

RORTY AND NIETZSCHE

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*I see Nietzsche as the figure who did most to convince
European intellectuals of the doctrines which were
purveyed to Americans by James and Dewey.*
---- Richard Rorty

Introduction

Rorty has never said straightforwardly that, like Dewey or James (1991a), Nietzsche were one of his heroes. But in an autobiographical text, "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids", he recognizes that he shares his philosophical views "with Nietzsche and Dewey" (1999, p.5). Nietzsche's influence on his work is undeniable. Like Nietzsche: (i) Rorty is very critical about the sterile works of philosophers who following Plato think of philosophy as the search for the "really real" (2007a); (ii) he assigns novelist and poets a place in midst of philosophers (2008); (iii) he thinks we live in a post-philosophical culture where philosopher has no special "problems" to solve but are all-purpose intellectuals 'who offer a view on pretty much anything' (2008b); and, (iv) that science has no special access to the 'really real' (2008a). For both of them creativity and imagination have a central role in our life. But unlike Nietzsche, for Rorty, democracy and Christianity are not signs of the West's decadency. For him, "one can detach the good Nietzsche – the critic of Platonism – from the bad Nietzsche, the one who had no use for Christianity or democracy." (2006, p. 93). Contrary to Nietzsche, the egalitarian ideals incarnated in a democracy do not represent for Rorty the triumph of the 'slave morality' but the hope of the continuing retreat of all sorts of present and future forms of cruelties. So, as he says in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Nietzsche was an 'ironist', one sufficiently historicist and nominalist not to be scared by the

contingency of his most central beliefs and desires. But he was not a 'liberal'¹ -- in fact, he was an 'antiliberal':

You preachers of equality, the tyrant's madness of impotence cries thus out of you for "equality" (...) I do not want to be mixed in with and mistaken for these preachers of equality. For thus justice speaks to me: "humans are not equal." (Nietzsche, 2006, pp. 77-78)

Getting straight to the point, as he sometimes abruptly does, Rorty says: "Nietzsche dislikes both his country and his century, so the Emersonian combination of self-reliance and patriotism found in James and Dewey is alien to him." (1991, p. 2). His philosophical positions are in the extreme opposite of his fellow countryman, Kant. He sees no use of concepts like "knowledge in itself", "thing-in-itself" ("the dogmatic idea of 'things that have a constitution in themselves' is one which one must break absolutely")², or "the categories of reason" ("the expedience of a certain race and species")³. With his perspectivism Nietzsche abandoned any reliance on philosophies such as Kant's which see truth as disentangled from interests and needs.

1. The place of Nietzsche in the history of philosophy according to Rorty

In writing about Richard Rorty's philosophy it is unavoidable to mention the importance of the XXth century's "linguistic turn" for his work. Indeed the Wittgensteinian assumption that language is not a medium for expressing ideas but tools for dealing with the events in the world has a central role in his writings. But one should not underestimate the relevance of another important turn in the history of philosophy: the "historicist turn"⁴. As a matter of fact, this is for him *the* decisive event in the history of contemporary

¹ A Liberal is someone for whom "cruelty is the worst thing they do" (CIS, p. 74). See also, CIS, p. xv.

² Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, transl. Walter Kaufmann (Random House, 1968), sec. 558 apud Rorty, 2007a, p.111, n8.

³ *The Will to Power*, trans. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), sec. 608 and sec. 515 apud Rorty (1991, p. 2, n. 1 e 2).

⁴ See CIS, Introduction, p. xiii.

philosophy. Without it we would not have the works of philosophers like Foucault, Heidegger, Dewey, Habermas and Rawls.

By 'historicist turn' Rorty means the philosophical 'revolution' inaugurated by Hegel. Before Hegel metaphysics and theology dominated the intellectual culture of the West. According to their followers, every human being has the same nature, or essence. So, the individual self-realization is the fulfillment of this very nature or essence. For Christianity this essence was given by our common origin as creature of God: we were born to continue his work, to spread love and goodness all over the world. Before Christianity, Platonian metaphysicians already inferred that in order to fulfill our real nature as rational beings we needed to be altruistic. For them virtuous behaviors were signs of rationality. As a matter of fact, the coincidence between the first and the second is not fortuitous, for Nietzsche "Christianity is the Platonism for the people" (2002, p.4).

