

**LIFE IS NO ARGUMENT:
NIETZSCHE, PRAGMATISM, AND RORTY**

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ABSTRACT: This paper considers whether Nietzsche's views can be given a pragmatist interpretation without undermining their philosophical interest and force. It prepares the ground by discussing the historical reception of Nietzsche's work, and then moves on to assess the merits of Richard Rorty's appropriation of that work.

Keywords: moral-theoretical skeptics, personal identity, pragmatism, self-creation, virtue ethics

I am no man, I am dynamite.

Nietzsche

Despite apparent anomalies, Nietzsche is now routinely associated with pragmatism. Kathleen Wheeler, for example, claims that much of *The Will to Power* reads like an early pragmatist text.¹ And, Richard Rorty not only sees a close connection between Nietzsche and early pragmatism, but believes that useful links can also be forged between his writings and what can perhaps best be described as the New Pragmatism² – this being the kind of pragmatism that he believes has broken free from the shackles of empiricist assumptions which prevented James and Dewey from surmounting the epistemological tradition running down from Plato through Descartes, and on up to Locke, Hume, Kant and beyond.

To what extent are these and other such pragmatist interpretations of Nietzsche historically accurate? Are they opportunistic? Do they add anything useful to our understanding of Nietzsche or pragmatism (or both)? In responding to such questions, it is probably best to begin

¹ *Romanticism, Pragmatism and Deconstruction*, Kathleen Wheeler, Wiley-Blackwell: Oxford, 1993.

² *The New Pragmatism*, Alan Malachowski, McGill-Queen's University Press: Montreal, 2010. For Rorty, as will later become clear, the difference between 'old' and 'new' pragmatism collapses to the extent that he only wants to extract from James *et.al.* views that are compatible with, or inspire, the New Pragmatism.

by tackling them within the context of the wider historical reception of Nietzsche's work.

Nietzsche regarded himself, or certainly his writings, as dangerous.³ And, he was right to do so. His views on a wide range of important topics, including such philosophical staples as truth, knowledge, religion, and morality, challenged traditional preconceptions, turning some completely on their heads, and radically undercutting others. But, the greatest threat that these challenges posed, as Nietzsche conceived things, depended entirely on their being fully understood on his own suitably elevated, even world-historical, terms. This is a fate that seems to have eluded them so far.⁴

Of course, there were dangers, other dangers, attending their very misconstrual, especially under the recklessly premature belief that they *had* been fully understood in what turned out to be certain warped ways. The Nazis' obscenely misguided appropriations attest to that. However, the views in question also suffered a less obvious indignity, one that Nietzsche himself would no doubt have considered to be the most dangerous outcome of all:⁵ they were

³ This term requires some initial clarification to head off the impression that this article endorses the idea that philosophy should somehow be in the business of handing out 007 licences. It is in the sense of having the potential to undermine conventional thinking regardless of the immediate social consequences that the main text questions whether Nietzsche's thought has been too often prematurely defused. Whether Nietzsche is dangerous in the further sense of being the potential cause of great, longer term, social catastrophes is not discussed..

⁴ Heidegger, of course, disagrees, but the Heideggerian reading of Nietzsche's diagnosis of nihilism, interesting though it is in many ways, is beyond the scope of this discussion – however, we do briefly mention Heidegger's general approach to Nietzsche. For more on this topic, see 'Life in the frame: Meaning on loan from nihilism', Alan Malachowski; in *Journal of the Philosophy of Life* (forthcoming, 2017).

⁵ Most dangerous because Nietzsche desperately did not want them tamed so their explosive potential would be thwarted. Gass gets this just right: "When he compares his book to bombs, he neither wishes them to explode harmlessly like handfuls of tossed confetti, nor merely to alter, suddenly, the placid state of someone's mind. He bloody well wants a boom!" 'The Polemical Philosopher', William H.Gass, *New York Review of Books*, Vol.35, No.1, Feb.4th, 1988.

domesticated after a lengthy period in relatively quiet exile.

