

## NIETZSCHE, RORTY, AND ENLIGHTENMENT

NIETZSCHE, RORTY AND ENLIGHTENMENT

By

DANIEL HARRIS, B.A.

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AUTHOR: Daniel Harris, B.A. (Wilfrid Laurier University)

SUPERVISOR: Professor Diane Enns

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## ABSTRACT

Friedrich Nietzsche is often supposed to represent an end to ideas central to Enlightenment thinking such as human maturation, power, and progress. Through an examination of the work of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and especially that of Richard Rorty, this thesis develops and defends an argument based on Nietzsche's thinking on contingency and creation in order to make clear the ways in which we can see in the philosophical reaction to Nietzsche's thought resources for a renewed faith in Enlightenment thinking.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

Friedrich Nietzsche

- (BGE) Beyond Good and Evil. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. New York: Penguin Books, 1973.
- (D) Daybreak. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- (OTL) “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” in Daniel Breazeale, Philosophy and Truth. Humanities Press, 1979. 79-91.
- (GM) On the Genealogy of Morals. Translated by Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage Books, 1967.
- (GS) The Gay Science. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1974.
- (Z) Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. New York: Penguin Books, 1969.
- (WP) The Will to Power. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books, 1968.
- (N) Writings from the Late Notebooks. Rudiger Bittner, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Richard Rorty

- (AC) Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- (CP) Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972-1980. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.
- (CIS) Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- (EHO) Essays On Heidegger and Others. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- (ORT) Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- (PSH) Philosophy and Social Hope. London: Penguin Books, 1999.
- (PMN) Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. Princeton University Press, 1979.
- (PCP) Philosophy as Cultural Politics. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- (TP) Truth and Progress. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

## INTRODUCTION

Alasdair MacIntyre begins After Virtue by displaying what he deems the inevitable incoherence of the Enlightenment project. He does this by highlighting the sheer interminability of a series of moral debates central to enlightened modernity, such as abortion, just war, and the right to health care and education. Both sides are right, yet each contradicts the other. MacIntyre contends that such confusion is what we get when Enlightenment rationalism plays itself out, when the incoherencies of the various strands of modern thought show their ultimate inadequacy to the human condition. What we need, then, is a new way to think about human beings and their societies. MacIntyre suggests that in choosing a future we face a choice between Aristotle and Nietzsche. Aristotle because he offers a comprehensive view of the good life with which to order such debates thereby providing the ground upon which difficult cases can be judged; Nietzsche because it is he who calls the Enlightenment's bluff, who first shows that morality as construed by Enlightenment philosophers is built upon unsteady foundations. MacIntyre writes:

Either one must follow through the aspirations and the collapse of the different versions of the Enlightenment project until there remains only the Nietzschean diagnosis and the Nietzschean problematic or one must hold that the Enlightenment project was not only mistaken, but should never have been commenced in the first place. There is no third alternative.<sup>1</sup>

This work offers a third alternative. Nietzsche, for MacIntyre, is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the Enlightenment, his solution necessary but so obviously unattractive that we ought,

clearly, to choose Aristotle. Against this, the third alternative, our alternative, is to construct a Nietzsche and an Enlightenment of our choosing, an Enlightened Nietzsche or a Nietzscheanized Enlightenment, and so to declare that we ought indeed to choose Nietzsche, but a Nietzsche of our design.

At first glance, Nietzsche was no friend to the Enlightenment. Indeed, for Nietzsche disgust for ‘enlightenment’ (his quotation marks) is a necessary part of what it means to be noble (WP 943). The hope for progress and human equality enshrined in Enlightenment thought is taken by Nietzsche as a sign of decline, of the leveling down of humanity to a uniform, harmless banality. Yet I hope to show that in certain currents fundamental to Nietzsche’s thought we find resources for the types of political goals emblematic of Enlightenment thinking.

Kant defines Enlightenment as “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity.” He continues, “immaturity is man’s inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another.”<sup>2</sup> We see Enlightenment defined first as humanity’s maturation, its coming to terms with the absence of ultimate authorities and so also with the necessity of human self-sufficiency.

In a passage that Nietzsche could have written, Kant decries the lamentable herd of most of humanity, immaturely relying on the guidance of others. He suggests that “after the guardians have first made their domestic cattle dumb and have made sure that these placid creatures will not dare take a single step without the harness of the cart to which they are tethered, the guardians then show them the danger which threatens if they

try to go alone.”<sup>3</sup> Too long tied to false dogma and superstition, Enlightened humanity begins to slough off false authorities and take responsibility for itself; the herd mentality begins to look distasteful and room is made for creative individuals whose activities can, for Kant, “accelerate the coming of this period which will be so welcome to our descendants.”<sup>4</sup> The Enlightenment is the age of critique, of testing all claims to guide our actions against the authority of reason. The human being must now ‘dare to know’. A better understanding of humanity’s position allows humanity to strive for a new version of happiness, progress towards which becomes the human being’s chief vocation. Kant writes how “it is man’s duty to *strive* for this perfection, but not to *reach* it (in this life), and his compliance with this duty can, accordingly, consist only in continual progress.”<sup>5</sup> Once aware of the potential and possibility of the human being and her community, human beings become free to work towards a continual progress no longer indexed to the paternalistic standards of a dubious authority. Instead, the aim of progress becomes the cultivation of a taste for it, for pleasure in the ameliorative malleability of human beings and their communities.

Distilling the salient aspects of Kant’s answer to the question ‘what is Enlightenment?’, I claim that we understand the Enlightenment as a constellation of ideas centering on human maturation, power, and progress. Humanity matures by coming to terms with a new sense of power, of self-sufficiency in guiding its affairs, which enables a new vision of the possible progress of human societies. The argument presented here is that in each respect, this is a deeply Nietzschean narrative. Nietzsche is nothing if not a poet of human power, potential, and progress; although the content of Nietzsche’s hopes differ from those of Kant, both are joined by a sense that with a better appreciation of

what the human being is, we are finally well-placed to envision a future radically different from and better than the past. So it is that Nietzsche asks, “is there a more holy condition than that of pregnancy? To do all we do in the unspoken belief that it has somehow to benefit that which is coming to be within us!...What is growing here is something greater than we are....we prepare everything for it so that it may come happily into the world” (D 552).

Nietzsche makes appearances in each of the following chapters. In the main, however, he remains in the background, waiting to be addressed. My focus, instead, is on the way we can see in the philosophical reaction to Nietzsche attempts to deal with his critiques while holding fast to the core of Enlightenment thought. If Nietzsche remains not quite in the open, the main character of this work is surely Richard Rorty. For it is Rorty who offers us a Nietzsche we can work with; not *the* Nietzsche, for such an account of a perspectivalist such as Nietzsche is neither possible nor desirable, but a Nietzsche at once faithful to the texts and amenable to the goals of Enlightenment thought.

Rorty’s heroes in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* are Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. While each began his philosophical career with an attempt to construct a totalizing system, Rorty stresses how they each ultimately came to distrust that urge in themselves and in the tradition, and so came to view philosophy as an attempt to distance oneself from the urge to systematize. Rorty’s own career followed the path of his heroes. After being educated at the historically-oriented philosophy departments of Chicago and Yale, Rorty’s early years as a professor were marked by a swift initiation into the then-burgeoning movement of analytic philosophy. Like his heroes, he tried to

do well the types of things expected of him within the dominant framework, making respectable contributions to debates in the philosophy of mind. Increasingly however, he came to distrust the insulated narrowness of analytic philosophy and returned to the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey, by that time long out of fashion and almost nowhere taken seriously.

Beginning in the 1970's, Rorty began to craft his vision of democratic politics best understood as an attempt to come to terms with the danger and pessimism of Nietzsche's work while maintaining the faith in democracy characteristic of John Dewey. Rorty's aim in his political writings was to encourage us to distance ourselves from the gods, to abjure appeal to standards or authorities supposedly context-independent. We find throughout his work a consistent appeal to the value of human communities working by their own lights.

My aim here, however, is not simply to countenance Rorty's positions but, by placing his alongside competing interpretations, to show the excesses and insufficiencies of Rorty's views, offering my own supplements and reservations where necessary. Throughout, the overarching goal is to tease out and make clear implications of Nietzsche's thought which set him at home within the Enlightenment tradition. I defined Enlightenment as a view of human maturations that appreciates human power and allows for a politics of progress. Each chapter addresses one aspect of the Enlightenment so defined. Chapter one introduces and explores the central tenets of Rorty's thought on truth and politics, showing the ways in which Rorty offers a new, Nietzschean story of human maturation, a story which places the Enlightenment turn to a human nature grounded in reason within a broader story of human development able to harvest the

hopes of the Enlightenment while sloughing off the chaff of universalist, foundationalist thought. In chapter two I discuss Rorty's relationship with Michel Foucault, suggesting that we understand both figures as responding to Nietzsche's question of power. The upshot of human maturation is a recognition of human self-sufficiency, of our nascent power in navigating our existence. The debate between Rorty and Foucault is over just what, in placing power in human hands, Nietzsche bequeathed us. I argue that we read Nietzsche's narratives of power as opening a space for progress towards radically democratic communal creation. In chapter three the work of Jacques Derrida is introduced with a view towards understanding the prospects for such creation. I show the ways in which Derrida and Rorty can be seen as offering similar advice to those concerned with such issues, albeit in tones so different from one another as to obfuscate such convergences. I develop and defend there a view of democratic progress drawn from Nietzsche's thinking on contingency and creation.

In both chapters two and three, I introduce a figure central to contemporary understandings of Rorty's relationship to Nietzschean thought. By showcasing the tensions in Todd May's reading of Foucault and Rorty and in Simon Critchley's understanding of the relationship between Derrida and Rorty, I argue that we are perhaps less than best-served by current renderings of the importance of Rorty's thought and its amenability to post-Nietzschean political thinking from the continent. The point of such an exercise is not just to take a stand on matters of textual interpretation. I argue that a pervasive misreading of Rorty which presents him as an apologist for American imperialism is a misunderstanding. There is a certain knee-jerk negative reaction to Enlightenment thinking, so that anyone espousing Enlightenment virtues is labeled as

naïve, chauvinistic, out-of-touch. But as Foucault put it to us, we must be careful to avoid the blackmail of the Enlightenment, the false dichotomy of a simple pro or con attitude.<sup>6</sup> The traditions of which we are a part provide the material for possible change. Turning our back on a tradition in its entirety would be to turn our back on ourselves. Nietzsche offers similar advice when he writes, “do not underestimate the value of having been religious.... You must...be on familiar terms with history and with playing the cautious game with the scales ‘on one hand – on the other hand’”(HATH 292). In arguing against the view of Rorty as naively, perhaps dangerously willing to affirm Enlightenment values, I want to show the ways in which his affirmation is radically Nietzschean. My intention is not to make Nietzsche banal by placing him within the tradition of Enlightenment thought, but rather to show just how radically Nietzschean Enlightenment thought can be. By showing what is wrong with a common critique of Rorty as banal, dangerous and culturally imperialist, it will become clear how much of Nietzsche’s own thought depends upon the type of affirmation for which Rorty is often criticized.

Maturation, power, and progress. Nietzsche is supposed by many, including MacIntyre, to represent an end - of faith in humanity, of democratic goals, and of Enlightenment. I suggest we read Nietzsche not as an end, but as a beginning.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p.118.

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’” in *Kant’s Political Writings*, H. Reiss, ed. (Cambridge, 1970), p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Immanuel Kant *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* quoted in David Owen, “The Contest of Enlightenment: An Essay on Critique and Genealogy” in *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* (25, 2003, pp.35-57), p.37.

<sup>5</sup> Kant *The Metaphysics of Morals* quoted in Owen, p. 52.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment” in The Foucault Reader Paul Rabinow, ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p.42.

## CHAPTER ONE: RICHARD RORTY ON SNAKES AND LADDERS

The trail of the human serpent is thus over everything. Truth independent; truth that we find merely; truth no longer malleable to human need; truth incorrigible, in a word; such truth exists indeed superabundantly – or is supposed to exist by rationalistically minded thinkers; but then it means only the dead heart of the living tree. *William James*

Anyone who understands me eventually recognizes [my premises] as nonsensical, when he has used them--as steps--to climb beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed it.) *Ludwig Wittgenstein*

When Nietzsche's madman heralded the death of God, he did much more than signal the demise of Christian piety. The death of God was the death of all his surrogates; gone was the Western faith in a non-human authority by whose standards we could judge our own progress. Indeed, gone was 'nature' conceived of as the home of knowable distinct things whose natures it was man's own nature to discover. Instead, after Nietzsche, we must begin to make our own way in an all-too-human universe.

Richard Rorty's thought is perhaps best approached as an attempt to come to terms with the lessons of Nietzsche by making suggestions for what we ought to do next, for what we ought to do with Nietzsche. Indeed, what Nietzsche's madman does for God, Rorty attempts for philosophy; Rorty wanders among us villagers urging that 'Philosophy is dead, and we Philosophers are its murderers'. Just as the Christian love of truth ultimately led to God being sacrificed at its altar, philosophers as diverse as Nietzsche, James, Derrida, and Davidson have philosophized themselves out of philosophy, so that philosophy as practiced up to the present is dead.

For Rorty, the end of philosophy is the end of Platonism. The history of the west, and so the tradition of western philosophy which follows close behind, is one of a gradual letting go of the urge for transcendence, the hope that we might tap into an authority

radically other than ourselves. Rorty's chief criticism, restated in various ways throughout his career, is against the notion definitive of the tradition that we can fruitfully conceive of the human being as standing in some relation to something outside herself, a relation the clarification and articulation of which will give us answers for how to live. The intuition constitutive of this tradition is that in order to understand the totality of human experience, we must behold it from a position that transcends space, time, and difference. Nietzsche's contribution is to rid us of this intuition.

The hero of a society which has not absorbed Nietzsche's call will be one who is able to provide us with a link to another world, access to which makes our own intelligible. For the Greeks, this figure was the philosopher; for the Christians, it was Christ; and for the children of the Enlightenment it has come to be the scientist. Plato's Philosopher King escaped the cave, gaining access to the world of Forms and so holding human experience in a single vision. The Christian's revelation gave him knowledge of what the world qua creation amounted to and so what the place of the human being was to be. Lastly, today the scientist studies reality as it is, getting to the fundamental elements, the very stuff, of the universe. In any culture with such a hero, the goal of existence is to escape the human condition through knowledge of the unconditioned, flee finitude through contact with the infinite. All are attempts to gain what Nietzsche called 'metaphysical comfort'.