Nietzsche was skeptical about the existence of naturally or essentially altruistic human soul. His view about human solidarity and community is in this point very similar to Hobbes; human beings search above all the satisfaction of their desires and individual aspirations. They accept to live in community and help each other only for "fear of the neighbor".⁵ But his skepticism, tell us Rorty, was not enough to free him totally from metaphysical frames of thought. Rorty agrees with Heidegger that Nietzsche was not really the post-metaphysician he would like to be. He was rather the *last* metaphysician, the proponent of an inverted Platonism. Similar to the dogmatizers he criticizes, Nietzsche also had his version of the only thing that is really real, the 'will to power'.⁶ But besides some inconsistencies in his writings Nietzsche was

undoubtedly an anti-representationalist, nominalist, historicist, anti-Cartesian philosopher. So it is impossible to settle him on the side of the Plato-Kantian canon.

The 'historicist turn' promoted by Hegel have overcome all attempts to define the human nature or the human essence. For Hegel and Hegelians like Rorty there is nothing prior to history or prior to socialization which would capture the absolute definition of humanity. This means, first, that we are set free to create either our private identity as we please or to imagine one new society as we please. There cannot be previously any sort of absolute given knowledge about how the future will be like. History is the form in which the human spirit shows its capacity to create and invent new forms of societies and selves. This historicist perspective constitutes a common assumption for all post-Hegelian philosophers such as Heidegger, Habermas, Foucault and Rawls.

The second consequence of the historicist turn is one which perhaps Rorty was the first to notice – he wrote CIS in order to elaborate this second consequence, as he tell us in "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids" (1999, p.13). For him one of the important results of the historicist turn is that there is no need any more to unify a search for private self-creation with an urge to engage oneself in a new social utopia. Transposed to the philosophical field this conclusion means that one does not have to choose between Rawls and Foucault, or between Heidegger and Habermas. One can use their writings simultaneous but for different purposes. Authors like Heidegger and Foucault are useful for our private self-creation; while authors like Habermas and Rawls are useful for helping us understand why the mechanisms through which the public institutions try to accomplish their social functions fail, and imagine new regulation's forms. But this division is far from settled. Even those authors themselves do not avoid mixing both spheres. And so we have, for one side, idiosyncratic discourses which also aim a large social resonance and, on the other side, public discourses which attack idiosyncratic discourses as if

⁵ See Nehamas (1985), p. 211.

⁶ While reading Nehamas's book on Nietzsche I have got the impression that one can deflate the 'will to power's concept, its metaphysical content, and reduce it just to our unavoidable evaluative form of dealing with things, persons, ourselves and events in the world.

they represented a severe threat to democracy. But the amalgamation of both vocabularies, private and public, results disastrous from a Rortyan perspective.

For one side, it would be a disaster, for example, if we try to take Heidegger's conclusions about the decadence of contemporary West societies seriously. He, like Nietzsche, thought he also had a 'social mission' to accomplish with his works, so he unfortunately adopts Nietzsche antiliberal jabber and despise the 'herd'. But on the other side, it would be an error to judge all Heidegger's (and Nietzsche's) contributions to philosophy in the lights of his (their) anti-democratic positions, as Habermas (Rorty, 2007 and 2000), and many others, do.

For Rorty, the strength of Heidegger's and Nietzsche's philosophical writings lay in their idiosyncratic attitudes. With their very personal writing's style they stimulate the creativity and the imagination of their readers. Nietzsche never hide himself behind his writings, on the contrary, they are full of self reference. Through them he presents himself as an author who does not compromise with scholar's etiquette and smooth talk, and who refuses to subordinate himself to the mainstream authority of traditional metaphysician and theologian.

One way to avoid outlived theories about the way one should conduct one's life is to find out a personal style and an own vocabulary for narrating one's point of views, autobiographical or not – and all this with a lively desire for richer, different experiences in the future.

2. Truth

One of the major contributions of pragmatism to philosophy is its critic of the old theory of truth as correspondence. For philosophers like Rorty it makes no sense to talk about a non-linguistic foundation of sentences and propositions since everything, including natural things, are experienced only as we express them

in words.⁷ Even though Nietzsche is very critical about the metaphysical distinction between reality and appearance, and the dogmatic position of scientific knowledge, he has not confronted deeply enough the old realistic conception of truth as correspondence (Nehamas, p. 52-55). While in early essays like "On truth and lies in a non-moral sense" he holds a position very similar to pragmatism's on truth, in late works, such as *Between Good and Evil*, he admits that a sentence could be false, but this falsity were not a problem:

We do not consider the falsity of a judgment as itself an objection to a judgment; this is perhaps where our new language will sound most foreign. The question is how far the judgment promotes and preserves life, (...). (Nietzsche, 2002, p. 7).

