings, 'Speaking and Hearing: Habermasian Discourse Ethics, Feminism and IR', *Review of International Studies*, 31:1 (1999), p. 165.

[79] Banksy, *Wall and Piece* (London: Century, 2005), p. 116.

[80] R. Rorty, 'Habermas, Derrida, and the Functions of Philosophy', in *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.308–26. See also R. Rorty, 'Universality and Truth', in *Rorty And His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 1–30.

> . . . there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case [. . .] by definition they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. But this does not mean that they are only a reaction or a rebound, forming with respect to the basic domination an underside that is in the end always passive, doomed to perpetual defeat. Resistances do not derive from a few heterogenous principles; but neither are they a lure or a promise that is of necessity betrayed. They are the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite.[81]

Such a view is perhaps a fitting supplement for a pragmatic understanding of irony. The accidental and contingent nature of irony that Rorty identifies, the ethical indeterminacy inscribed in the relationship between radical critique and liberal reform, indeed, within British irony, the intimate ties felt with 'the strategic field of power relations', all imply that an agonising rather than an affirmative resistance is the order of the day. British irony, a well cultivated self-doubt, is simultaneously a resource for considered reflection on the harm we enact in the world *and*, particularly when employed by the former Prime Minister Blair, sometimes a part of the justification for such harm.[82] It is only with great caution that British irony can be valued as a contribution to a discussion of the limits of global justice. It is as suggestive and broadly felt as it is (potentially) conservative and tranquilising.

Conclusion

In summary, the article has argued that irony, and in particular British irony, can be read as one amongst many resistances to certain aspects of the global justice discourse. That even this limited discussion of British irony travelled so easily into tragedy, humanism, or humour may suggest one reason why liberal political theorists (with the exception of Rorty) have steered a clear course around irony. Such characteristics do not fit easily with the cold analytical rigours of many liberal accounts of global justice. But the recurrence of ironic practices and their place at the centre of global/imperial power structures serves to make them a signal formation, an illustrative and original alternative for political engagement. Irony may not offer a straightforward analytical device for 'solving' questions of global ethics. But it does suggest an approach which facilitates an appreciation of the tragedy, humanity and centre-less webs of identity which often go unnoticed in the discussion of global justice, and which may be central to its future construction.

Two points remain to conclude this discussion. Firstly, the temptation to compare, contrast and somehow rank the protagonists of British irony simply cannot be

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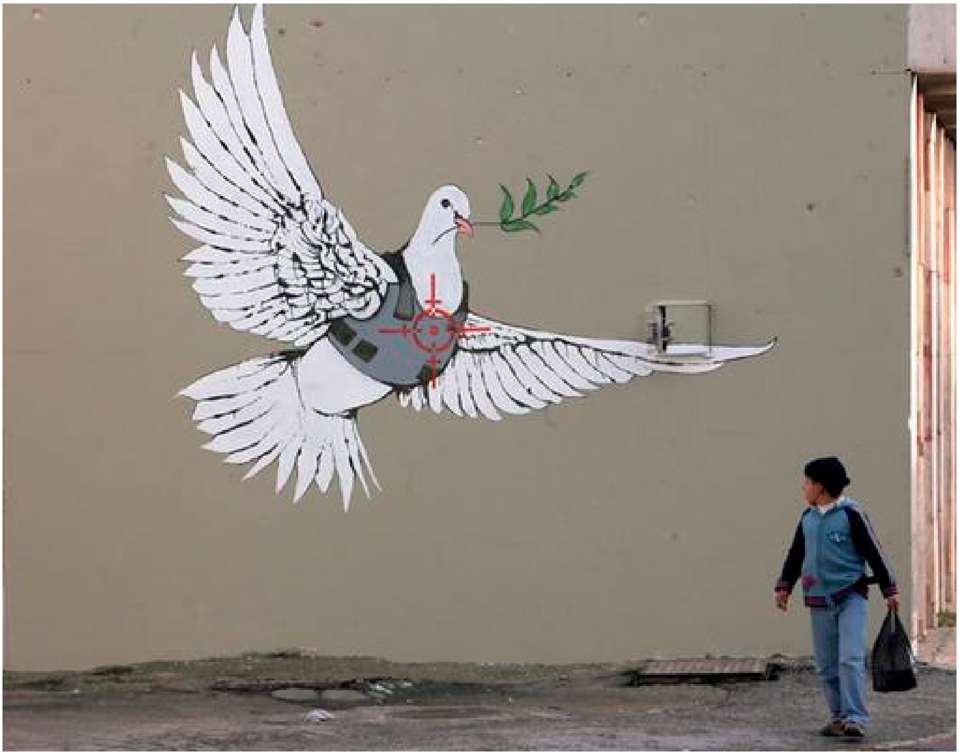
[81] M. Foucault, 'On Method', in Louise Amoore (ed.), *The Global Resistance Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 88. See also Louise Amoore that may be relevant: 'There is No Great Refusal': 'The Ambivalent Politics of Resistance', in M. de Goede (ed.), *International Political Economy and Poststructural Politics* (Palgrave, 2006).