For Rorty, the father of this tradition is Plato. About halfway through his career Plato began to diverge from the thinking of his teacher, Socrates, and Socrates the character began to speak Plato's own language, opening a space between the two men. The space between Plato and Socrates is the space between Platonism and anti-Platonism,

foundationalism and anti-foundationalism, the tradition and Rorty. Whatever Socrates' pretensions to contact with another world, we find in his thought a radical and obdurate insistence on conversation, consensus, and a community of inquirers whose search for truth is a common one. It takes Plato to introduce a character like the Philosopher King, a person who can bypass conversation and simply pronounce. It is little surprise, then, that we often find Rorty praising Socratic conversation at the expense of the Philosopher King's univocal pronouncements. In this chapter my purpose is to clarify for myself the main tenets of Rorty's philosophical worldview. I suggest that Rorty's importance lies in his contribution to the battle between Plato and Socrates, Platonism and anti-Platonism, and so I return often to this opposition in order to come to terms with Rorty's project.

Rorty's pragmatism is concerned to show what type of claims we can make in the wake of Nietzsche, what type of thing our Enlightenment heritage can be after its foundations are jettisoned. Rorty justifies this letting go of foundations by telling a story of human maturation comprising two stages. First, a group of philosophers representing diverse traditions teach us that we cannot escape our own skins, that the trail of the human serpent is over all. To this end, Rorty crafts a list of philosophers who all contribute to a new dubious pose towards the Platonic urge for transcendence. Second, Rorty argues that with this new self-image in hand, we are ready to rid ourselves of the claims to foundations that allowed us to construct the type of liberal democratic society in which we find ourselves. Such appeals to foundations are, to use a phrase he borrows from Wittgenstein, ladders which we are now in a position to safely throw away. Rorty's is a story of human maturation, of our increasing ability to see the world as largely what we make of it, and so is at home in Enlightenment thought. At the same time, it places

the Enlightenment's faith in reason in the context of a broader story of maturation, and so is able to overcome the much-maligned excesses of Enlightenment's faith in the saving power of reason. Rorty's story of snakes and ladders brings together the light of Enlightenment hope for the human condition with the shadow of Nietzschean critique. It is a narrative at home in both visions of humanity, one which gives us reason to believe the two narratives are really one.

### 1.1 Snakes

Plato's cave analogy articulates the type of urge for transcendence anathema to Rorty. Plato's fear is that however confident we are with our representation of the world, we might be talking about mere shadows on the wall, so that "even when we have justified true belief about everything we want to know, we may have no more than conformity to the norms of the day" (PMN 367). So we need a figure who can reassure us that our representation is knowledge of the really real. Enter the Philosopher King, who can back up his pronouncements because he has seen the light, literally. Below the philosopher, the ignorant remain enmeshed in a world of shadows, and whatever consensus they might reach is ultimately unimportant. They inhabit the world of appearance, and so are silenced by the philosopher's description of the really real.

For Plato's skeptical fear to take hold, the fear that *all* our representations might be false, knowledge has to be conceived of representationally. Knowledge must be something that represents the world by putting the knower into contact with the known, the word into contact with the world. So the job of epistemology is to flee the cave, to

gain a type of knowledge that cannot be equated with knowledge of shadows, and so to avoid, as Nietzsche put it, being deceived. Knowledge incapable of deception is knowledge of essence, of changeless Forms. Without it, we glimpse only appearances. The philosopher's hope, Plato's hope, is to have the world make demands on us unmediated by history, situation, or subjective bias.

This distinction between the darkness and light, between appearance and reality, is neither innocent nor unimportant. From it we can extrapolate what John Dewey called the whole brooding nest of dualisms on which the history of Western philosophy reposes: inner/outer, essential/peripheral, necessary/contingent, reason/passion, realities/illusions, fact/opinion, and neutral/partisan.<sup>1</sup> Plato's dream, and so the dream of philosophy since, is to flee the second side of each dualism, finding a resting place in an atemporal world free of change, perspective, or subjectivity. We can discern the same urge for transcending the local, provisional or limited in Bertrand Russell's desire for "the free intellect," which "will see as God might see, without a here and now, without hopes and fears...calmly, dispassionately, in the sole and exclusive desire of knowledge."<sup>2</sup> From Plato to Russell, and continuing to us, the dream of philosophy is an escape from the human towards the divine, away from the living and so transient towards the obdurate, constant world of essence. It is a desire to disappear in our individuality and be reborn in universality.

Call pragmatists those philosophers who find dubious such a desire for transcendence, and even more so the entire project of erecting rigid distinctions in human experience from which the desire arises. Dewey wrote how philosophers have heretofore "served ideas *forced into* experience, not *gathered from* it."<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere: "experience

knows no division between human concerns and a purely mechanical physical world.

Man's home is nature... Separated from such conditions [purposes and aims become] empty dreams and idle indulgences of fancy.”<sup>4</sup> That is, the dream of philosophy to escape a lived, holistic experience of the world produces only idle speculation, a philosophy unsuited to our experience of the world. We need to recognize that all binary oppositions and distinctions are malleable, that they serve life and so, as the life of a society progresses, often need to be remade.

Rorty’s contribution to this Deweyan line of thinking is to show the way in which it ties in with developments in ostensibly distant currents of philosophy. Rorty’s project is one of looking forward in order to sketch the post-Nietzschean ground on which several different lines of thought are converging. Consider the following selections, representing a hundred years of philosophy on both sides of the Channel, and their common view of truth and non-human reality:

1. We cannot look around our own corner. (Nietzsche GS 374).
2. The concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play. And on the basis of the certitude anxiety can be mastered.<sup>5</sup> (Jacques Derrida)
3. Elements of what we call ‘language’ or ‘mind’ penetrate so deeply into reality that the very project of representing ourselves as being ‘mappers’ of something ‘language independent’ is fatally compromised from the start.<sup>6</sup> (Hilary Putnam)
4. A community of minds is the basis of knowledge; it provides the measure of all things. It makes no sense to question the adequacy of this measure, or to seek a more ultimate standard.<sup>7</sup> (Donald Davidson)
5. The trail of the human serpent is thus over everything. Truth independent; truth that we find merely; truth no longer malleable to human need; truth incorrigible, in a word; such truth exists indeed superabundantly – or is supposed to exist by rationalistically minded thinkers; but then it means only the dead heart of the living tree, and its being there means only that truth also has its palaeontology and

its ‘prescription,’ and may grow stiff with years of veteran service and petrified in men’s regard by sheer antiquity.<sup>8</sup> (William James)

Each of these comments focuses on demystifying truth, and philosophy understood as its pursuit, by making it something *we* do. Each, for Rorty, is part of the conversation that follows from Nietzsche’s initial questioning of the value of truth. If to be a Platonist is to prize truth as unquestionably good and so to organize and understand one’s life in its constant and unconditional light, then to pose such a question is to put an end to Platonism. It is to reduce truth to our level by suggesting that there is no other level, no divided line and so no philosopher king who might simply skip conversation. In (1), Nietzsche suggests that the hope for a view external to practice, a perspective not mediated through and through by the so-called contaminations of the perspective-holder, is impossible. We cannot see around our own corner because there is no world apart from our needs, no thing-in-itself separate from what our needs as creatures of a particular sort pick out. In (2) Jacques Derrida suggests that the absence of such a view, a centre or anchor, signals our inability to avoid a certain anxiety. For Plato’s quest for episteme, for knowledge as certainty about the world, is an attempt to rid the world of its mystery so as to make possible our mastery over it. The hope for a ground beyond the reach of play is the hope for contact with something changeless, something so radically other that by understanding it we may better understand ourselves. (3) and (4) mark similar positions articulated by leading analytic philosophers of their generation, Hilary Putnam and Donald Davidson. Although neither are unqualified friends of either Nietzsche or Rorty, we can see how both lend aid to the suggestion that the desire for transcendence is unfit to human experience. Finally, in (5) William James unknowingly

echoes Nietzsche's own views on truth. To say with James that the human serpent covers all is to label the Platonic urge for a Real world accessible only to a few as a false hope motivated by an obdurate unwillingness to accept our place as finite beings of contingent circumstance. Truth exists - no one doubts this except the fictional relativist strawman popular among epistemologists - but truth is a matter of 'palaeontology' rather than correspondence, of how long the belief has proved useful rather than how certain we are of its necessity. Truth is James' 'dead heart of the living tree', Nietzsche's columbarium; truth is the ossified remainder of what has served life. Incorrigible, independent, rock solid truth remains, but truths, like mountains, will rise, fall, and whither away given enough time and force.

If we accept the view of truth common to each of the above authors, then truth as something otherworldly becomes otiose. Truth for its own sake, knowledge as an unconditional good, knowing as access to a different realm, all such views are left behind. Truth is always for *our* sake, its value is its service to *our* ends. Truth has value, it would not have so obsessed Nietzsche otherwise, but it is not of the type hoped for by Plato: it is ours rather than God's. So as epistemologists, we seek justification and consensus rather than Truth, the human rather than the divine. We will say with Rorty that "we do not have any way to establish the truth of a belief or the rightness of an action except by reference to the justifications we offer for thinking what we think or doing what we do."<sup>9</sup> That is, we are unable to measure a candidate for belief against anything other than our present beliefs, just as we are unable to convince an interlocutor to agree accept by appealing to what he already believes. No table-thumping; no pointing to the facts.

We find in Socrates comfort for such a view. Plato's Philosopher King is someone who, having direct access to the real, can bypass conversation and simply pronounce. This urge, at bottom, is a vicious one. Socrates would not recognize such a figure, for he could not make sense of an end to conversation. For Socrates, the hallmark of conversation is consensus, and what consensus is reached is always provisional. What matters to Socrates is not so much that we betray the facts but that we might betray each other by arguing in bad faith. His focus on conversational ethics signals a commitment to knowledge understood as a search in common, as something in the service of human life.

We find Socrates often inviting his friends back the next day, to continue the conversation. It is as if we must leave an elipsis at the end of all conversations, for tomorrow may bring new considerations, new interlocutors, and so the need for a new consensus. Socrates states that “though I have no real knowledge of the truth of these matters, yet just as on the present occasion, I have never encountered anyone who was able to maintain a different position in such a discussion and not come off covered with ridicule... I must assume that matters stand as stated.”<sup>10</sup> So in conversation we are not, in the first instance, after something otherworldly. Instead, the goal is consensus, reaching a position with which all present can agree. This is, in important respects, a pragmatic conception of truth. Consider Rorty's remark that pragmatists “can make no sense of the notion that the view which can survive all objections might be false” (CP 165). For both Socrates and Rorty, it is unclear how we can differentiate truth from justification, the sublime from the prosaic. Knowledge is something gained in experience, something reached in common. Rather than a relationship between an individual mind and a world external to it, we can recognize in both lines of thought the deeply social nature of

knowledge. Where Socrates stresses the need for interlocutors, the need to have one's arguments tested by peers, pragmatists add that it is hard to be rigorous all by oneself. That is, standards of argumentation are social rather than transcendental, they involve one's moral relationship to peers rather than a monological relation to the world. Attention ought to shift from questions of truth to questions of justification, from our relationship to the really real to our relationship to each other.

Making good on this shift in attention means overcoming the urge for transcendence, that is the hope for contact with an objective world, a view from nowhere. Without such a vantage point we have no test for knowing which justified beliefs are true, which not. More importantly, we can not envisage what such a test would entail. For adopting such a viewpoint would mean doing something we cannot do: stepping outside of our experience and its concomitant biases and beholding our predicament as if we were a god, dividing mere belief, mere consensus, from Truth. The thought that we need to add an extra element to our equation – add ‘correspondence to the world’ to consensus, make consensus a sign of something other, something grander which obtains - is the same urge that might lead one to ask ‘although neither I nor anyone I have encountered can find fault in my actions, they are not moral without the assent of God’. In both cases, we can discern an attempt to ground social practices on the really real, a non-human standard that, if we can hitch our wagons to it, will lead us onward. The pragmatic imperative to rid ourselves of all non-human authorities compels us to let go of this notion that anything needs to be added to the consensus of a free people in order to make it true. As Rorty states, “I know how to aim at greater honesty, greater charity, greater patience, greater inclusiveness and so on...But I do not see that it helps things to add ‘truth’ or

‘universality’ or ‘unconditionality’ to our list of goals, for I do not see what we shall do differently if such additions are made.”<sup>11</sup> The argument is not that ‘true’ just means justified, or that justifying one’s beliefs somehow makes them true. There will always be justified beliefs that are not true. The argument is instead that, pragmatically, we will be better served by seeking justification rather than truth. We can recognize justification when we see it, and discuss the various moral and social norms infusing the processes by which it is obtained, but it helps little to add that the idea which can be justified to every person we have come across is also, therefore, true.

I will bring this section to a close by considering William James’ dictum that every human desire has a *prima facie* right to be satisfied, the only thing able to trump such a desire being another one. To say with James that every human desire has such a *prima facie* right is to say that we find in experience no way to tell a mere desire for the pleasant from a true, real desire for the good. When there are only human beings and their experience, only the human serpent, there are only desires. The Good, or anything else claiming to link us with the objective, really real world, is cheerfully jettisoned by James’s pragmatist, a “happy-go-lucky, anarchistic sort of creature,”<sup>12</sup> making of politics a muddling through, an ongoing conversation where desires are played off against one another, arguments are had, priorities set. What matters in these debates is no longer the interlocutor’s relationship to the really real, his grasp of the facts of the matter, but instead his willingness to converse, to hash things out, to engage in politics. In the next section, I consider what just such a politics might look like.

## 1.2. Ladders

Accepting that ‘the trail of the human serpent is over all’ allows us, Rorty argues, to begin to see the things formerly claimed as foundations as ladders which we might now safely throw away. Rorty suggests that the claims to foundations characteristic of the rise of Enlightenment democracy are just such ladders. The type of concern for each other without which modern democracy is impossible would perhaps not have arose without Christ’s message and its grounding in our purported relationship with the divine; the type of freedoms possible in democratic societies could not have come into existence without the Enlightenment turn to a human nature grounded in our rational capacities. But we have climbed those ladders, are living in the societies they made possible, and now ought to be mature enough to jettison them, to take off the training wheels and begin to steer our own course. Examples of such letting go are found in the progressive Christian’s conviction that the value of Christ’s teachings do not require the literal truth of the Bible and the liberal’s recognition that her society’s values do not need to be God’s own in order to be worth dying for; in the atheist’s reckoning his life worthwhile without an eternal source of meaning and the poet’s conviction that her work can be timeless without being outside of time, can move us without moving us towards the Truth or our Nature.