Life is a central notion for him. Much more important than to know if a sentence is true or not is to evaluate the power of its message, its capacity of promote 'self-overcominess'. As Rorty asserts (2006a, p.23), in midst of the pragmatists there were never a perspective exactly like what Nietzsche called 'life'.

Rorty is very skeptical about the correspondence theory of truth and also critical about notions like theory, absolute foundation, representations and so on, but his philosophical background, the Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy, is clearly present in his writings. Because 'life' has too many meanings to be used with appropriateness and clarity, it would be better not to make use of it. His way of talking is much more economical, has much less metaphors, analogies and descriptions than Nietzsche's.

In spite of the inconsistency of his positions about truth, Nietzsche, according to Rorty, sustained pragmatist positions in various passages of his works (especially *The Will to Power*, sections 480-544)⁸. Like a pragmatist, Nietzsche take the *effects* of discourses in account, that

⁷ Or, as Hegel would say, "Nature is but a moment in the developing self-consciousness of Spirit" (Rorty, 2007a, p. 111).

⁸ Rorty, 1991, n. 2.

is, how they manage or not to produce truth-values. In this sense, he was “a good an anti-cartesian, anti-representationalist, and antiessentialist as Dewey. He was devoted to the question “what difference will this belief make to our conduct?” as Peirce or James”. (Rorty, 1991, p.2)

3. Nihilism

A central theme of Nietzsche’s philosophy is ‘nihilism’. Although this expression does not appear in his major work, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, written in the years 1883 to 1885, but only in posthumous fragment from 1881, its implications are clearly there.

Zarathustra is the ‘announcer’ of the Overman, of the Will to Power and of the Eternal Recurrence. Those three elements jointly build Nietzsche’s *tragic* or *Dionysian* philosophy (Machado, 1997). Tragic philosophy wants to celebrate life with all its ups and downs. It mistrusts the apparent positive talk of (rational) Philosophy, science and religion. For Nietzsche these are all nihilistic; they *disempower* us by fixing absolute values like Truth, Free Will, God, Immortality, Soul, and so on. For them those values are eternal and universal. They are not submitted to temporality. For Nietzsche on the contrary to negate temporality is to negate life. The joy of life is dependent of the temporal flux of open possibilities.

On the other side, the modern acceptance of the ‘death of God’ has created another sort of nihilism, the passive nihilism. And this is also a terrible situation to live with. For some, the absence of absolute religious values created an emptiness, a void, a ‘nobody cares’ attitude which is totally contrary to life. Those are the ones Zarathustra calls the ‘last men’; they do not know about the Overmen.

So, while criticizing the absolute, a-temporal values, Nietzsche is not saying at the same time that we do not need values. He wants us to celebrate the will as an important value. Every creator has a different path to go,

but all creators are guided by their will to power, by their strength to carry life through all difficulties without regret. This conception of philosophy is deeply related to tragedy since the tragic hero is the one who celebrates the *amor fati*. He endures all sorts of sorrows and losses but he never concludes that it could or should be different.

As I said above, Rorty is very skeptical about Nietzsche’s employment of ‘life’ as a central philosophical notion. Nonetheless, when one reads his writings, especially CIS, one feels that he is also urging us to search our own path, to avoid following mainstreams positions, or common sense. And above all one feels that he is urging us to get rid of the fear of making mistakes. Like Nietzsche, he believes that one cannot live outside time. Contingency means accepting all our failures, success, and changes.

4. No Representations, but interpretations⁹

With his conception of knowledge as manifestation of a ‘perspective’ of the knower, that is, as a result of how, due to her cultural background, her intentions and feelings, her interests, she ‘sees’ the issue in question, Nietzsche showed that anybody who pretend to be capable of absolute neutrality and so, capable of holding ‘last words’ about anything, that is, words that would be universally true, is a nihilist who neglects the forces of life. Even a scientist interprets her object of study from a specific perspective. *Interpretation* is the way we normally deal with all sorts of phenomena in the world. From life’s perspective there is neither mental *representation*, nor pure neutral analysis of how things really are. For Nietzsche there is also no object *per se* or substance, detached from its properties or accidents. An object without qualities has no content. The interpreter

⁹ In what follows I make use of Nehamas (1985) clear exposition of Nietzsche’s philosophy (see specially, part I: The World). In a note at the introduction of CIS, Rorty tell us that his “account of Nietzsche owes a great deal to Alexander Nehamas’s original and penetrating Nietzsche: Life as Literature” (p.27).

is always interacting with persons and things, affecting and being affected by them.