Nietzsche's vexatious views were initially kept safely at bay in a large sector of the philosophical world by a refusal, and presumably not just an inability, to take him seriously. Bertrand Russell's well known derisory treatment of Nietzsche set the tone here for many years, at least for the analytic tradition, the predominant tradition in modern Western philosophy. But, things were not much better, certainly not at first, in the continental tradition where one might expect Nietzsche's writings to receive a more considered and knowledgeable reception, if only on account of the likelihood that greater sensitivity would be shown to their *historical* credentials. However, as Gary Gutting rightly points out: "before the 1960s, French interest in Nietzsche was more literary than philosophical".⁶ This adds the spice of detail to Heidegger's well-known, earlier, and more general, assessment: "For a long time Nietzsche has been either celebrated and imitated or reviled and exploited. Nietzsche's thought and speech are still too contemporary for us."⁷

Sweeping evaluations aside, the 'continental' story is currently a complex and interesting one. For when Nietzsche's thought was engaged with greater philosophical seriousness, an array of influential texts emerged, ranging from Heidegger's own monumental *Nietzsche*,⁸ through Foucault's 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History'⁹ and Deleuze's *Nietzsche and Philosophy*¹⁰

to Derrida's *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*.¹¹ Although, Heidegger unwittingly removed the sting from some of Nietzsche's rhetoric by somewhat successfully branding him as the 'last metaphysician', the urge to tame Nietzsche's thought does not surface often, or with much effect, in these texts.

Some thinkers who happily spanned the invidious analytic/continental divide, still unfortunately displayed in philosophy, and sported a keen nose for both intellectual and historical danger, were drawn to Nietzsche precisely because they recognized his potential for cultural disturbance. Leo Strauss and Lionel Trilling were notable, in this respect, though for quite different reasons. Strauss was sensitized enough to the perilous nature of Nietzsche's work to begin reading him furtively, and though he remained ambiguous in his estimation of Nietzsche's views (probably deliberately and perhaps even cunningly) he never doubted their importance and power. Trilling regarded Nietzsche and Freud as the two great harbingers of the grave dangers that modern civilization faces and yet also generates in its blind suppression of creative energy and individuality. Never one to shy away from the dark side of a writer, Trilling nevertheless contrived to put a positive spin on Nietzsche: ultimately, his provocations had been made in the cause of preserving civilization rather than disrupting or destroying it.¹²

Within non-continental philosophy, the reception to Nietzsche's thought has undergone a dramatic transformation – dismissive hostility is, for the most part, long gone.¹³ Walter Kaufmann's wealth of translations and his *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*¹⁴ partly paved the way here, though at the

⁶ *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, Gary Gutting, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p.254.

⁷ *Nietzsche*, Vol. One, Heidegger, (David Farrell Krell, trans.), Harper: New York, 1991, p.4.

⁸ *Nietzsche*, Vols One and Two, Heidegger (David Farrell Krell, trans.), Harper: New York, 1991 and *Nietzsche*, Vols Three and Four, Heidegger (David Farrell Krell, trans.), Harper: New York, 1991.

⁹ 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', Michel Foucault; in *Michel Foucault Aesthetics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 2*, James D.Faubion (ed.), Penguin: London, 1994, pp.369-391.

¹⁰ *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Gilles Deleuze, Continuum: London, 1986.

¹¹ *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, Jacques Derrida, University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1981.

¹² For an insightful discussion of Trilling's interpretation of Nietzsche, see *Lionel Trilling and the Fate of Cultural Criticism*, Mark Krupnick, Northwestern University Press: Illinois, 1986.

¹³ I believe there are still some myopic analytic philosophers who believe that Nietzsche was not a philosopher.