Rorty outlines what giving up foundations could mean for democratic politics in his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. I turn now to a discussion of that book organized around its own central and titular themes in order to outline the political conclusions drawn by Rorty from our new post-Nietzschean epistemology.

The hero of Rorty’s book is his liberal ironist. Rorty’s figure has “radical and continuing doubts” about her final vocabulary, that set of words which we all have, which

when pushed on we can offer in support of nothing but circular arguments. Rorty's examples of such words include "true, right, beautiful...England, decency, kindness" (CIS 73). If we push anyone far enough, we push them into a justificatory circle in which the only way to defend her beliefs is by citing reasons that hold only for a member of the type of community in question: a liberal must ultimately give liberal reasons for her view of things just as an evangelical Christian must cite the bible to prove the merit and provenance of its message. Grappling with the awareness of her own situation, the liberal ironist carries with her an inextinguishable sense that she might have been somewhere and someone else; no matter how committed she is to liberal values of democracy, equality, and solidarity (or whatever values she holds), she might just have well inhabited a different culture, and be just as committed to, say, the Party, the Caliphate, or the Decider. Although committed to the ideals of a liberal utopia, she admits that her reasons for being so committed are decidedly and already liberal ones, and so her vocabulary is final in the sense that "if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse. These words are as far as [she] can go with language; beyond them there is helpless passivity or resort to force" (CIS 73).

This lack of security issues from the contingency of human life. Contingency, for Rorty, goes all the way down. We are not the product of the march of history but the effects of events that could have been otherwise. Rorty's hero is the "sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance" (CIS xv). To recognize contingency is to recognize that there is no standpoint outside of

ourselves from which we might view our history and our self so as to be able to tell a story about progress, change, or development in which these things are *necessary*, in which we are following through on a plan laid out in advance.

Contingency does not suggest arbitrariness. There are reasons we are the way we are, identifiable, locatable events which shape the lives of communities and of human beings. All a sense of contingency requires is that we cease appealing to a certain set of reasons, those reasons which come from somewhere outside of practice. Such reasons often come capitalized and include Reason, God, Truth, and History. The urge to capitalize is the urge to cite reasons that hold not just for us but for the universe, for everything. Accepting contingency means accepting that there are no such reasons.

To see one's self, language, and community as contingent developments is to allow for a certain distance between one's present self and one's sense of the radical possibility of being much different, of being born into a different context and so becoming a different person. Rorty calls this distance 'irony'. Irony accomplishes for theory what a wink accomplishes in conversation: both signal some sort of self-conscious slippage or deception, a sense that things, at bottom, are not as they seem. In a troubling sense, troubling for the ironic individual herself, she cannot, deep-down, commit to all of her commitments, even those which determine who she is. For it is not enough to be committed to one's worldview, to have at one's disposal arguments for its worth, for neither the Nazi nor the psychopath lacks such arguments.

Irony leads to an inescapable skepticism towards one's culture. Unquestionable, foundational faith in the status quo is ruled out because we always argue from our own corner, and there can be no appeal to a vocabulary which is not the vocabulary of some

one, identifiable perspective. Any justification of our way of life is inevitably circular, and the ironist is plagued by the fear that her circle might be a small, limited, or vicious one. It follows that any philosophizing done by Rorty's hero is self-consciously not a matter of discovering the Truth, of getting closer to some pre-existing core. Consider Nietzsche's imperative to become who you are. Nietzsche did not mean that one ought to contemplate existence so as to arrive at her essence, to unearth what was waiting to appear. Instead, one becomes as she creates, becomes what she creates, she *is* nothing but that creation. Rorty's hero similarly seeks self-overcoming, a constant cycle of discovery and destruction free of claims or hopes that this process has a goal other than itself. She reads compulsively, seeking out new characters and new forms of life, new models and villains through which to enlarge the scope and possibility of her own life. Rorty writes how “redemption is to be achieved by getting in touch with the present limits of the human imagination...The more books you read, the more ways of being human you have considered, the more human you become” (PCP 94); “the point of reading a great many books is to become aware of a great number of alternative purposes, and the point of *that* is to become an autonomous self” (PCP 90). Insofar as there is no one identity she is destined to inhabit, she wants to be cosmopolitan enough to explore her surroundings without a destination in mind, to grapple with as many possible selves so as to avoid the existential poverty of an unquestioned identity.

We might at this point suggest that Rorty's figure, contingent and ironic, is a rather poor role model, void of both anchor and sail, listlessly churning without purpose through life's waters. Yet Rorty's political project rests on the thesis that contingency and irony might lead, rather to despair or nihilism, to solidarity. Rorty's liberals are

people who think “cruelty is the worse thing they do” (CIS 74). It is not that human beings have a nature part of which is an aversion to cruelty, but just that a certain sect has because of its history come to view cruelty, and particularly the infliction of humiliation, as the worst thing that one might do to another. An aversion to cruelty and the solidarity that aversion makes possible are not, Rorty explicitly states, the basis upon which a politics is founded. Rorty writes of how solidarity “has to be constructed out of little pieces, rather than found already waiting, in the form of an ur-language which all of us will recognize when we hear it” (CIS 94). Rorty, a liberal ironist himself, has given up the hope that there might be a non-circular argument for his view of things. Rather than a pre-existing base upon which to build, solidarity is something to be achieved, something to be made, and liberal politics and the tools it provides gives us all the resources we need to do so.

Rorty often faced the criticism that irony and solidarity exclude each other. Rorty’s position is that although this has often been the case, it need not necessarily be so. Rorty’s problem with ironists (Foucault is his paradigm) is that they are rarely liberal; he objects to liberals (here he points to Habermas) as insufficiently ironic. Each believes that universal concepts of truth and justice are warrants without which democracy is doomed, so the ironist refuses to countenance democracy while the liberal refuses to let go of universality. The first says there is no truth so no democracy; the second that there must be democracy so there must be truth. Rorty urges us not to choose sides in this debate but to transcend it by relegating irony to our private lives while in public doing what we can for the goals of democratic politics. The urge to bring the public and private together is that same objectionable urge that Rorty has called us to let go of. It is the urge

to behold reality as issuing from a single principle, easing Derrida's anxiety by making life coherent and existence supine. If we give up the game of reducing all of existence to an algorithm, we will stop viewing vocabularies as attempts to mirror the Real, and so we will cease seeing them as in competition with each other for the prize of Truth. Persons and communities will be composed of many truths. Some of those truths will be suitable for public life, others not, and there will be no yearning to bring them together into a single vision. Rorty's hero will be a liberal *and* an ironist, and the hope to bring those two aspects of her existence together will be, like Wittgenstein's ladder, thrown away.

There is, plainly, something almost too tidy about Rorty's conception. Life does not come compartmentalized; irony bleeds into politics just as much as universalist morality forms for some the core of their private self-image. Yet it is enough for Rorty's purposes that we give up the *hope* of uniting the two, of somehow understanding them as one. He writes, "the existence of these two sides (like the fact that we may belong to several communities and thus have conflicting moral obligations, as well as conflicts between moral obligations and private commitments) generates dilemmas. Such dilemmas we shall always have with us, but they are never going to be resolved by appeal to some further, higher set of obligations which a philosophical tribunal might discover and apply" (CIS 197). Even with Rorty's suggested bifurcation, politics remains a muddling through, an arena in which the line between private and public is always up for grabs. Rorty is not guilty of a facile simplicity because he is not offering us an algorithm for avoiding debates about who and what we are. Such conflict is just what we mean by politics, and Rorty's aim is explicitly and unabashedly aimed at making possible a meaningful politics able to heed Nietzsche's pessimism while remaining faithful to the

democratic élan of John Dewey. When conflict arises, we will have to hash things out, converse, and compromise. We will have to return to Socrates.

Max Weber cautioned us that the “historical origin of modern freedom has had certain unique preconditions which will never repeat themselves.”<sup>13</sup> Rorty takes this warning seriously. Because we are not the product of a teleological History but of chance, liberal and democratic freedoms are precious, fragile things to be nurtured. Because vocabularies are never final, because we will never achieve that urge to transcendence, politics is soaked with risk and danger, but also with hope. Rorty’s hope is that we overcome the Gods, let go of the Platos and all other sources of metaphysical comfort as so many ladders, once helpful but now obsolete, realizing along the way that the best aspects of democratic societies are achievements rather than birthrights, ours rather than God’s. Courting the human serpent allows us to let go of the urge for vertical contact with something higher, freeing us to look more clearly at the horizon, at those around us. It makes it impossible to dismiss the consensus of a community of human beings as mere shadows on the wall.

Rorty’s narrative of snakes and ladders is one of a gradual maturing of humanity away from suprahistorical sources of authority, towards the provisional hegemony of human hopes. Although he places the Enlightenment so as to overcome it, Rorty’s view of human development betrays the hopes he shares with the Enlightenment proper. Where Kant wrote “if only freedom is granted, enlightenment is almost sure to follow,”<sup>14</sup> Rorty championed the view that if “we take care of freedom, truth will take care of itself.” What matters are human communities; it is *their* freedom which enables progress,

*their* powers which may make the world new. Rorty's version of humanity's release from self-incurred tutelage, non-human constraint, puts him firmly in line with the first pillar of our Enlightenment, maturation. As humanity gains a different, more valuable perspective on its situation, a new politics becomes possible; we stand, enlightened, on the edge of a better future. More importantly, Rorty's view of human development relies on the deeply Nietzschean problematic of the inescapability of merely human horizons. From Nietzsche's serpent, his perspectivalism, Rorty forges a politics of maturation and of hope in which human communities prosper to the extent that they let go of the metaphysical comfort of self-incurred tutelage, even if this must mean letting go of the supposed foundations for such maturation offered by Kant, and so letting the ladders fall behind.

I have focused here on Rorty, so I will give him the last word. Rorty brings to our attention a choice between holding onto universalism and recognizing the human serpent, clinging to ladders and leaving them behind. The choice is:

that between accepting the contingent character of starting-points, and attempting to evade this contingency. To accept the contingency of starting-points is to accept our inheritance from, and our conversation with, our fellow-humans as our only source of guidance. To attempt to evade this contingency is to hope to become a properly-programmed machine...If we give up this hope, we shall lose what Nietzsche called 'metaphysical comfort,' but we may gain a renewed sense of community. Our identification with our community – our society, our political tradition, our intellectual heritage – is heightened when we see this community as ours rather than nature's, shaped rather than found...What matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right (CP 166).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I have taken these from a much longer list, see Stanley Fish, “On Rhetoric,” in *The Stanley Fish Reader*, H. Aram Veeser, ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 1999) pp. 114-143, p.118.

<sup>2</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1988), p.160.

<sup>3</sup> John Dewey, “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy” *On Experience, Nature, and Freedom: Representative Selections*, ed., Richard J. Bernstein (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960) pp.19-69, p.28.

<sup>4</sup> John Dewey *Democracy and Education* (NuVision Publications, 2007 [1917]), p.231.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” in *Writing and Difference* trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) p. 277.

<sup>6</sup> Hilary Putnam quoted in Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998) p. xxvii.

<sup>7</sup> Donald Davidson, “Three Varieties of Knowledge” quoted in Richard Rorty, “McDowell, Davidson, and Spontaneity” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58(2) 1998, pp. 389-394.

<sup>8</sup> William James, “What Pragmatism Means” in *Pragmatism: The Classic Writings*. H.S. Thayer, ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1982) pp. 218-219.

<sup>9</sup> Rorty, “Universality and Truth” in Robert Brandom, ed. Rorty and His Critics. (New York: Blackwell, 2000), p. 44

<sup>10</sup> Plato *Gorgias* W.C. Helmbold, trans. (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1955) 509.

<sup>11</sup> Rorty “Universality and Truth” p.7.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Barry Allen *Truth in Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Richard J. Bernstein *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991) p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment” in Kant, Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals & What is Enlightenment. Lewis White Beck, trans, ed. (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), p. 86.

## CHAPTER TWO: POWER, HOPE, AND NIETZSCHE'S SMILE

What we cannot do is to rise above all human communities, actual and possible. We cannot find a skyhook which lifts us out of mere coherence---mere agreement---to something like ‘correspondence with reality as it is in itself.’ ...Pragmatists would like to replace the desire for objectivity---the desire to be in touch with reality which is more than some community with which we identify ourselves---with the desire for solidarity with that community. *Richard Rorty*

R. Rorty points out that in these analyses I do not appeal to any ‘we’—to any of those ‘we’s’ whose consensus, whose values, whose traditions constitute the framework for a thought and define the conditions in which it can be validated. But the problem is, precisely, to decide if it is actually suitable to place oneself within a ‘we’ in order to assert the principles one recognizes and the values one accepts; or if it is not, rather, necessary to make the future formation of a ‘we’ possible, by elaborating the question.

*Michel Foucault*

Nietzsche wrote that “knowledge works as a *tool* of power” (N 14[22]). While he was not the first to link the two concepts, Nietzsche’s insistence upon their intimacy set the agenda for much of the philosophy to follow. But there is a significant ambiguity in Nietzsche’s insight, and at least two interesting ways in which it might be interpreted. Nietzsche might mean that those with power are able to control knowledge, to determine what passes for true and so to make knowledge a tool of *their* power. He might, conversely, be offering a helpful piece of advice; Nietzsche might simply be asserting that knowledge, like all factors in human existence, should be thought of as a tool for dealing with the world, as an instrument for constructing a space in which we can live. We would expect the first characterization of Nietzsche’s insight to adopt a dubious pose towards knowledge and so to put forward terms like ‘power structures’, ‘hyper and pessimistic activism’, and ‘danger’. For the second characterization, we might better expect a vocabulary consisting in ‘hope’, ‘consensus’, and ‘utopia’ to gain currency.

In this chapter, I discuss these two interpretations and their importance to Richard Rorty's work. Rorty sees himself as advocating the second of our putative interpretations, and often sets himself against the first interpretation which he attributes to Michel Foucault. Rorty's engagement with Foucault is interesting, insightful, and central to his own project. In Rorty's terms, Foucault is an ironist who refuses to be a liberal, someone who stands apart from society because he refuses to be contaminated by it. Foucault represents for Rorty an aborted engagement with Nietzsche, someone who reads the obvious pessimism of Nietzsche's work without reading deep enough to grasp the hope and chance that is also there. But we will see below that Foucault also claims inheritance from Nietzsche, and so we might understand Rorty and Foucault as separated by different visions of what we ought to do with Nietzsche, how we ought to read our quotation.