That things possess a constitution in themselves quite apart from interpretation and subjectivity, is a quite idle hypothesis; it presupposes that interpretation and subjectivity are not essential, that a thing freed from all relationships would still be a thing. (Nietzsche apud Rorty, 2007a, p.111)

Though we all interpret in order to interact with one another and the rest, only a few of us are capable of making others adopt our point of view. But many of those who make us adopt their beliefs and point of views, like the ascetic priest or the scientist, hide their personal motivation or interest. The ascetic priest pretend he is acting altruistically, always for the good of others, never for himself; and the scientist pretend to be discovering absolute facts that were hidden behind the events. Both are metaphysician and dogmatist. The priest is a transcendental metaphysician and the scientist is a materialistic metaphysician. Both sustain that there is *true facts* lying behind the phenomena. But the 'genealogist' does not leave them alone, in peace; she denounces the values and interests that were concealed behind those neutral and altruistic arguments. Every 'true' discourse wants to impose a certain value to all, says Nietzsche. This imposition of private values on others is not wrong *per se*, on the contrary, it is the sign in humans of the 'will of power', the energy that governs everything in the nature. But Nietzsche condemns those two kinds of will of power, the religious and the scientific, for their dogmatism, their incapability of recognizing their limitedness. Opposed to those metaphysicians there are the 'free spirits'.¹⁰ The free spirit knows that the things in the world are constantly changing and that her interpretation/writing is not unconditional. She knows that it reflects her point of view and values. She adopts an attitude of suspicion toward her own beliefs. This 'attitude of suspicion' is what Rorty in CIS calls 'irony'. Like Nietzsche's free spirits, but for other reasons, he also believes that even in rich, literate democracies the ironist intellectuals are

¹⁰ See *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *Beyond Good and Evil*.

outnumbered. For Nietzsche there are few free spirits in the world and it is good so. For Rorty, it is a distress that most nonintellectuals of today "are still committed either to some form of religious faith or to some form of Enlightenment rationalism" (CIS, p. vx) -- "Enlightenment rationalism" is the Rortyan expression for (blind) belief on the truthfulness of scientific theories. Contrary to Nietzsche, Rorty is not insensitive before this situation. He sustains a liberal utopia according to which a 'narrative turn' will take place where sermons and treatises are going to be replaced for novels, movies and TV programs. When this occurs, narratives are going to take the places of theories. Narratives (journalist's reports, docudrama, and, specially, novels) would then display ethical arguments without moral authority. By bringing detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like they would present us with the opportunity of re-describing us by amplifying our capacity of feeling compassion towards persons different from us.

5. *Wie man wird, was man ist* or private self-creation

"How one becomes what one is" constitutes the subtitle of *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche's autobiographical and last book. At the first sight, it seems obviously a contradictory statement. For if Nietzsche rejects the metaphysician presupposition of the being as that which is (the Socrates-Plato's quest), and instead encourage us to ask 'whose sum of effects is momentary there',¹¹ how can he encourage us to become what one *is*? Besides this, with his rejection of the metaphysical concept of substance as a substrate for accidental qualities, he also rejects the concept of a central self, who controls our experiences. Like the events and objects in the world, we human beings are constantly changing, being different persons each time we connect ourselves with new set of effects.

¹¹ See Nehamas (1985), Chap. 3: A thing Is the Sum of Its Effects"

Nehamas¹² make a very persuasive interpretation of this statement. For him we should interpret it in the light of Nietzsche's conception of the eternal recurrence and his analogy between life and novels. He disagrees with the cosmological interpretation of the eternal recurrence. Nietzsche is not affirming that in fact there is an eternal time flux in which we keep repeating the same events of our lives, past, present and future. For Nehamas the eternal recurrence is not a theory of the world but a theory of the self.

The central aspect of his interpretation is the assumption that due to the intrinsic interconnectedness of everything, we could not change anything in our past without changing the world and our identity. "This is because (...) he [Nietzsche] thinks that the properties of each thing are nothing but the effects on other things, the properties of which are in turn nothing but still further such effects." (Nehamas, 1985, p. 155). For Nietzsche's alter ego, Zarathustra, "all things are entangled, ensnared, enamored; if ever you wanted a thing twice (...) then you wanted *all* back." (Z., IV, 19). If because of suffering a deception or the effects of a bad choice or action one expresses the desire of having a different life, for Nietzsche, one is in fact expressing the desire to be another person. On the contrary, by accepting the burdens of all our actions ("Thus I willed") and enduring all its bad and good moments, we affirm our individuality and character. We would endure all the suffering again if it is necessary.

We still need to explain how one can talk about identity and self if there is no alienated substance or substrate for Nietzsche. In order to answer that we need to put side by side three concepts: will to power, truth as creation and narrative.