¹⁴ *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, Walter

price, especially in the latter case, of smoothing over rather too many difficulties and disturbances. This kind of 'smoothing over' reached its apotheosis in 1983 in Richard Schacht's *Nietzsche*,¹⁵ a comprehensive and thoroughly workmanlike text that revealed a Nietzsche who not only had many sensible things to say, but voiced them on many of the topics that interest analytic philosophers. From being a potentially threatening outsider, Nietzsche became, too suddenly perhaps, someone who could sit at the high table of analytic philosophy forging distinctions and negotiating over the nature of truth, knowledge, and moral values. The notion this might be anomalous, that Nietzsche would be uncomfortable in such a situation, that he might in fact dread mummification and other stultifying tortures at the hands of the various "Egyptians", "epistemologists caught in the coils of grammar,"¹⁶ alongside the "morbid cobweb-spinners" seated around him,¹⁷ was now glossed over to the extent that when Brian Leiter wrote his influential and otherwise insightful *Nietzsche on Morality*,¹⁸ he could unveil, without any apparent sense of irony or philosophical unease, a thorough-going, rather self-congratulatory, analytic approach, one that "enables Nietzsche to speak to us" without ruffling too many conceptual feathers, and purports to embody "ideal scholarly virtues, virtues that any commentary must exhibit".¹⁹

Kaufmann, Princeton University Press: Princeton NJ, 2013.

¹⁵ *Nietzsche*, Richard Schacht, Routledge: London, 1985.

¹⁶ *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche, 354, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001 (hereafter GS).

¹⁷ "You ask me about the idiosyncrasies of philosophers? ... There is their lack of historical sense, their hatred of even the idea of becoming, their Egyptianism. They think they are doing a thing *honour* when they dehistoricize it, *sub specie aeterni* – when they make a mummy of it", *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, Friedrich Nietzsche, Penguin: London, 1990, 1, p.45 (henceforth: TI). For reference to the "cobweb-spinners", see TI, 4, p.47.

¹⁸ *Nietzsche on Morality*, Brian Leiter, Routledge: London, 2002.

¹⁹ Leiter, *op.cit.* p.xiii.

The upshot of all this is that the philosopher of "myth-dissolving lucidity" and "pitiless consciousness",²⁰ who mistrusted "all systematisers"²¹ and urged the reevaluation of *all* values, is now commonly brought into line with the epistemologically obsessed, reason orientated approach of the analytic movement. This inevitably requires some strenuous procrustean moves, the irony of which appears to be lost on those performing them. And in the meantime, Bernard Williams' astute and timely warning seems to have been ignored or brushed aside:

[Nietzsche's writing] is booby-trapped not only against recovering theory from it, but in many cases, against any systematic exegesis that assimilates it to theory. His writing achieves this partly by its choice of subject matter, partly by its manner and the attitudes it expresses. These features stand against a mere exegesis of Nietzsche, or the incorporation of Nietzsche into the history of philosophy as a source of theories.²²

In sympathetic response to this warning, a warning that has yet to be properly addressed by those who perhaps most need to hear it, Mark Jenkins concludes that "Nietzsche's writing severely underdetermines theory".²³ This is true as far as it goes. But, it still sells Williams' insight short. He is surely drawing attention to Nietzsche's immense propensity for *destruction* when it comes to the main aims of theorizing. We should be talking of irrevocable damage, not just loose or untidy fit.

In parallel with the smoothing over process just sketched, a number of moral philosophers began to express a serious interest in Nietzsche, sometimes taking advantage of, or inspiration from, this very process,

²⁰ 'The Figure of Socrates', Pierre Hadot; in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Pierre Hadot, Blackwell: Oxford, 1995, p.169.

²¹ "I mistrust all systematisers and avoid them. The will to a system is a lack of integrity", TI, 26, p.35.

²² 'Nietzsche's Minimalist Psychology', Bernard Williams, p.4; in *European Journal of Philosophy*, 1993, pp.4-14.

²³ Williams, Mark P. Jenkins, Acumen: Chesham, 2006, p81.

sometimes not. But, their Nietzschean turn appears to have been necessitated in the first instance by a deep-seated dissatisfaction with philosophy's lack of progress in their own sphere of interest. This dissatisfaction had a number of sources – the stale nature of the longstanding and all-pervasive debate between Kantians and Utilitarians, diminishing returns from standard moral theories of all persuasions, and so on. But, an important catalyst for change was Elizabeth's Anscombe's argument, first published in 1958,²⁴ that the dominant approaches to morality were at heart *legalistic* and hence doomed in their search for foundations absent a viable conception of a divine lawgiver. According to Anscombe, the situation was exacerbated by the lack of a clear philosophical understanding of psychology, an understanding that would necessarily involve adequate analyses of notions such as pleasure, intention, and action. Two things happened.