Both Foucault and Rorty are concerned to show how knowledge functions in human societies, how the determination of what passes for true relates to the sites of freedom and of domination. Both agree with Nietzsche that truth is made rather than found, a product of human ingenuity rather than a fact about the world as such, yet while agreeing on much about the nature of truth, the two draw vastly different conclusions about the proper aims of political philosophy; where Rorty talks almost incessantly about hope, Foucault's macabre genealogies trace histories of subjugation supposedly definitive of modern democracy. And so there is a contest between our two interpretations of Nietzsche's insight centering on what the end of metaphysics means for politics, whether Nietzsche's question of power clears the way for domination or for hope. I read power as a loose term bringing together a constellation of concerns around our growing awareness

of the self-sufficiency of human beings. Chapter one discussed narratives of human maturation. Our second pillar of Enlightenment, power, explores what such maturation means for human prospects, what it means when we begin to view the universe as all-too-human.

I want ultimately to support our second articulation of Nietzsche's puzzle, best articulated by Richard Rorty's view of politics as issuing from a conception of knowledge as whatever issues from free and open encounters among free and open members of a community. But in doing so I want to also highlight the deficiencies of Rorty's reading of Foucault. I think a fairer consideration of Foucault's project might help us, with Rorty, to see truth as the product of consensus and so to see power as necessarily supported by that same consensus. In particular, I will offer an interpretation of Foucault's genealogical method which shows it as a supplement rather than threat to Rorty's political vision. With this interpretation, we will be better placed to see knowledge as a tool of power, and to see power as necessarily held in common. This is best established by reading Nietzsche with a smile, rather than a frown, and in so doing recognizing the deep ties that join the Nietzschean problematic to the Enlightenment concern with human power and potential.

## 2.1 Nietzsche

I need first to contextualize Nietzsche's aphorism within what I see as the broader trends of his philosophy. In doing so, I hope to lend support to both of our putative interpretations, to show how they are both reasonable responses to Nietzsche's thought.

Nietzsche was hostile to the notion central to the western tradition that our knowledge of the world was getting us somewhere. At least since Plato, we westerners have been convinced that correct knowledge is correct representation of the way the world is, was, and would be even without observers. Central to this line of thought is a necessary distinction between appearance and reality, between how the world appears to us and how it otherwise, and really, is. Nietzsche casts doubt on this distinction; for Nietzsche, the observer's role is an essential aspect of the process by which knowledge about the world is gained. That is, Nietzsche dismissed the notion that we ought to look for, or could ever find, what Thomas Nagel has called a view from nowhere. To think that there exists such a neutral standpoint is to posit an “eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction” (GM p.119). After Nietzsche, there are only perspectives, only visions of reality that begin and end in a definite, locatable standpoint; “there is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective ‘knowing’” (GM p.119), and so our attention ought to turn to the knower and how it is that her perspective determines knowledge, decides what will pass for true.

To put the human knower at the centre of truth creation is to anthropomorphize knowledge. It is to make ‘truth’ denote not those characteristics essential to a thing in and of itself but instead that which has proved best for human beings to believe. Knowledge, then, becomes a tool like any other, a tool for dealing with the world, for increasing our power. We can sum up this aspect of Nietzsche’s thought as a resolute dismissal of essentialism. Consider the following remarks:

The world apart from our condition of living in it, the world we have not reduced to our being, our logic and psychological prejudices does *not* exist as a world ‘in-itself’. It is essentially a world of relationships... (N 14[93]).

It is our needs *which interpret the world* (N 7[60]).

[Truth is] not something that's there and must be found out, discovered, but something *that must be made* and that provides the name for a *process* (N 9[91]).

We describe better; we explain no more than those who came before (GS 112).

The question of which of these perceptions of the world is the more correct one is quite meaningless, for this would have to have been decided previously in accordance with the criterion of the *correct perception*, which means, in accordance with a criterion which is *not available* (OTL p.86).

All are ways of getting away from the idea of knowledge as representation in which truth is a relation of fit between something offered by a human being (a word, thought, proposition) and the way the world is in itself. Instead, human truth is something that must be made, constructed out of and in response to our needs as a species. Once we adopt Nietzsche's framework, it simply makes no sense to think of a world apart from our presence in it, or to try to adapt our knowledge to that world. The world of our concern is perspectival, contingent, and constructed all the way down.

At this point, we might reasonably adopt the second, Rortyan interpretation of our quotation. To say that knowledge works as a tool of power would be to say that all human interaction with the world is instrumental to an increase in power, where power denotes the ability to live in and control our surroundings. Knowledge, insofar as it is "nothing entirely foreign and apart from the nature of things" counts as just one such type of interaction with our world.<sup>1</sup> It is a tool for coping, a tool of power.

Much of Nietzsche's philosophy is concerned to offer resources for coming to terms with this new status of knowledge. If not careful, one might interpret the absence of absolutes as an invitation to nihilism. For Nietzsche, this move is understandable but

avoidable. We must be sure not to claim “that the world is worth *less*. ” In abjuring an essentialist, foundationalist account of knowledge we have lost only illusions which ought not to be mourned (GS 346). Once armed with our new view of human knowledge, we gain a new strength against those metaphysicians who try to restrict our freedom with false stories of human purpose. ““Life has something behind it, beneath it,”” they say; their ascriptions of universal, transcendent purpose and value “lift the common old existence off its common old hinges” (GS 1). Nietzsche tries to alert us that there are *only* the common old hinges, *only* this world, *only* this chance to live a life of meaning.

Such a life comes to mean, once we discard metaphysical attempts to subsume our earthly life in a broader cosmological story, constructing an individual existence by fashioning a self according to a single taste. This “giving style to one’s character” is a prolonged, deliberative process of creation. It is a matter of hard, consistent fashioning of given raw materials into a novel creation, a new person unconstrained by false notions of imperatives which supersede her duties to her self (GS 290).

Self-creation is for Nietzsche the means by which individuals can remove the yoke of metaphysical thinking. It is a revolutionary affirmation of the radical freedom of the human individual, an embodied display of one’s understanding of the contingency of knowledge and power. To construct one’s own self is to resist the comforting but malign invitation to see in knowledge a chance to get the world right. It is to turn one’s understanding of knowledge as constituted by the knower, as necessarily embodied and perspectival, into power over one’s own existence.

Nietzsche sets up an antagonism between his new type and the old type of metaphysicians. It is an antagonism between “the new, the unique, the incomparable, those who give themselves the law, those who create themselves,” (GS 335) on the one side, and those realists who take on faith that our knowledge gets to the world as it is, those who assert obdurately that “there are enduring things; that there are identical things; that there are things, substances, bodies” (GS 110). The first group succeeds where the second fails to understand that our propensity to call a statement true is a measure not of its correspondence to reality but of its ability to preserve the species. Our most true beliefs, then, are just our oldest ones, the ones which, for the longest time, have been conducive to life.

Nietzsche, and those who follow him without question, never get out of this antagonism between a new type and old, between self and other. Nietzsche’s utopian future is not one where more and more people come to terms with the perspectival character of our existence but instead one where the few who do are able to gain mastery over all others. Nietzsche’s proffered solution to the battle between his old and new types is a revolution by the vanguard. It is a battle for power. His is a vision of new Europeans who live dangerously and are unafraid to understand the workings of power, and thus wield it unflinchingly over those who do not.

We can now lend provisional support to the first interpretation of our quotation, which I have called Foucault’s. To say that knowledge works as a tool of power is to say that power is a limited resource valued by competing forces. That faction which is able to ensure that its system of knowledge serves as the standard in a community thereby fosters its own power over competing factions and their competing set of truth

candidates. Knowledge is what passes for true in the discourse of those with power. So a dubious pose towards knowledge is warranted: knowledge is itself baseless, but serves as the base of power, as the foundation of control by the rulers over the ruled.

We can see that Nietzsche provides resources for both of our readings. Rorty is right that Nietzsche demystifies knowledge by making it one of many aspects of the human being's interaction with her world; but Foucault is right that such demystification does not preclude, and perhaps invites, abuses by those who are able to govern conduct. So coming to terms with Nietzsche's contribution will never be a simple matter of discerning what he meant, but instead must be the articulation of what competing interpretations offer, what they can do for us.

## 2.2 Rorty and Foucault

So much for Nietzsche. In what follows I will present Rorty's reading of Foucault and the problems he points to, and then show how Rorty's project claims to avoid those problems. I will end by showing some inadequacies in Rorty's rendering of Foucault which, when remedied, might lend comfort to Rorty's own project.

Rorty objects to the fear common to Nietzsche and Foucault that the individual, atomistically conceived, is always put at risk by her place in a community. For both, individual creation is a solitary endeavour, it is a way to exist at the periphery of society and claim sovereignty over the self by not allowing it to be guided by the totalizing attempts of mass culture. Foucault seems guilty of a fundamental mistrust of the collective, a stance that would help us make sense of his aversion to modern democracy.

Consider his support for the centrality in Greek thought of an ethic of caring for the self.

There is, for Foucault, a certain allure in Greek ethics, if only in its general form and approach to living well. “From the idea that the self is not given to us,” he writes “I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art.”<sup>2</sup> With Nietzsche, Foucault thinks that existence is an aesthetic project, that to live well is to first grasp and then to flourish in one’s role as creator. With no authorities, the self becomes raw material to be fashioned according to one’s own vision.

Care of the self mirrors Nietzschean self-creation in significant ways. Both involve steady, deliberate work on material about which one cares. Both are artistic endeavours, matters of creation according to a plan. Finally, and perhaps most saliently, both are *ex hypothesi* profoundly individualistic. For the Greeks, living well becomes a solitary effort as ethics becomes disentangled from one’s relations to others, so that “ethics can be a very strong structure of existence, without any relation with the juridical per se, with an authoritarian system, with a disciplinary structure.”<sup>3</sup> Ethics need not, then, be tied up with political issues, with our dealings with others. It can be based only upon our relationship to ourselves. Such an ethics, it follows, lacks the normalizing impetus of most contemporary moral systems. The “will to live a beautiful life” is an aesthetic choice, an individual one.<sup>4</sup> It is an ethical system based on personal choice rather than exhaustive prescriptions for the proper behaviour of all actors in all situations.

Rorty’s contention is that an ethics that remains contracted rather than imposed makes sense only if there is something deep within the human being that ought to be protected, and so he thinks Foucault is guilty of some sort of implicit essentialism. On this reading, to wonder “how the human subject fits into certain games of truth,” as

Foucault does, is to cling to the notion of a human subject apart from the games of truth by which she is constituted.<sup>5</sup> To conceive of discourse as “a violence that we do to things” is to posit a pure victim of violence, a world apart from our descriptions of it whose truth shall set us free.<sup>6</sup> Both are claims about the existence of what Nietzsche called God’s shadows, the lingering belief in angry authorities to be accounted for in our earthly affairs. But once God is dead, so too are his shadows. For Rorty, we ought to do away with any notion of something essential about the way the world is, anything essential about what a human life is. To do otherwise is to attempt to appease an authority “which is *not available*. ”

Rorty sees Foucault as needlessly preoccupied with Nietzsche’s antagonism between the individual and her community. It is furthermore a preoccupation that only gets off the ground if there is something outside the influence of culture, outside of time and chance that stands to be compromised by political action. Foucault sees Nietzsche as ushering in a great unmooring, a dangerous lack of security in which power flows in all directions; Rorty reads the same texts as clearing the way for communities of human beings no longer trying to appease authorities, no longer appealing to standards that transcend their own. I want ultimately to agree with much in Rorty’s approach, but to make clear how his reading of Foucault runs counter to his own purposes, and demonstrate how a fuller appreciation of Foucault’s project can supplement rather than frustrate Rorty’s political vision.

Rorty sees himself as following through on anti-essentialism in ways his colleagues on the continent have not. His anti-essentialism leads Rorty to put forward a strong thesis of panrelationism. If there is no substance, no noumenal realm, no thing in

itself hanging about, then there are only relations between things. If a thing lacks essence, then it is what it is by virtue of the connections which constitute it. He writes, “there can be no such thing as a description which matches the way X really is, apart from its relation to human needs or consciousness or language” (PSH 52). So Rorty encourages his readers to think of everything in the universe as we might think of the number ‘17’ (PSH 55). Certain questions seem ridiculous to ask of 17: for instance, what *is* 17?; what is its essence?; what would 17 be apart from human observation?; does our current understanding of 17 conform to its inherent qualities? Such questions are out of place because the only interesting things we can say about 17 issue from its connections to other numbers, to its place in human deliberation and human communities. 17 is the sum of twelve and five, it is a prime number, it is the age at which many Canadians graduate high school. These connections just *are* what 17 is; once we subtract all sentences true of 17, there is *nothing*, no remainder. 17 is nothing but its place in a network of meanings held aloft by a community of interlocutors.

Rorty’s contention is that everything is a number, everything is nothing but its connections, its relationship to human needs. “There is,” he writes, “nothing to be known about an object except what sentences are true of it” (PSH 50). The same questions that were out of place for 17 are out of place for all human words. We need to stop asking questions such as ‘does liberalism provide true freedom for human beings?’; ‘are human rights real or nominal?’; ‘is morality merely subjective?’; and, importantly, ‘can I name a future system without being complicit in the present one?’ The problem with all such questions is that they attempt to measure up human creations against ‘what is really there’; they are questions of the type ‘what is the essence of 17?’

For politics then, we have to cease thinking that there is something out there to get right. Human communities are not things to be measured against a theoretical ideal, they are networks of people working together to achieve common ends. If we return to our quotation from Nietzsche with which we began, we can say that a community that reads Nietzsche with a smile is one that grabs hold of the spirit of self-creation and applies it at the level of community. As Nietzsche's new type was able to fashion himself according to a single taste, a style of his choosing, Rortyan communities can do the same, they can create the standards by which they will be judged. Such a community will stress that "power is all there is to knowledge—that a claim to know X is a claim to be able to do something with or to X, to put X into relation with something Y" (PSH 50). Power is control, but it is control held in common over a common future.

### 2.3 Genealogy as conversation.

In this final section I suggest that Rorty's provides us only with a caricature of Foucault, and in so doing misses aspects of Foucault's thought valuable for Rorty's own purposes. I will do so by putting it to Rorty that we read genealogy not as the mistrustful musings of an indifferent spectator, but rather as detailed and engaged *conversation*, a conversation which takes so seriously human communities that it relentlessly attempts to uncover and articulate how new practices are creating new sites of oppression, new springs of power. Foucault, *pace* Rorty, does not chart the course of some external force called power, but instead points to the ways, under our own noses, that changes in human societies affect changes in the freedom of their members; conversational genealogy

observes, it gathers evidence so that we may shed some light on how our democratic experiment is progressing. Most importantly, such an activity is crucial to the spirit of experimentation central to Rorty's Deweyan heritage.