For Nehamas, a central aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy is his view of the world as a text, a narrative.¹³ For him

there is an analogy between Nietzsche's conception of life and the (good) novel, where everything that occurs with its characters has a reason to be, that is, is connected with all others events of the story.

All human beings engage themselves on thousand of experiences during their lives. There are so many interconnections between us and things, events and persons that one is not capable of capturing, or accessing, all of them consciously. But there is one way where we can find a unified sense for this whole multiplicity of sensations and effects; it is when we narrate our life. As Nehamas notices, Nietzsche admired Goethe profoundly -- as also all strong poets (cf. *The Gay Science*, 299) --, because through his works Goethe managed to create a singular narrative about himself (cf. *Twilight of the Idols*, IX, p. 49). Like a good novel, in an autobiographical narrative about one's life every single part of it needs to be somehow connected. Every detail has a purpose that connects it to the whole, the life of the narrator. A paradigmatic example of this poetic capacity is the work of Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*. The narrator of this romance manages to remember almost every detail of his life, including all its moments of frustrations and disappointments, but by doing so he manages at the end of the book to make a coherent picture of his life. This capacity of make sense of those fortuitous and uncountable situations, aspects, and events of one's life is the fruit of the will of power. One has the possibility to overcome this fragmentary state of life by creating a narrative about oneself. And although this narrative is the result of an intentional work of assembling scattered facts and experiences, it is a *created*-story that is truly coherent. The assemblage will be weak and pale if one is not capable of unifying all its parts coherently. This is not an easy task; one needs to have a disposition for a constant and pénible self examination. Each momentarily closed self-narrative delivers a unique (momentary) image. This momentarily closed image is the self. But it is unstable. If we add to it new facts and stories, it will most probably change itself again.

¹² Op.cit., chap. 5: This Life – Your Eternal Life.

¹³ See also Rorty, 2007a, p 117: "(...) Nietzsche was right to think of the world as our poem (...)"

Rorty would endorse this interpretation of life as literature. In fact he writes: “All any ironist can measure success against is the past – not by living up to it, but by redescribing it in his terms, thereby becoming able to say, “Thus I willed it””. (CIS, p. 97)

Like Nietzsche, Rorty also emphasized the importance of reading and aspiring to be ‘strong poets’. But his justification for this relevance is less ‘emotional’. He did not consider as Nietzsche the strive for self-overcoming and self-reliance as a private search for perfection or ‘spiritual cleanliness’ (Rorty, 1991, p.2). The strong poets are creative persons, not because they know how to use ‘will to power’ and like tragic heroes endure all sufferings without regret, but because they manage to create a vocabulary of their own. Both Rorty’s and Nietzsche’s heroes were poets, writers *and philosophers*. They did not feel the necessity of separating fiction and poetry from philosophy because for both of them there were no reason to still believe that the task of philosophy would be to find out the ‘really real’.

With Rorty, we should say that for post-Nietzscheans philosophy is a ‘kind of writing’. Because of that, notions like “philosophy of language” or ‘Kantian philosophy’ are in fact out of place. Philosophy is a name for a sector of the literate culture. As in any literary genre, “is delimited not by form or matter, but by tradition – a family romance involving, e.g., Father Parmenides, honest old Uncle Kant, and bad brother Derrida.” (2008a, 92).

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6. How to Philosophize with a Hammer

The way I read Nietzsche and Rorty, in spite of the many differences we can find between them, at the core their message is the same. Given that there are no absolute values whatsoever the creator or the strong poet has the possibility to create new values (or new vocabularies). But they cannot create *ex nihili*, out of nothing. For Nietzsche, first, one ‘destroys’ previous ‘values’ knotted in nonnominalist statements, by showing its genealogy, its specific interests and needs, and then one is free to create new values. Or, using Rortyan vocabulary, first one connects oneself *horizontally* with the history of philosophy, that is, one interprets its zeniths “as the culminating reinterpretation of our predecessor’s reinterpretation of their predecessors’ reinterpretation” (2008a, p.92). After doing this one become new ‘inspirations’ to invent unforeseen possibilities and to regard the so-called eternal objects of philosophy as “artifacts whose fundamental design we often have to alter” (idem, ibidem). For Rorty we recreate, reinterpretate the past vocabularies in the light of today’s cultural atmosphere. “The most that an original figure can hope to do is to recontextualize his or her predecessors.” (1991, p.2) So ‘destruction’ here is the same as “recontextualizing”. It is not a capricious act but an important step in the creative process of matching philosophy with the flux of history and with the culture’s atmosphere of our current time.

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