[82] D. Bulley, 'The Ethics of Decision: Representations of Britain's War in Iraq'. Paper presented at the 2006 ISA Convention, San Diego.



Picture 5. (Dove in Flak Jacket) http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_pictures/7125611.stm

avoided. And secondly, with an eye to future research in this area, the multiple forms of irony be it national or religious, or otherwise, surely require some attention?

On the first point, it would be easy to stereotype. Brown could be taken as the most theoretically sophisticated British ironist, and certainly the one who speaks most directly to the subject of global justice, while we might hold certain reservations about his broader political impact. Banksy, who can perhaps claim a larger political impact, would rank as the most imaginative ironist, yet hardest to pin down to particular (moral) position. And Gervais would be taken as the funniest, with the broadest appeal, who perhaps sacrifices the ethical potential of his critique to the (cerebral) anatomy of the joke? But, of course, these observations break down. Brown can surely claim a greater political impact by virtue of his influence on generations of students, his work is published across the world and his institution regularly counts state leaders as visitors, and students as future leaders. Equally, Banksy might lay claim to a superior ethical point?

The performativty of Banksy's graffiti, the completeness of the inversions he makes, means that the critique presents a permanent paradox. There is simply no way of reconciling the beauty of his murals with the horror of the Israeli–Palestinian Wall except to consider beauty and horror as permanent features of our ethical world. Closure is not possible. In the image of a dove with a flak jacket above, for instance, we see the absurdity of the double-bind: peace and security, in its purest form. And finally, Ricky Gervais might be salvaged by pragmatism. In a world where the majority of people have not heard of the G8, and know very little about the intimate connections between global capitalism and global poverty, Gervias' involvement in campaigns like Make Poverty History and Comic Relief means that the campaign is likely to reach more people, and with a sophisticated message attached. No doubt the politics of reception is crucial here. It may be possible to watch Gervais' comic relief sketch and assume that apathy is the only way. But we should not affirm an elitist view of irony, that it is the preserve of intellectuals. The widespread nature and appeal of British irony implies that we should avoid such closures, while recognising that there are of course no guarantees in this.

On the second point, future research should perhaps avoid treating irony as either universal or distinctly national. As this article has suggested, both attempts to essentialise irony are difficult and carry certain drawbacks. A theory of universal irony could blind us to the distinct messages, questions and imaginations available through different ironic forms. Equally a (universal) division of irony along national lines would both reify contested social histories and close off the evolution of irony via overlapping communities be they feminist, religious, or in cyberspace.

There is clearly an emergent category for political analysis here. The controversial Danish cartoons suggest we need to engage critically with the cross-cultural implications of irony. In addition irony has emerged as an important resource for anti-globalisation protestors.[83] And against British prejudices, perhaps, the most ironic and *one of the best* critiques of the War on Terror has hailed from the US in the guise of *Team America.* Indeed, critical theorists have yet to provide a detailed engagement with the multiple and laudable ethical resistances contained within the South Park cartoons. Of course, such a research agenda is limited by its openness. Irony does not provide clear answers, or even clear questions to the discourse of global ethics. Moreover, in the specific case of the cultural manifestations of irony we should not ignore the potential for ambivalences relating to ownership of media capital and the exigencies of 'selling to a specific market', i.e. those who are not part of that market may be marginalised.[84] But it does signal an imaginative and politically relevant arena in which ethics is being negotiated in contemporary circumstances. Neither a lack of codification nor the 'too hard label' should deter critical scholars from engaging such forms.

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[83] Marieke De Goede, 'Carnival of Money: Politics of dissent in an era of globalising finance', in Louise Amoore (ed.), *The Global Resistance Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 379–91.

[84] In a masterful analysis of the *Lonely Planet* guidebook brand, which seeks to provide travellers with a way of breaking down cultural barriers Debbie Lisle argues that while on the one hand *Lonely Planet* 'travellers do not encourage the global inequalities bolstered by the tourism industry – they *help* others by breaking down cultural barriers and spending their hard currency where it is most needed . . .' and 'in the process, LP travellers develop important cultural capital: they become well-travelled, culturally aware, cosmopolitan global citizens.' One the other hand 'The problem, of course, is that the benefactor/victim logic of humanitarianism leaves the excommunicated masses of the world – those who are written about in LP guidebooks – in the same position: subordinate and silent.' Debbie Lisle, 'Humanitarian Travels: Ethical Communication in *Lonely Planet* guidebooks', *Review of International Studies*, 34:1 (2008), p. 171.