Todd May's article, “Michel Foucault: Nietzschean Pragmatist”<sup>7</sup> is a good place to start. May's enterprise in this paper is similar to our own: situating Nietzsche, Foucault, and pragmatism as landmarks on a common anti-foundationalist terrain. He begins by suggesting that we draw a distinction between two types of pragmatism. The first is that of Rorty, and is characterized for May by a faith in the progress of history and the development of humankind: “Rather than asking how philosophy is related to the ultimate character of the universe, Rortian pragmatism wants to tie it to the successful carrying on of our lives.” This is a fair estimation of Rorty's work. May continues, more contentiously, that Rorty's pragmatism is characterized also by “the broadly Darwinian (or perhaps Spencerist) assumption, rejected by both Nietzsche and Foucault, that there is a deep relation between the practices we ultimately choose to engage in and the successful navigation of our world [which leads to] a blind and uncritical endorsement of whatever practices happen to be dominant at the time.”<sup>8</sup> This is a charge leveled often at Rorty: that his faith in America and its tradition blinds him to the very real injustices perpetuated by, and perhaps constitutive of, the tradition he encourages us to accept as our own. With May, we might think of the first, Rortyan pragmatism, as a naïve faith that things will ‘work out’ for the best, that time is on our side.

May's second brand of pragmatism is developed in the work of Foucault. Its distinctiveness lies in its inheritance from Nietzsche, whose suspicion of the status quo Foucault forges into a method for investigating the practices of a society so as to

articulate and address how it is that relations of power come to create, sustain, and define the types of subjects possible in a given community. Foucault's focus on the concept of a practice, embedded and never fully explicit norms governing what can be said or done in a given framework, is able to show that many of the effects of a practice will be unintended and, because a people's beliefs will be largely internal to the set of practices which constitute their community, go unrecognized. So it is that Foucauldian genealogy is for May the antidote to Rortian pollyanaism. As May puts it, genealogy requires "a tracing of the history of practices and their interaction in order to be able to see whether and to what degree they have been successful: or, to put the point more accurately, to see what they have been successful at...instead of hypercritical pessimism or nihilism, we might call his position *jaded realism*."<sup>9</sup> It is a realism which, in Foucault's words:

does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people. On the contrary, to follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us.<sup>10</sup>

Foucault constructs new narratives of a society's course by focusing on the accidents, the deviations, so that new questions can be asked the answering of which will require the recognition of new sites of suffering to which Rorty's faith remains blind. Whereas Rorty's pragmatism is characterized by an uncritical acceptance of the status quo, Foucault offers a philosophy of intervention aimed at addressing new sites of domination that arise with the introduction of and interaction between practices.

May attributes Rorty's blithe support for the status quo to an implicit essentialism about human beings and their history. He sees Rorty as offering a superficial pragmatism in which truth is tied to utility without questioning what a community's truths are useful

*for.* For this, we need Foucault. In order to place May's contribution in the language we have used thus far, we might say that May thinks Foucault's approach accommodates both of our interpretations of Nietzsche's quotation: that power just is what human beings do, not entirely apart from other facets of our life, but that this does not preclude, but indeed often invites, abuses of power in which domination is entrenched and enshrined. So power is, with Rorty, all-to-human, but this doesn't, as Rorty has it, make the world safe. We should note that we have here a Foucauldian attributing essentialism to Rorty in order to claim a Nietzschean heritage, while above we saw that Rorty accuses Foucault of the same crime in order to claim the same prize. Something has to give, and by staying with May we will uncover where the difficulty lies.

I think May is right, and wrong, and both on two counts. First, he is right that there is a difference in tone between Rorty and Foucault, a difference about the prospects of political action from within. But he is wrong to attribute this difference to a perceived essentialism in Rorty's thought. No such essentialism exists. Second, he is right that Rorty runs the risk of an uncritical acceptance of the status quo and that Foucault's genealogical method escapes this difficulty. But he is wrong in thinking that this is a problem inseparable from Rorty's project, so central to Rorty's thought that it cannot be overcome. Once we rectify the first misreading of Rorty, the way is clear to see Foucault as a potential friend to Rorty's project. Once we establish the potential common ground, we will better understand how May miscalculates the scope of Rorty's apparent conservatism.

That May attributes to Rorty an uncritical faith in the teleological unfolding of human history is only understandable given a superficial reading of Rorty, for he does

talk often of ‘achieving our country’ and of the greatness of the American tradition. May’s charge, furthermore, applies almost certainly to Rorty’s pragmatist forefathers such as Emerson and James for whom pragmatism’s American heritage was central to its import. Yet scratching just below the surface will show the inadequacy of this view when applied to Rorty. Recall from chapter one Rorty’s stress on the contingency of human identity, language, and community. That we exist as we do, with the priorities and principles we do, is a lucky course of events, and lucky only by our own lights. The liberal ironist and her utopia is one in which liberals come to terms with the sheer contingency of where they find themselves yet resolve to affirm what is best about their traditions in an explicitly and unapologetically circular defense of their way of life. Irony, for Rorty, just is the recognition that any faith in the unfolding of history is misplaced, that one’s deepest beliefs, those that come closest to articulating who she is, are defendable only to someone who already accepts a great deal about her view of the world and so shares some premises from which to argue. Rorty champions liberal democracy not because it is natural but because it is rare, not because liberals have tapped into nature’s own language but because they have created one of their own. Consider Rorty’s appraisal of the importance of George Orwell’s *1984*:

Orwell helps us see that it *just happened* that rule in Europe passed into the hands of people who pitied the humiliated and dreamed of human equality, and that it may *just happen* that the world will wind up being ruled by people who lack any such sentiments or ideas...History may create and empower people like O’Brien as a result of the same accidents that have prevented those people from existing until recently – the same sort of accidents that created and empowered people like J.S. Mill and Orwell himself (CIS 185).

A view of history in which ‘accidents’ ‘*just happen*’, indifferently creating democracy or totalitarianism is the furthest view possible from an uncritical bowing to the march of

history.

Yet it is undeniable that Rorty does make the type of sounds attributed to him by May, talk of achievement, affirmation, and the acceptance of cultural heritage. Such comments are better understood as deriving from Nietzsche's dictum *amor fati* than from a blind acceptance of current norms. Affirming one's life, loving one's fate, is a matter of an agent coming to terms with one's history as *her* history, and so affirming it not blindly but authentically, as necessary not metaphysically but for the construction of the one narrative it is her unique business to tell, her own. Her history will indeed culminate in her, and so there is a telos of a sort, but it is imposed in the act of self-creation rather than read off the rolls of history. Where May sees in Rorty a dangerous non-Nietzschean faith in the success of present practices, Rorty's view is not that present practices will lead to success, but that we must call successful whatever those practices have lead to, (us), for it is *our* history that is being told.

Consider a person constructing his family tree. That he places himself at the bottom of it, that he creates it so as to culminate in him, is not for him to claim that history has led to him, that he is meant to exist. It is instead to engage in a type of practice which is always self-referential. May is wrong, then, to attribute essentialism to Rorty. In chapter three I will return to this question of Rorty's essentialism, but for now I will say only that it is clear that we will need to look elsewhere if we are to explain the difference in tone between Rorty and Foucault.

Earlier I claimed that Foucault is better understood as a supplement to Rorty's views than as an antagonist. I claimed that May is right to point to a lacuna in Rorty's thinking, the potential that in affirming one's culture one merely acquiesces to the status

quo. May offers Foucauldian genealogy as a method that overcomes the limitations of Rortyan optimism. May is right to point to Foucault's strengths, but wrong to think of them as a substitute for Rorty's affirmation of our cultural heritage. I want to place Rorty and Foucault on the same page, as potential allies, by claiming that they are in different ways both responding to the fact of suffering.

Recall that Rorty's liberal is someone for whom cruelty is the worst thing we do. Cruelty understood as the inflicting of unnecessary suffering is to be identified and rooted out so that liberal democracies might become more amenable to greater happiness for greater numbers of people. For Foucault, genealogy is a method that allows us to see the ways in which cultural practices, in isolation and in interaction with each other, culminate in the creation of new subjects about whom new truths obtain, in regards to which new avenues of inquiry may be pursued, and against whom new forms of suffering made possible. To say with Foucault that sexuality did not exist until it was an object of study, a candidate for knowledge and the possible basis of a questioning, is to say that human practices produce subjects as effects, produce certain types of human beings as functions of the practices at work. The interaction of Catholic confessional, new medical practices, and the rise of ‘population’ as an object of study of interest to governments interacted to produce subjects whose sexuality was an issue.<sup>11</sup> Important for our purposes, none of this was planned, none of it carried out by an identifiable set of intentions. The end of the interaction among different practices, human beings defined by their sexuality, was a product but not a goal, a result but not an achievement. So Foucault does, as Rorty has it, see power as something which escapes our grasp. But, *pace* Rorty, this is not a transcendental move but one deeply historical. Giving up on the heuristic centre of the

subject, Foucault pays closer attention than Rorty to the hidden excesses and unexpected plot twists of human societies. Rather than a retreat from public life, it is the possible basis of a reinvigorated interest in the public sphere. Genealogy is a kind of conversation with oneself, a checking up on oneself, a response to the power of human communities and its ability to transform our lives. It is a method of bringing to light what remains hidden, *viz.*, unarticulated suffering.

Critical engagement with cultural practices is not absent from Rorty's thinking, but we usually find him offering it as a way of understanding other societies rather than our own. Rorty often points to the ethnographer as a valuable resource in understanding other cultures, helping us to meet them with understanding rather than violence. This desire to be open to alien cultures is, for Rorty, definitive of liberal ethnocentrism. However, if we view Foucault as engaged in a kind of self-directed ethnology, then Rorty's suspicion of Foucault's project appears as a self-satisfied apologia for the status quo from him who wants to question so as to understand other forms of life while tacitly assuming the value of his own.

I do not think this is the best reading of Rorty, but it does highlight an important tension in his views. If we agree with Rorty that affirmation is necessary, that we must always work from within because the idea of an external perspective left with Nietzsche, we must always add that the danger of affirmation is acquiescence, the danger of loving one's fate is repugnant self-satisfaction. Rorty needs the type of enterprise made possible by Foucault as a supplement. If the inevitable circularity of justification leads to a necessary ethnocentrism, then the ethnos in question needs to be open to understanding itself as much as alien cultures. Rorty wants us to prize liberal democracy for the types

of lives it makes possible, for the difference it makes. His necessary ethnocentrism compels him to suggest that the only way to ‘argue’ for our way of life is to talk-up its advantages through comparisons with other forms of life, real or imagined. Yet if we are to seek out such comparisons, as Rorty urges, he should welcome Foucault’s activity as part of what it means for a community to in good faith affirm its *whole* life. To truly affirm is, with Nietzsche, to affirm the whole, and without something like Foucault’s method for coming to terms with the multileveled effects of power, Rorty can affirm only the surface phenomena of liberal societies. Foucault turns externalities into internalities, regrettable exceptions into deviations part of the structure of social life. As long as Rorty remains blind to such effects, true affirmation exceeds his grasp.

I stress that I offer Foucault’s genealogy as a supplement rather than a replacement, for May’s mistake is in thinking that Foucault gives us enough. Foucault offers a supplement rather than a substitute because a willingness to study the minute deviations of practices, the hidden consequences of public life, is only valuable insofar as we seek to root out the suffering produced, and such a goal makes sense only in the shadow of an affirmation of the worth of the community in question. In the epigraph that opens the chapter, Foucault responds to Rorty’s criticism of the absence of any ‘we’ in his work by suggesting that it is necessary to question any given ‘we’ so that the formation of a future ‘we’ is made possible. Thus, Foucault calls us to “elaborate the question.” But questioning without action is fruitless. There are only ‘we’s’ – past, present, and imagined future ones, and no external perspective from which “precisely to decide if it is actually suitable to place oneself within a ‘we’.”<sup>12</sup> So any formation of a future ‘we’ will begin where we find ourselves, here, as we are, with our priorities and

practices as they are. To fail to affirm our starting point, where we are thrown, is to forever and necessarily frustrate meaningful change.

The difference between Rorty and Foucault, to return to Nietzsche and to Enlightenment, concerns what we ought to do with human power. If Enlightenment thought clears the horizon, makes new worlds possible, then the questioning of human power is the questioning of potential, of what becomes possible after Nietzsche. Foucault writes, “if the genealogist refuses to extend his faith in metaphysics, if he listens to history, he finds that there is ‘something altogether different’ behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms.”<sup>13</sup> It is as if the interplay of institutional and societal practices produces subjects by deceptively filling up an otherwise empty essence box. We should rather say that the absence of essence means man is what he makes of himself, and so engaging in the conversation through which communities define and alter who they are is not only not to risk complicity but is the only option left. Only he fears complicity who thinks he can save himself for the true, future ‘we’, destined to arrive without being named. But without essence, the only human beings we can make sense of as arriving, the only possible ‘we’s’ we can envision, are the ones we bring into the world ourselves, products of our own power.

Rorty has summed up the difference between his pragmatism and Foucault’s philosophy as a difference about what we may hope (CP 203-208). The hope of the Enlightenment was that creative individuals may “accelerate the coming of this period which will be so welcome to our descendants.”<sup>14</sup> Call Kant’s hope the thought that human beings might come to see their power as a tool to make the world better, a

dangerous not always successful aid in bringing about a world conducive to greater human happiness. There is such hope in Rorty, hope in communal creation, but little hope in Foucault. While both engage the question of power central to both Enlightenment thought and to Nietzsche, it is Rorty who gives a vision of human potential and possibility true to the ideals of Enlightenment yet aware of the dangers of Nietzschean interrogation. What hope there is in Foucault is laid at the feet of a ‘future we’ of whom we cannot speak without risking complicity. Foucault gives us resources to better understand ourselves, to make our affirmation meaningful because more complete, but he himself falls short of such affirmation, remaining an outsider, yearning for a future ‘we’, a utopia that will simply appear and wash away we antediluvian democrats. I think this is a bad utopia. So we come to what might consist in a good utopia, one in which both Nietzsche and Enlightenment thought would be at home. It is one in which we aren’t afraid to name a future system, a future ‘we’, because we know that a name is just a tool, a tool of power. We know that power is dangerous, but that at the heart of danger is hope, is Nietzsche’s smile. We know that so viewing power clears the way for self-creation in a manner made clear to us by Nietzsche. We know that self-creation can happen on a communal scale, that with steady work, with deliberation, with a plan forged in common, the future might be better than the past. This is our utopia, our hope.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Philosopher: Reflections on the Struggle Between Art and Knowledge” in Daniel Breazeale, ed. *Philosophy and Truth*. (Humanities Press, 1979), pp. 1-58, p.45.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. Paul Rabinow, ed. Robert Hurley et al, trans. (New York: The New Press, 1997), 253-280, p.262.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.260.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.264

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *Ethics*, 281-301, p.281.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p.229.