At Anscombe's prompting,²⁵ some philosophers returned to Aristotle's virtue ethics so that they could figure out how better to tackle morality from the point of view of character rather than action. Then the salient questions soon became much broader: "What sort of person should I strive to be?" and "What kind of life should I live?" replaced the narrower, legalistic, principle-seeking "What should I do?" and "How should I act?" Others, although there was some overlap here, focused their attention on perceived defects of a theoretical approach to morality as such. And, in this second case, Nietzsche was closely, and at times gratefully, vetted as a possible ally.

Moral-theoretical sceptics who claim Nietzsche is *their* ally, are less inclined to soft-pedal interpretations of his work than the philosophers we described earlier – those who are now busy trying to shape him into a

theorist after their own kind, when they do not find him wanting in that respect. Bernard Williams, in particular, as we might anticipate, takes a good deal of care to draw from and elucidate Nietzsche's writings without automatically draining off the provocative energy.²⁶ Even so, the main danger the moral-theoretical sceptics countenance in their presumed ally's thought is one that poses a threat only to *theory*. And, they are not inclined to dwell on the wider practical consequences of that – not even on whether there are any.

To one side of these ventures – making the analytic most of Nietzsche, as it were, and enlisting his help in exposing the inadequacies of moral theory – stands the rather different project of valorizing his perceived pragmatic tendencies. Rene Berhelot was, to my knowledge, the first serious commentator to actually call Nietzsche out as a pragmatist when, in 1911, he highlighted what he regarded as striking affinities with the views of William James and John Dewey.²⁷ But, Arthur Danto's later, much more forthright, attribution of a pragmatist approach to truth in the early 1960s seems to have been the first attempt to associate Nietzsche with pragmatism itself which attracted widespread attention.²⁸

However, it is one thing to identify pragmatist tendencies in Nietzsche's thinking, it is another to both praise and try to make good use of those tendencies. History had to wait on Richard Rorty for that.

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*,²⁹ Rorty assumes, without explicitly appealing to any detailed pragmatist considerations, that Nietzsche is firmly on his side when he launches his broad-based attack on the

²⁴ 'Modern Moral Philosophy', G.E.M. Anscombe, *Philosophy* 33, 1958, pp.1-19.

²⁵ Though Roger Crisp is surely right to suggest that this prompting was not altogether obvious, that it takes "considerable benefit of hindsight" to recognise it"; *Virtue Ethics*, Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (eds), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p.3.

²⁶ Though to my, pragmatist taste, he sometimes overexerts himself in trying to make Nietzsche's views on truth analytically respectable. See *Truth and Truthfulness* pp.xx-xxv.

²⁷ This is noted by Rorty in 'Pragmatism as romantic polytheism', p.27; in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, Richard Rorty, Cambridge university Press: Cambridge, 2007, pp.27-41.

²⁸ *Nietzsche as Philosopher*, Arthur C.Danto, Columbia University Press: New York, 2005.

²⁹ *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Rorty, Princeton University Press: Princeton NJ, 1979.

presuppositions and concerns of analytic philosophy. In other writings, he refers, with equal confidence to 'Nietzsche's pragmatism', though his conception of what this most importantly involves changes somewhat. In the first instance, Nietzsche is usually viewed as someone who both shares the anti-epistemological views of James and Dewey while also helping to make the world safer for those views. This is the Nietzsche who undermines the propensity to elevate theory over practice:

Theory and practice - Fateful distinction, as if there were an actual *drive for knowledge* that, without regard to questions of usefulness and harm, went blindly for the truth.³⁰

and obligingly pours scorn on philosophy's obsession with theories of knowledge:

Philosophy reduced to 'theory of knowledge', actually no more than a timid epochism and abstinence of doctrine; philosophy that does not even get over the threshold and painfully *denies* its right of entry – that is philosophy at its last gasp, an end, an agony, something that arouses pity. How could such a philosophy rule?³¹

In the other cases, especially in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*,³² Rorty shifts the emphasis, placing it instead on the idea of Nietzsche as a proponent of a pragmatist approach to questions of personal identity, one that hinges on a robust notion of self-creation. Here Nietzsche is cast as a strong poet of personhood.

