

## **Beyond irony: using hermeneutics to make sense of Rorty's liberal project in the age of value-pluralism.**

This paper presents a constructive critique of Rortyan irony as an incomplete means towards a confident assertion of the liberal ethos within the general framework of value pluralism, and instead offers an alternative, hermeneutic approach to political theory insofar as it affords a sounder epistemological argument in defence of liberal values.

Rorty brings attention to the historically contingent and locally defined roots of the liberal project, linked to the Enlightenment. Once liberalism cannot be asserted universally, then, the best we can do is approach it ironically, he argues. The ironist has to affirm her liberalism even when the reasons that substantiate this defence are not entirely clear to herself, just like characters in Greek tragedies are not fully aware of the meaning of their actions. The point of irony is that this meaning exists, however it is impossible for us to fully grasp it as characters within the story: only an external spectator – the audience, in the case of Greek Tragedies – can comprehend it. In this view, then, the problem is not that liberalism is not supported by a complete notion of truth, but simply that we are not capable of fully comprehending this truth given our inherent situatedness.

This paper endorses firmly Rorty's depiction of liberalism as historically contingent, however it tries to transcend his defence of irony by proposing that instead we adopt an approach towards political theory that I will refer to as 'hermeneutic confidence'. This approach, just like Rortyan irony, eliminates the possibility of asserting liberalism in an absolute, 'true' manner. However it rejects Rorty's move from contingency to irony, mostly due to the negative connotations of the term: there is some assumption of un-clarity, or of lack of completeness in this term. Instead, the defence of liberalism I propose draws both in our capacity for abstract thinking, and in our ability to understand philosophically and reflect

critically on the meaning of historically, culturally, and socially constructed truths. This is what this paper understands hermeneutics to be, and it uses the work of H.G. Gadamer in order to provide a basic theoretical framework, and that of I. Berlin and B. Williams as possible examples of what this hermeneutic defences of liberalism can look like in practice. Thus, if we are aware of the historical contingency of liberalism, this should not be counted as a weakness, but rather a strength, for this awareness demands that we examine critically its basic normative principles with regards to the context in which they ought to be applied. The result is a much more case-sensitive type of liberalism, better suited to the types of radical dilemmas we face within our increasingly politically polarised world.

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**Author information:**

Dr. Paula Zoido-Oses

Teaching Fellow in Political Theory, University of Warwick / Visiting Lecturer in Politics and IR, New College of the Humanities.

**Bio:**

I am a Teaching Fellow in Political Theory at the University of Warwick, and a Visiting Lecturer in Politics at the New College of the Humanities in London. I am mainly interested in questioning the normative justifications of liberalism, especially in the face of value pluralism. In order to do this I have been exploring the intersection between contemporary political theory, the history of philosophy, and the philosophy of history. I have a PhD from the LSE for which I wrote a thesis that approached the question of method in Political Theory, arguing that a more hermeneutic approach is needed if we want to be able to justify liberalism once we accept its contingent nature. In my thesis I used Isaiah Berlin's work as an example of this type of approach. Since finishing my PhD last year I have been exploring critiques of liberalism, looking mostly at feminist critiques of liberal individualism.