<sup>7</sup> Todd May, “Michel Foucault: Nietzschean Pragmatist,” *International Studies in Philosophy* 36(3) 2004, pp. 63-75.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp. 64-65

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 68.

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” in Paul Rabinow, ed. *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 76-100, p.81.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* Robert Hurley, trans. (New York: Vintage, 1980).

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, p. 385.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.78.

<sup>14</sup> Immanuel Kant *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* quoted in David Owen, “The Contest of Enlightenment: An Essay on Critique and Genealogy” in *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* (25, 2003, pp.35-57), p.37.

## CHAPTER THREE: RORTY, DERRIDA, AND OUR NEW INFINITE

He possesses heart who knows fear but *masters* fear; who sees the abyss, but sees it with *pride*. *Friedrich Nietzsche*

Ends are, in fact, literally endless, forever coming into existence as new activities occasion new consequences. ‘Endless ends’ is a way of saying that there are no ends—that is no fixed self-enclosed finalities. *John Dewey*

Nietzsche wrote himself into the role of vanguard for a generation of philosophers whose task it would be to come to terms with the human being as inhabitant of an indifferent universe of infinite possibility and infinite danger. He warned his new philosophers to be wary, vigilant: “by your side lies the ocean; true it does not always roar, and sometimes it lies there like silk and gold and daydreams of kindness. But the hours are coming when you will recognize that it is infinite, and that there is nothing more terrifying than infinity” (GS 124). I want in this chapter to place the work of Rorty into conversation with that of Jacques Derrida, specifically in regards to their views on progress, set out in this work as the third hallmark of Enlightenment thought. For if we think of progress as indexed to some permanent standard, and then agree that it is Nietzsche who dispels the authority of any such standard, then we may perhaps conclude that after Nietzsche, progress is ruled out. This is certainly a dominant interpretation. Consider Horkheimer and Adorno in the opening pages of their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “in the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant.”<sup>1</sup> Writing early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have seen the supposed progress made possible by a politics informed by Enlightenment thought, we have seen colonialism, slavery, Auschwitz, and so many join Lyotard in asking: “what kind of thought is able to emancipate Auschwitz in a general...process towards a universal

emancipation?”<sup>2</sup> I want to show, however, that we find in Nietzsche comfort for a continued vision of human progress through engaged political action.

The Enlightenment has been defined here as a movement of thought concerned to explore human maturation, power, and progress. In chapter one we saw Rorty’s narrative of human maturation in which human communities gradually let go of the urge for transcendence, the urge to find authority in something other than and greater than the merely human. In chapter two we explored power, the unceasing questioning common to Nietzsche and Enlightenment thinkers of human self-sufficiency, of our ultimate and necessary isolation in a universe without value not put there by humans. In this chapter I discuss progress, suggesting that Derrida and Rorty can be viewed together as offering a vision of a post-Nietzschean democracy the engine of which is a view of ameliorative progress that lays claim to the best of Enlightenment thought while rightly abjuring the universalist overtones of the Enlightenment proper.

Both Rorty and Derrida are philosophers of Nietzsche’s infinite ocean; both extrapolate Nietzsche’s problematic in order to make suggestions for how to live democracy in a post-Nietzschean world. Rorty and Derrida problematize notions like justice and progress while championing them, cast doubt on our self-images while suggesting that they remain all that we have to go on. Placing these two lines of thought in conversation will, I hope, develop the type of activity argued for in the preceding chapter, the steady, creative work of communities fashioning new, better versions of themselves.

Both Rorty and Derrida are postmodern thinkers where postmodern is read in Lyotard’s sense of an incredulity towards metanarratives. But showcasing their points of

intersection will highlight what separates them from other postmodernists, particularly Foucault as I have characterized him in chapter two. For while to be postmodern is to share this incredulity towards metanarratives, those big stories of human progress and predicament, both Rorty and Derrida share also an incredulity towards anything but little stories: limited, exigent suggestions for what to do next, how to make this one situation better, how to solve this one crisis. While we must, after Nietzsche, avoid attempts to subsume the human in a broad cosmological story, we need not and should not stop telling little, contingent, human stories. For Rorty, the name of this process is social hope, for Derrida it is justice. In what follows I will attempt to show that these amount to much the same thing and argue for the most salient consequences of this confluence. In doing so, I also want to address what I see as common misreadings of both thinkers. First, Rorty's own reading of Derrida as a philosopher of private perfection, and second the characterization of Rorty put forward by supporters of Derrida such as Simon Critchley who see in Rorty's thinking a dangerous ethnocentrism. By pushing the two thinkers together, I hope to show both such readings to be off the mark.

Nietzsche begins *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* with a sentence that might usefully establish the context of our conversation: “Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing” (OTL 79). It is difficult to agree with the above quotation and still see knowledge as something godly, something that puts us into contact with a world other than the merely human. Instead, knowledge is a human creation, the invention of a creature attempting to survive in an indifferent universe. One effect of so viewing knowledge is to see it as something we do

rather than something we find, something which comes into its own through and by our own interventions, interventions conditioned by our needs as creatures of a particular sort.

Both Rorty and Derrida share this view of human knowledge as the creation of human actors, and so each approaches conversations about political concepts, traditions, and institutions accordingly. Both see our institutions as leaky vessels atop Nietzsche's infinite ocean, moving us along, yes, but in need of the constant work of inspection, repair, and imaginative rebuilding. We survive, and possibly thrive, through the constant weaving together of limited, provisional narratives about what the future might be like. Theirs is not an attempt to set things on the correct course, to find in Rorty's words "the correct track across an abyss" towards an already existing end, but instead to create those ends through the very act of envisioning them (PCP 146). It is furthermore to recognize the contingency and fallibility of our aspirations, their status as manifestations of the hopes of particular communities, and most importantly to cease wishing that they might be something more. Both envision progress without end: without cessation and without telos. A progress without end would be one which retained what is the best about Enlightenment thinking while cheerfully jettisoning the metaphysical underpinnings that democracy and its concomitant values have claimed thus far. Coming to terms with such a notion ultimately requires coming to terms with Nietzsche's ocean, and that is what is on offer in the political visions of Derrida and Rorty.

### 3.1 Derrida

I want to start with Richard Rorty's reading of Derrida before moving on to a discussion of Derrida's complication of justice. Rorty was a fan of Derrida's work and wrote affectionately about him for three decades. But for Rorty, Derrida is a private figure of self-perfection rather than a public intellectual who might have something to say about getting along with our fellow human beings. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty develops a political vision that hinges on a strict divide between the public and private spheres. For Rorty, we need to give up attempts to bring the private and public, sublime and beautiful, otherworldly and prosaic together. Philosophers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida are indeed brilliant, but useful only in our private lives; they offer suggestions for what we might do with our solitude rather than with our responsibilities to others. The overarching compromise of Rorty's book is that we “privatize the Nietzschean-Sartrean-Foucauldian attempt at authenticity and purity, in order to prevent [ourselves] from slipping into a political attitude which will lead [us] to think that there is some social goal more important than avoiding cruelty” (CIS 65). For the day-to-day governance of our communities, we need banal, everyday, pragmatic reasoning and compromise rather than the revolutionary ushering in of a new world. Nietzsche does not help us extend the scope of welfare programs; Sartre cannot help in our inner cities; Foucault has not helped us push for reforms to campaign financing. Rorty sees Derrida as part of this class of writers, each brilliant but none suitable for political thought.

Derrida is valuable as a private philosopher insofar as we read his writings as those of someone working through his predicament, coming to terms with where he finds

himself vis-à-vis the philosophical tradition; Derrida, for Rorty, is a philosopher of philosophy. Texts such as *The Postcard* showcase Derrida at his best: teasing his predecessors, cracking jokes, cultivating an ironic distance between himself and the tradition which attempts to consume him. It follows that for Rorty attempts by readers of Derrida such as Jonathan Culler to elucidate a Derridean or deconstructive method, to defend Derrida as a systematic philosopher in the line of Kant and Hegel, are regretful attempts to make Derrida a public figure, to show that he has a method or program that can be used in public life. For Rorty, we need only look to Nietzsche's Overman or Heidegger's Nazism to realize that the visions of world-disclosing philosophers are better left to our private lives. For we westerners are past the point where we ought to seek total revolution, and the alternative, slow and careful work from within, is better served by those public figures like Rawls or Habermas who operate within accepted and sedimented vocabularies.

I think that Rorty's limiting of Derrida to the private realm is not just a mistake, but a curious one; curious because, as I read it, Derrida's thought on justice can be put to work for a specifically Rortyan politics. I turn now to Derrida in order to discuss his view of justice so as to show its compatibility with Rorty's public, political vision.

One way to think of Derrida is as an interrogator of what Heidegger called Words of Being, words so important to our self-understanding that if they were not part of our vocabulary we would be different people. Derrida seems to agree in part with Heidegger that language speaks man, but then tries to reverse that one-way conversation by problematizing words and concepts. He agrees that in some sense we are stuck in language, so that all there is to do, the only way to be difficult, is to act out against it, to

show its shortcomings, its inherent frustrations so as to flee “the prison of all languages.”<sup>3</sup> So Derrida interrogates; he puts into question concepts like the gift, forgiveness, and law. This work of questioning is the work of deconstruction, and deconstruction takes place through and by a call for justice.

Derrida calls justice impossible. To say that justice is impossible is to say that it is not the type of thing which presents itself, which comes to characterize a concrete situation. Instead, it is what is glimpsed, what is called after, when we as humans try to interact with one another on an equitable basis. Justice is that for which laws are made, “it is just that there be law,”<sup>4</sup> but laws can never fully embody justice. Whereas a law counts, puts into place individuals, sets the rules of a certain arithmetic, justice is a demand which belies concrete formalization. It refuses form, refuses to count, to put into units.

So Derrida pulls apart law from justice. Law is the attempt by humans to create stability atop chaos, to make cooperation possible. It is founded atop an abyss, Nietzsche’s infinite ocean, and is therefore constitutively and forever without foundations: “The operation that amounts to founding, inaugurating, justifying law, to *making law*, would consist of a *coup de force*, of a performative and therefore interpretative violence that in itself is neither just nor unjust...”<sup>5</sup> With every law, every institution, we can trace backward to a moment of founding which creates, with the law, the very justification for its existence. And so, whenever we hear a claim to authority, to foundation, we can deconstruct that claim, and show what has been called stable and unchanging to be a precarious accomplishment, the founding of stability atop chaos. In following Derrida, then, we find ourselves in a precarious Nietzschean predicament,

staring at an infinite ocean. And we are terrified, we suffer. “The suffering of deconstruction, what makes it suffer and what makes suffer those who suffer from it, is perhaps the absence of rules, of norms, and definitive criteria...”<sup>6</sup>

However, to quote Derrida, this is “not bad news.”<sup>7</sup> If we can come to terms with our role in the creation of law and all those institutions that make community possible, we can begin to wield the power of that role for purposes of our own choosing. Rather than mourning the absence of absolutes, inhabiting god’s shadows or hoping for the security of dry land, we can, with Nietzsche and Derrida, become navigators of this infinite ocean. Derrida writes both of this fear and of its overcoming in a contribution to *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* which merits a full hearing:

Now, this chaos and instability, which is fundamental, founding and irreducible, is at once naturally the worst against which we struggle with laws, rules, conventions, politics and provisional hegemony, but at the same time it is a chance, a chance to change, to destabilize. If there were continual stability, there would be no need for politics, and it is to the extent that stability is not natural, essential or substantial, that politics exists and ethics is possible. Chaos is at once a risk and a chance, and it is here that the possible and the impossible cross each other.<sup>8</sup>

When at the end of our search for foundations we find only fingerprints, our fingerprints, we find also the beginnings of a hope that because things can never be final, never settled, they can always be better; that because *we* make them, *we* can make our institutions new again. It is the discovery that there can be progress without end because there is no impediment to human progress save the desire for non-human constraint. When the desire for such constraint is replaced by a willingness to employ our power to alter our institutions, everything becomes possible. Atop this chaos, the stability we impose might lead to fascisms, to genocides; that is the risk. But it might also lead to

whatever else we can come up with, whatever other worlds we can bring into existence. The hope for the latter alternative is the hope for justice.

So to say with Derrida that deconstruction is justice is to say that because we can no longer claim absolute authority for our institutions we can never be satisfied with them. Because justice remains to come, because it cannot be captured by our creations, we must ceaselessly seek out particular injustices to be remedied, ceaselessly interrogate the approximation of justice currently embodied in our laws. For Derrida we are to “never yield on this point, constantly to maintain a questioning of the origin, grounds and limits of our conceptual, theoretical or normative apparatus surrounding justice.”<sup>9</sup>

Justice is a plea built into each invocation of the word, a call which envisions a future world in order to demand action in the current one. Because the demands of justice can never be satisfied, we are impelled into action, into the working out of solutions for particular problems as they arise. Derrida writes how justice, “*presses* urgently here and now, *singularly*. It does not wait. Imminence means that it presses in every instant: *this* is never present, but *this* will not be put off to tomorrow.”<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere, Derrida is bothered by the call for total revolution in May 1968, for the destruction of institutions, and instead urges “a critique of institutions, but one that sets out not from the utopia of a wild and spontaneous pre- or non-institutional, but rather from counter-institutions...neither spontaneous, wild nor immediate.”<sup>11</sup> If we want change we attain it through suggestion rather than destruction, through making changes here, now, rather than calling for an elsewhere. To be sure, an ‘elsewhere’ remains, but its very un-presentability is the source of the immediacy of a call to action *now*.

The call of justice delivers to us a dual allegiance that forces us to gesture in opposite directions.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, any intervention seems frustrated by its necessary inability to address, finally, the issue in question. Justice never *is*, so why seek it? On the other hand, there is nothing besides human actors, nothing besides particular responses to a call from the excluded, exiled or unarticulated stranger. So it is that deconstruction is a “vocation,”<sup>13</sup> a commitment to respond constitutive of who we seek to be. Not an imperative binding simply because of the way we are (rational, children of god, et c.) but a call that is there, that we have the chance to answer while recognizing the risk of whatever solution we impose.