Rorty's pragmatist appropriation of Nietzsche raises a host of issues. But, we will focus on just three of them: "In what sense, if any, is Rorty right in making close connections between Nietzsche and the two classic pragmatists, James and Dewey?", "Is Rorty entitled to pin his own brand of pragmatism – the New Pragmatism – on Nietzsche?", and finally "Can Rorty's pragmatist

approach to Nietzsche preserve the potency of his views or does it involve its own form of domestication, insidious or otherwise?" Clearly, while Rorty's interpretations are the starting point here, these three issues spill over into general concerns as to whether Nietzsche can be credibly classed as a pragmatist in *any* sense.

Was Nietzsche just a prescient forerunner of classic pragmatism? Or does he actually belong squarely in the pragmatist camp? Nietzsche's philosophical reality principle, his commanding preference for *this* world rather than some other world, one conjured up in metaphysical hope or promised by religion, appears to bring him very close to the great pragmatists' way of thinking. By prioritizing life over knowledge, he seems to be anticipate Peirce in acknowledging the paramount importance of 'practice': "Where life and knowledge seem to come into contradiction there is never any serious contest; doubt and denial here count as madness".³³

And, as Hilary Putnam, an astute occasional commentator on James and Dewey, has stressed, 'the primacy of practice' is one of the central tenets of classic pragmatism.³⁴ For many admirers, it is also the main attraction. However, there are some obvious tensions in assimilating Nietzsche's views to those of Peirce or James and Dewey.³⁵ These are most evident in the case of James' much criticized account of truth. On the one hand, there are occasions when Nietzsche appears to share the view that the notion of truth is best cashed out in terms of utility: "We do not even have any organ for *knowing*, for 'truth'; we 'know' ... just as much as may be *useful* in the interest of the human herd".³⁶ On the other hand, there is conflicting textual evidence. Nietzsche points out, for instance, that false beliefs can be useful,

³⁰ *Nietzsche's Last Notebooks, 1898*, p.75, Daniel Fidel Ferrer, Open Source.

³¹ *Beyond Good and Evil*, Friederich Nietzsche, 204; reprinted in *A Nietzsche Reader*, p.42, R.J.Hollingdale (ed.), Penguin: London, 1977 (henceforth: NR).

³² *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, Richard Rorty, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1989.

³³ GS, 110.

³⁴ See *Pragmatism: An Open Question*, Hilary Putnam, Blackwell: Oxford, 1995.

³⁵ Peirce is in fact rarely, if ever, linked to Nietzsche. And, when Rorty attributes pragmatism to Nietzsche, whether classic or new, he keeps Peirce out of the picture.

³⁶ GS, 354.

and that beliefs regarded as true are typically riddled with errors, but no less advantageous for that: "Truth is the kind of error without which a certain species could not live."³⁷ For James, the usefulness of falsehoods has to be a rather unusual, and coincidental, exception. But for Nietzsche, it almost appears to be the rule. The overall impression to be gained here is that he is *not* enamored of anything like the classical pragmatist view that beliefs are true only in so far as they have beneficial effects. This impression appears to be succinctly vindicated in the famous remark that prompted our title: "Life is no argument; among the conditions of life could be error".³⁸

Rorty is presumably well aware of the various tensions here,³⁹ but he circumnavigates them in any case by operating on what he would presumably see as the best side of a distinction between two opposing approaches to Nietzsche. This is the distinction between (1) those who interpret Nietzsche as someone who, whether he knows it or not, endeavors to make a positive contribution, however oblique or confused at times, to the solution of perennial philosophical problems, and (2) those who regard Nietzsche as the arch debunker of the presuppositions that generate such problems. Of course, Rorty comes out on the side of (2): Nietzsche the debunker. Bernd Magnus has instructively clarified this kind of distinction by dissolving the idea that it is primarily a distinction between 'positive' and 'negative' conceptions of Nietzsche's philosophical work. Moreover, he shows that the positive interpreters have a strong tendency to misconstrue the negative thrust of Nietzsche's ideas. They fail to recognize that he also has *his own* positive goal, albeit one that is antithetical to their own.