Justice remains ‘to come’ so that we remain open to future exigencies, to the future needs of people not accounted for in our present deliberations. To claim that justice had arrived would be to slip into a complacency, a totalizing torpor that would allow, through its sense that a certain desirable state of justice had been achieved, the smug satisfaction of all fascisms, that sense that we have a sanction to commit whatever acts we judge necessary, that because we have achieved a relation to something outside of ourselves (History, Truth, God), we can commit those acts which, beforehand, seemed impossible. And so it must remain, with Derrida, “essentially impossible” to claim “I know that I am just.”<sup>14</sup> It remains impossible because to know that I am just would be to claim an authority for the status quo, to have found bedrock at the bottom of our abyss, the place from which to build. There is no such place, so there is no justice fully realized. Nietzsche’s infinite ocean makes possible a justice only as an “always unsatisfied appeal,”<sup>15</sup> and so allows for a thought of progress which does not demand the making finite of the infinite, the making present of the un-presentable.

Derrida's view of justice, we can see, compels us to act. If all we have are approximations of an ideal, then there is always work to do. Such a notion of justice enables communities to engage in constant and vigilant revising, to make themselves into newer, better versions of themselves. Derrida's justice, then, allows a certain Rortyan politics of imaginative and ameliorative intervention. So I disagree with Rorty's characterization of Derrida as a philosopher of our private lives. Derrida's thought of justice is the thought of infinite possibility, of communities of possibility always and necessarily working towards what, by their own lights, might be more just. Derrida shares with Rorty this sense of the necessary openness of our deliberations, an openness to a future we have not yet imagined. To say with Derrida that “incalculable justice *commands calculation*”<sup>16</sup> is to say that we must act because satisfaction is ruled out; it is to say that justice is unachievable but makes possible and necessary constant and immediate intervention. “Not only *must* one calculate, negotiate the relation between the calculable and the incalculable, and negotiate without a rule that would not have to be reinvented there where we are ‘thrown’, there where we find ourselves; but one *must* do so and take it as far as possible, beyond the place we find ourselves.”<sup>17</sup> This is Derrida's imperative: we find ourselves always and already members of a community and a concomitant mess of values, norms, expectations, and hopes, all unsteady attempts at living atop an infinite ocean. Because *anything* is possible, because we might descend at any time into any manner of cruelty, ensuring that the change which will necessarily occur takes us closer to our own best versions of ourselves is our only responsible option. Justice is an insatiable imperative. It compels us to act, intervene, interrogate the status

quo because we are always adrift, always heading somewhere. To accept the call of justice is to begin to steer our own course.

### 3.2 The Derrideans

I turn now to one of Derrida's most insightful and interesting commentators over the last decade. Simon Critchley has written extensively on Derrida, including contributions to the debate over the character and extent of any connections between deconstruction and pragmatism, Derrida and Rorty.<sup>18</sup> Critchley shares my dissatisfaction with Rorty's reading of Derrida, and to a lesser extent my contention that there are important and pervasive similarities between the two men. He goes so far as to suggest that Derrida might be understood as amenable to the "Deweyan tradition that seeks to link pragmatism to radical democracy."<sup>19</sup> Yet while Critchley and I agree on certain conclusions, our reasons for doing so differ. Drawing out where and how Critchley and I differ will help bring out just where I see deep connections between Derrida and Rorty.

Critchley asks whether deconstruction is pragmatic, and whether pragmatism is deconstructive. His answer is that although we may discern superficial affinities between the two movements, mostly issuing from their shared suspicion of philosophical foundations, any rapprochement between the two lines of thought is ultimately frustrated by deconstruction's ultimate and unquestionable foundation in justice. Where pragmatism prides itself on lacking foundations, deconstruction announces and celebrates its own. Critchley reads the undeconstructability of justice as a suggestion that while deconstruction works against foundations, it does not target *all* foundations. Instead,

deconstruction stops short and justice remains. “At the basis of deconstruction,” Critchley writes, “is a non-pragmatist (or at least non-Rortian) foundational commitment to justice as something that cannot be relativized.”<sup>20</sup> This is where Critchley and I part ways. For on the reading of justice offered above its value lies precisely in its non-foundational status: Derrida’s thought is valuable insofar as it no longer seeks to ground, found, or guarantee. Deconstruction is a vocation rather than a categorical imperative precisely because our commitment to it is not foundational, not necessary. It is a call, a chance, and a risk. I share with Rorty the thought that paying Derrida the type of compliment offered by Critchley, congratulations for constructing a system on top of solid ground, is out of place. One should not “try to pay good old logocentric compliments to enemies of logocentrism” (EHO 121).

Critchley’s claim is that there *is* for Derrida something outside the text, or at least almost so. Justice exceeds context so as to be a condition of its possibility: “Context is motivated by an unconditional appeal or affirmation – a Nietzschean ‘yes, yes’ or, better, ‘a “yes” to emancipation’.”<sup>21</sup> Justice, on Critchley’s reading, is the bedrock of political thought, non-relativizable and undeconstructable. Furthermore, it is only from the vantage point of such a perspective, one which looks down upon and motivates context, that criticism is possible. Without such a perspective built into one’s theory, “one risks emptying the theory of any critical function, that is, of leaving open any space between things as they are and things as they might otherwise be.”<sup>22</sup> For Critchley, then, criticism is a matter of adopting a viewpoint outside of current practices and judging those practices according to a sense of how things might otherwise be. Yet following Nietzsche it is just such a vantage point which is not available. To hope for the

possibility of such a spectator's perch is to succumb to the terrifying infinity of Nietzsche's ocean and to the suffering of deconstruction. When Derrida writes that to experience deconstruction is to suffer "the absence of rules, of norms, and definitive criteria," he means it. Deconstruction moves against *all* claims to have discovered foundations outside of practice. We should avoid Critchley's move, a last second hail Mary pass to foundations, as we would an atheist's deathbed conversion. Both are last minute fears, yearnings for security, hopes for dry land.

This yearning for an eye turned in no particular direction, a view from nowhere, motivates Critchley's polemics against Rorty. Critchley is irritated chiefly by Rorty's insouciant recognition that his theory offers no such external perspective. Indeed, Critchley seems unable to believe that Rorty can be serious. He wonders whether Rorty's claim to a solidarity motivated by an aversion to cruelty can be anything other than a claim to foundation: "if cruelty is something about which liberals cannot be ironic, then the attempt to diminish suffering must have the status of a non-relativizable universal..."<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere: "Is [an aversion to cruelty] a universal principle or foundation for moral obligation? If it is, then how would this be consistent with Rorty's anti-foundationalism, and if it is not then what sort of binding power is it meant to have on members of liberal societies?"<sup>24</sup> To ask such a question is to assume that 'binding power' means something non-contingent, something *there* whether we like it or not, something that stands outside of practice and so provides a perspective from which to judge any practice, any particular context. It is to assume that we need some absolute point of reference by which to determine our own position, to judge ourselves. On the

reading of Derrida offered above, and on Rorty's characterization of his own views, it is precisely this yearning for such a point of reference which must be abandoned.

Consider the logic of autoimmunity for Derrida. Democracy is distinct from other political systems insofar as it shelters within itself the risk of its own demise, the democratic creation of non-democracy. Derrida is concerned to show how democracy is built around recognition of the co-implication of what he calls risk and chance, which is to say that one cannot hope to elude risk, to find an external standpoint which mitigates completely against it. Any critical stance must be well within context, within practice, and we ought not to hope for some other vantage point. For it is only by realizing that there will be no such point of reference, its actual and definite impossibility, that we can turn as individuals and communities to better fashioning the possible, to better addressing the problems encountered in the world before our eyes.

Yet Critchley persists in assuming that a critical stance towards politics requires a vantage point outside of the practices being considered. Finding no such point in Rorty's views, Critchley condemns him for enabling a political conservatism that frustrates meaningful change. Rorty admits his ethnocentrism and says 'so much the better', but for Critchley "when the infinitude of ethics contracts into the finite space of an *ethos* – a site, a plot, a place for the sacred, 'the country of Whitman's and Dewey's dreams' – then the very worst becomes possible."<sup>25</sup> So it is that "Rorty's demand for national pride is only a cigarette paper away from the rather unpalatable chauvinism of American exceptionalism."<sup>26</sup> If one is looking with Critchley for a guarantee that Rorty's views will not lead to the 'very worst', to 'chauvinism' or to 'exceptionalism', then one will be justifiably disappointed. But one will only look for such reassurance if he fails to

consider Derrida's pronouncement offered above: "Chaos is at once a risk and a chance."<sup>26</sup> Philosophers ought not to try to be insurance salesmen, constructing systems which defend against risk so as to provide security and peace of mind. They ought to instead, with Derrida and Rorty, suffer the absence of such a guarantee so as to better cope with its consequences. Derrida himself responded to attempts to find in his thought words and concepts that can form the structure of a new system, concepts which form the "ground, foundation or origin." He asks: "how does one model oneself after what one deconstructs?...Have I not indefatigably repeated – and I would dare say demonstrated – that the trace is neither a ground...nor an origin, and that in no case can it provide for a manifest or disguised onto-theology?"<sup>27</sup> As with the trace, so with justice. Derrida is not in the business of system building, and so none of his concepts should be thought of as grounds for the beginnings of a new system. Instead, we suffer deconstruction so as to cope with our predicament as it is.

### 3.3 Rorty

Such coping is perhaps the defining feature of Rorty's politics. I mentioned above that Derrida might be understood as responding to Heidegger's engagement with language's predominance in our lives. Conversely, for Rorty language should be thought of as a tool, more like Heidegger's hammer than his House of Being. To understand a concept is to understand the use of a word, and words are used by creatures trying to facilitate common ends. When freed from false hopes that these common ends might hook up to the world as it is, or gain the sanction of a non-human authority, we become free to let

our imagination better determine those ends so that the future might be better than the past. The name for this plea for a better future is social hope.

Rorty's Deweyan vision of politics is one in which we take seriously Nietzsche's aphorism that "we are experiments: let us also want to be them!" (D 453). Wanting to be an experiment means for Rorty wanting to engage in one's society, to see it as the work of human beings and so limited by no constraints outside of human practice. To be experimental is to be pragmatic, to judge the worth of a given idea about what to do next by the effect it will have on one's society, the difference it will make. Lacking a view from nowhere, political decisions are made with a view to and from our own situation: embedded, socialized, contingent all the way down. So when Rorty champions the cause of 'achieving our country' he is neither blithely claiming authority for America nor chauvinistically claiming its superiority. He is instead pointing to a tendency in American thought towards the adoption of a certain stance vis-a-vis politics, a stance which forever delivers the right of judgment to future generations. Just as, with Derrida, we can no longer say 'I am just', Rorty's America is one in which we can never say 'our country has been achieved'. For that decision is not up to us.

Rorty champions Walt Whitman's view that "America...counts, I reckon, for her justification and success (for who, as yet, dare claim success?) almost entirely on the future...For our new world I consider far less important for what it has done, or what it is, than for results to come."<sup>28</sup> As for Derrida, democracy names something we can never speak of as present or achieved. Instead, it is what remains just behind the horizon, not a ground but a posit, "a great word, whose history...remains unwritten because that history has yet to be enacted."<sup>29</sup> Democratic communities engage in conversation for its own

sake rather than for the achievement of a certain state of affairs. The hope of such conversation is not that we will stumble across the right system, the one system, foundations on which to build a society, but the simple wish that our vocabulary will be supplanted by a new, better one we cannot at present even imagine. Giving oneself over to social hope, to a groundless unachievable posit, means substituting for the Platonic urge for transcendence, for timeless respite in a changeless elsewhere, an openness to democratic conversation able to foster ameliorative progress that will, with luck, replace our present vocabulary. Such a community would admit that “the terms in which we state our communal convictions and hopes are doomed to obsolescence, that we shall *always* need new metaphors, new logical spaces, new jargons, that there will never be a final resting place for thought” (EHO 19). This is Nietzsche’s “so much the better,” and his “and this too is an interpretation”; it is the joyful affirmation of life as interpretation and the joining together of risk and chance (BGE 22).

So Critchley is wrong to contrast the “closure or achievement imagined by Rorty” with the “ever incomplete, undecidable structure” of a deconstructive politics.<sup>30</sup> For Rorty’s hope is that we will cease looking for a view external to human communities and instead devote our efforts to the ongoing conversations of those communities, conversations which are their own end. Social hope is the desire for a citizenry ravenous for intervention which will, through the accumulation of piecemeal reforms, finite responses to the particular, bring about future generations who will barely recognize us. As with Derrida, we can discern the derivation of a call to action from the very finitude of our hopes and ideals. It is because justice never *is* that we must act in its name; it is because social hope can never be sated that we take part in the working through of the

issues facing the societies of which we are part. The urge for our own obsolescence is the urge for a progress and democracy indexed only to the hopes, plans, and priorities of specific communities, communities for which the hope of a view from nowhere is viewed with the same pedantic mirth with which we currently view former societies' objects of worship, so that satisfying the demands of non-human Reality is taken as seriously as satisfying the demands of Zeus.

### 3.4 Progress Without End

I began by suggesting that both Rorty and Derrida make possible a vision of progress without end, without cessation or telos. I would like to finish by saying more about this notion as an attempt to clarify and consolidate the connections between the two lines of thought. Hope and justice both name the thought that because things can never be settled, never be final, they can always be better. Both Rorty and Derrida are philosophers of a certain abyss, a space between the present and future, between the possible and impossible. It is a gap some theorists aiming for certainty try to bridge, but after Nietzsche the job of the philosopher is no longer to bridge this gap with one scheme rather than another, but to face it, to face up to it. Rorty and Derrida agree with Nietzsche that we are standing on the edge of infinity; both offer a vision of politics which, rather than mitigates or overcomes, speaks to Nietzsche's new infinite.

In neither set of ideas can we make out any room for an end to this process, for a culmination. The achievement of justice is conceptually impossible. Built into the very idea is its ultimate impossibility. Likewise, the point of hope is hope, the point of

conversation is conversation. Without a non-human authority to appease, there is no standard by which we could safely end innovation, change, or progress. Nietzsche's ocean, we might remind ourselves, is infinite. The point of positing a class of ideals such as hope and justice is to deal with that infinity, to think about what politics can mean after Nietzsche. I have suggested that what politics means, what progress can be, is this mix of infinitude and finitude, the derivation of an appeal for immediate, finite action from the very infinitude of possibility. If Nietzsche's new infinite is not to be terrifying it has to be because we have built a politics around it.

Both Rorty and Derrida carve out such a space in their thought. Both envision a politics structured around a space left open, for Derridean hospitality and for Rorty's victim of as yet unarticulated suffering, "for him to come if he comes."<sup>31</sup> It is because we no longer seek universality that we recognize the limits of our concepts and institutions, and so view and build them in such a way that their revision is always called for and made possible. Both visions consist in what Derrida calls "doing everything for the future to remain open,"<sup>32</sup> what Rorty calls cultivating a "romantic hope for another world which is yet to come."<sup>33</sup> Both are ways of saying that solutions to present problems will create new ones, and so on without end, and so much the better. The struggle of politics becomes a struggle for the recognition of the provisional status of our work, for its incompleteness, the impossibility of cessation, and for our recognition that "this is not bad news."

Neither can we find a guide for this progress, a telos. Critchley's hope, the hope for a vantage point outside of practice, is given up. Instead, progress comes to mean grappling with heritage, accepting it as our own, and acting from within it. Just as

Nietzsche's preferred actor fashions herself according to a single taste by imposing a novel design on given material, such communities exchange self-chosen contingencies for given ones. To agree with Derrida that contra Heidegger, “there will be no unique name, even if it were the name of Being. And we must think this without nostalgia,”<sup>34</sup> is to agree that we will never be so lucky as to stumble into contact with something other than ourselves, something that might give us direction. Without such an aid, without a telos handed over to us, we must rely on our own hopes and thoughts about the future, about what we should do next. So it is that deconstruction entails and presupposes a “moment of affirmation” without which radical critique is impossible.<sup>35</sup> There is no politics except from within, because there is no ‘outside’ to belong to. In whatever tradition we find ourselves, in whatever language we must articulate or claims, it is this that is to be affirmed before changed, recognized before surpassed.

In support of my characterization of Derrida as urging a working through of problems from within, I point to a tendency in his writings to warn against attempts to make deconstruction into a destructive, revolutionary force. Instead, Derrida often insists he thinks of its work as the work of the Enlightenment. He states not only that “nothing is less outdated than the classical emancipatory ideal.”<sup>36</sup> but that he has supported throughout his career the “Enlightenment of tomorrow.”<sup>37</sup> Such an Enlightenment would share with today’s the commitment to progress, to making the world better by providing greater happiness for greater numbers of people. It would accept our place in a history, in a tradition of ideas, but in pointing towards the future would seek to re-appropriate and reinvigorate what is of use in the tradition while jettisoning the appeal to epistemic and moral foundations with which the Enlightenment began. Motivating this position is a

basic commitment shared by Rorty: We heirs of the Enlightenment cannot do away with who we are or how we find ourselves. The only option is intervention, suggestion, imagination. The hope for a progress *with* end, one which is guided and could be achieved, is the hope for what Rorty calls non-human constraint, what for Derrida would be something beyond the reach of play, a perspective which after Nietzsche is no longer available. And so a progress without end begins to come into view.

I will end by restating that both Derrida and Rorty are philosophers deeply committed to the Enlightenment project of remaking the world according to criteria acceptable to all. There are of course important divisions between the two men. Just as one would be hard-pressed to find in Rorty's work friendly mention of singularity or the Other, it is unlikely that Derrida ever countenanced Whitman's suggestion that the United States is the greatest poem. Indeed, both men have expressed reservations about the other's work and its proximity to his own.<sup>38</sup> Yet I have tried to show that whatever differences exist, the similarities between the two figures can be forged into a vision of political progress structured around a space left open for the future, and so both are what Nietzsche called "philosophers of the dangerous perhaps" (BGE 2). To fuse the pragmatism of Rorty with the deconstruction of Derrida would be to bring together the pragmatic reduction of decision-making to a weighing of human interests with the deconstructive imperative to question so as to correct the logic of our scales. It would be to say with Derrida that there is nothing outside the text and with Rorty that there is no answer to a redescription save a re-redescription. that human interaction is not about negotiating with a world external to us but is instead a way of bringing a common world into existence. It would be to agree with Nietzsche that humans invented knowing, and

then to hope that we might yield our ponderous possession in the service of those goals which, by our own lights, seem to represent what is best about us.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Richard Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), p. 203.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Lyotard, quoted in Jose Luis Bermudez, “Is the Postmodern World a Nietzschean World?” *International Studies in Philosophy* XXVII (II), pp.1-14.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.343.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law,” in Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, Gil Anidjar, ed. p.244.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.241.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.231. Interesting for our purposes, William James describes his pragmatist as having “a certain willingness to live without assurances and guarantees.”

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.242.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism” in Chantal Mouffe, ed. *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 84.

<sup>9</sup> Derrida, “Force,” p.248.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*. Translated by Giacomo Donis (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), p.23-24.

<sup>11</sup> Derrida, “Secret,” p.50.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Richard J. Bernstein, *New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), p. 214.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 210.

<sup>14</sup> Derrida, “Force,” p.245.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.249.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.257.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> see especially Critchley’s contributions to Chantal Mouffe, ed. *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*.

<sup>19</sup> Simon Critchley, “Deconstruction and Pragmatism,” in Critchley, *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas, and Contemporary French Thought*. (London: Verso, 1999), p.101.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.102.

<sup>21</sup> Critchley, “Metaphysics in the Dark,” in Critchley, *Ethics*, p.111.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.112.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.116.

<sup>24</sup> Critchley, “Deconstruction,” p.90.

<sup>25</sup> Critchley, “Metaphysics,” p.113.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 109.~453, p.459.

<sup>27</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, Trans. Bass. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p.52.

<sup>28</sup> quoted in Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), p.26.

<sup>29</sup> quoted in Ibid, p.19.

<sup>30</sup> Critchley, “Metaphysics.” p. 110.

<sup>31</sup> Derrida. *Secret*, p.83.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Rorty, ‘On Moral Obligation, Truth, and Common Sense’, in Josef Nizik and John T. Sanders eds. *Debating the State of Philosophy* (London: Praeger, 1996), p.50

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p.27.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Bernstein, p.215.

<sup>36</sup> Derrida, “Force,” p. 251.

<sup>37</sup> Derrida, *Secret*, p. 54.

<sup>38</sup> For Rorty on Derrida’s ‘justice’ see especially “A Spectre is Haunting the Intellectuals: Derrida on Marx” in *Philosophy and Social Hope* pp.210-222. For Derrida on Rorty, see especially “Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism” in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* pp. 77-88.

## CONCLUSION

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, after expounding upon the inescapability of interpretation, Nietzsche anticipates a possible rejoinder: “Granted this too is only interpretation – and you will be eager enough to raise this objection? – well, so much the better” (BGE 22). Elsewhere, he prefaces some deplorable ‘truths’ about women by ensuring the reader that they are only “*my truths*” (BGE 231). Nietzsche’s texts are replete with such examples. Nietzsche talks about truth without claiming to have the Truth about truth; he talks about morality without telling us how to be moral. It is Nietzsche, as Gianni Vattimo observes, who happily offers us an “interpretation that knows it is one.”<sup>1</sup> In this conclusion I would like to put forward some thoughts on what such a view might mean for politics. My question here is what our Enlightened Nietzsche can mean for democracy. The answer I would like to suggest: democracy is *ours*, and as such it is *dangerous*.

Why ours? In an insightful investigation into Michel Foucault’s work, Richard Bernstein asks of Foucault, who says “not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous,” dangerous for whom?<sup>2</sup> Chapter two was devoted to establishing the necessity of posing this question, and the answer offered there was ‘dangerous for a ‘we’, for us’. For danger in all its manifestations threatens interests, there is no abstract danger. We find interests only in beings whose existence is an issue for them, and no such beings exist except as members of a ‘we’. We saw there that just as the Nietzschean actor can fashion a new self according to a style of his choosing, thoroughly anti-essentialist cultures can, as a collective affair, develop their own tastes and construct a society with only those tastes in mind. Once we get rid of non-human constraints on action and creation, we get rid of *all* limits on human potential. To say that there are no authorities

save human ones, no gods to please, no ‘reality’ to adequately mirror, is to say that there is only human ingenuity, only solidarity, only humans engaged in the construction of concepts and of communities. And so the Enlightenment hope of creative individuals who dare to know, who dare to create and lead is too a deeply Nietzschean thought. Nietzsche’s power should be read as the self-conscious ability of human beings to create and sustain a world that tries to live up only to their own expectations, so that they might live according to their own tastes.

Foucault was in many ways an enemy of the liberalism espoused by Rorty. Yet if we try our best to articulate Foucault’s hopes for a future society, I think it would be one in which people had the space and freedom to create themselves without having to answer to any authority save when their own creation got in the way of someone else’s. This is liberalism; an ideal, never fully present liberalism, but a liberalism nonetheless.

Why dangerous? Because democracy is ours. Chapter three explored the concepts of justice and hope and made a case for viewing both as responses to Nietzsche’s new infinite. Nietzsche’s ocean is terrifying because it is limitless, because there are no non-human authorities by which to guide our way. We established there that justice and hope both approximate a spirit of creation built upon a sense of this danger; we gain strength rather than descend to despair when we accept that what is presently called just, or what is currently hoped for is valuable in its finitude, in its status as a precarious hope for the future suspended across an abyss, a network constructed and supported by a certain community and so determined by its own contingent and fragile needs. Foucault was not apolitical, but where he sought only to aid in the “undefined work of freedom” hope and justice capture the attempt to define however provisionally

what progress and freedom here and now entail.<sup>3</sup>

The progress glimpsed in Rorty and Derrida places both men and their Nietzschean narratives in the tradition of Enlightenment thought. Yet where progress for Kant was to be guaranteed by universal truths of the human being, we find in Nietzsche resources to turn the very lack of such universals into reason to believe that progress is not only still possible, but demanded. Kant saw the French Revolution as offering evidence of a universal tendency in humankind towards the progress of freedom.<sup>4</sup> Writing in Nietzsche's wake, Rorty views the same Revolution as a celebration of contingency. The French did not gain nerve by tapping into resources shared by all humans, but instead were brave enough to imagine a better world for themselves, better by standards they themselves brought into existence. The difference between the two views of the French Revolution, and so progress, is the difference between the Enlightenment proper and our, Nietzschean one.

Nietzsche's enlightenment, and its hallmarks as put forward in the third chapter, justice and hope, reflect the gradual letting go of epistemic and moral foundations. Giving up such foundations is deeply democratic. For if there are only interpretations, then there will be no end to the conversation wherein interpretations are tested against those of one's peers, a conversation we might call politics. Without appeal to any 'because it is so', no fact of the matter, we are forever thrust into the social space of justifying ourselves to those around us. It is not that we Western liberals have discovered the way, have founded a politics on the fact that out there, there are no foundations. We have, instead, stumbled across a way of living that can work for beings with the hopes and interests we in fact have. With Nietzsche, we offer our truths only insofar as it is

understood that they are ours, and we hope this is enough to keep the conversation going.

Against this, we saw in chapter one how Plato's truth is a conversation stopper.

Outside his cave, we discover the world as it is, as it would like us to describe it; we find the world's self-image to which only knowledge of Truth can do justice. But, *pace* Plato, the world is not such a place. The world does not have hopes for how it will be described. Treating 'reality' as something to be satisfied, mirrored, or corresponded to is just the latest in a long series of attempts to feel secure in our situation by establishing a relationship of fidelity with something other and greater than us because necessary. We saw there that Rorty offers us a new Nietzschean story of human maturation which places the Enlightenment as one stage in a broader movement of human beings gradually taking charge of their existence.

If we can avoid Plato's philosopher, or any figure with the right to put an end to inquiry, we may be able to come to see inquiry itself as the goal of politics. It would, in the end, be a politics with which Nietzsche might well disagree. For Nietzsche saw democracy as symptomatic of a decline in man.<sup>5</sup> He thought that the death of God cleared the way for the vibrant clash of many gods, that is many interpretations, ideas, suggestions for what to do next. But he doubted that this work could be the work of communities, and offered instead strong individuals whose successes always came at a cost to the collective, turning us democrats into a bridge to be overcome.

Yet there are undeniably currents of Nietzsche's thought that show him to be perhaps *the* Enlightenment philosopher. For the Enlightenment was the age of critique, and it is Nietzsche who gave us the resources to turn the activity of critique against itself, to question the drives and forces at work when human beings appeal to an obdurate other

for support, be it truth, God, or reason.

The Enlightenment was also the age of demythification, of replacing dogma and irrationalism with truth. Nietzsche demythified the Enlightenment and left in its place, behind the mask, nothing. No thing; no ground; no truth. Instead, we find ourselves after Nietzsche with a space, a hope, and Nietzsche's call to dance "even near abysses" (GS 347). We do not lose the hope of the Enlightenment, faith in human maturation, power, and progress, but we make them new. Nietzsche writes of this, our enlightenment, when he suggests "this Enlightenment we must now carry further forward" (D 197). We have seen how in different ways Rorty, Derrida, and Foucault have tried to carry Nietzsche forward, and how the best understandings of Nietzsche's thought carry with them the mark of Enlightenment hopes.

Nietzsche was no stranger to these hopes. His Zarathustra writes of human maturation through escape from dogma when he admonishes his famous wise men: "You have served the people and the superstition of the people, all you famous wise men – and not truth" (Z 2 On the Famous Philosophers 126); of power and possibility as he speaks of "the great noon when man stands in the middle of his way between beast and overman and celebrates his way to the evening as his highest hope: for it the way to a new morning" (Z 1 Of the Bestowing Virtue 104); and lastly of progress, an obdurate focus on the possibility of the future being better than and different from the past, when he laments, "the now and the past on earth – alas, my friends, that is what I find most unendurable, and I should not know how to live if I were not also a seer of that which must come." (Z 2 Of Redemption 160).

We have not, however, tried here to satisfy Nietzsche, but instead to pay his texts the compliment of a strong, Nietzschean reading, one ineluctably tied to our own goals and priorities. Still, to think Nietzsche and enlightenment in a single breath is perhaps to betray Nietzsche and his disdain for community, for democracy. Well, so much the better. We have made Nietzsche into a bridge.

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<sup>1</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism & Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, & Law*. Santiago Zabala, ed. William McCuiag, trans., (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics” in *The Foucault Reader*. Paul Rabinow, ed (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p.351; Richard J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), p. 157.

<sup>3</sup> Foucault, “What is Enlightenment” in *The Foucault Reader* Paul Rabinow, ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 46.

<sup>4</sup> Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’” in *Kant’s Political Writings*, H. Reiss, ed. (Cambridge, 1970).

<sup>5</sup> See especially *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.126 [203].

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