In a brief, but informative, exploration of standard approaches to Nietzsche, Magnus first observes that commentators generally appear to be more comfortable, sure-footed, and unified in their handling of the negative or "deconstructive" component of Nietzsche's writings than they are in approaching the "positive, reconstructive side".⁴⁰ In short, they are clear, or at least think they are, about what Nietzsche is against, but tend to be confused as to what he is for. Now, we have already raised doubts as to whether, in the case of analytic philosophers, the kind of confidence Magnus refers to is well-founded. And, we have intimated that it may stem from a failure to appreciate the potency of Nietzsche's dark side. Indeed, in this case, the overconfidence masks Nietzsche's disruptive aims, enabling him to be depicted as one more contributor to some of the very debates he wished to put an end to. In that sense, these analytic philosophers are also confused about what Nietzsche is in favor of, though without apparently even being aware that they might be.

Magnus develops some further thoughts that help clarify what is going on here. He moves the discussion beyond prevailing differences in dealing with Nietzsche's positive and negative aspects. But, he does this by drawing attention to another distinction, one buried beneath these particular differences, one he claims is "an unarticulated difference, scarcely recognized among Nietzsche scholars, not to say philosophers in general".⁴¹ This is the difference between (a) "those who believe that one is paying him a compliment by reading Nietzsche as a 'philosopher' who gives Kantian-style answers to textbook questions", and (b) "those who view that characterization as depreciating his more broadly 'therapeutic' achievement."⁴² Both these approaches appeal to a 'positive' conception of

³⁷ *The Will to Power* Friedrich Nietzsche, (Walter Kaufmann trans.) 493, p.272, Vintage: New York, 1968.

³⁸ GS, 121; quoted in NR, p.202

³⁹ Though sometimes he writes as if he is not: in 'Pragmatism as romantic polytheism', *op.cit.*, for example, Rorty claims that Nietzsche believed "beliefs should be judged solely by their utility" in meeting the varied needs of "the clever animals" called "human beings", that "Nietzsche and James did for the word 'truth', what Mill had done for the word 'right'", p.28.

⁴⁰ 'Postmodernist Pragmatism: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and Rorty', Bernd Magnus, p.262, in *Pragmatism: From Progressivism to Postmodernism*, Robert Hollinger and David Depew (eds), Praeger Publishers: Westport, 1995, pp.256-283.

⁴¹ Magnus, *op.cit.* p.263.

⁴² Magnus, *op.cit.* p.262.

Nietzsche's philosophizing. However, the first prematurely diverts Nietzsche's destructive impetus by interpreting his criticisms as *reconstructive* moves that are, beneath the bravado, of a rather traditional kind. These moves were designed to replace the theories concerned (i.e. the target theories) with better, Nietzschean, versions, and hence put philosophy itself back onto a secure footing in roughly the same place. Such, at least, seems to be the tacit agenda of many of the analytic Nietzsche whisperers we referred to earlier: "Yes, Nietzsche appears to put great pressure on the appearance/reality distinction and related notions such as that of 'mind-independence', but the result of him doing so leaves us with a more robust theoretical conception of reality and philosophy's relation to it" - similarly for 'truth', 'morality' and so forth.

The second positive approach invokes no such diversionary measures. It enables Nietzsche's negative philosophical agenda to be played out in full. For it recognizes that this is necessary, that for therapeutic reasons the bombs *should* be allowed to explode, so to speak, rather than be defused. Nietzsche is depicted "as attempting to liberate us from precisely the felt need to provide theories of knowledge, or moral theories, or ontologies."⁴³ This Nietzsche is, even at his most dangerous, and arguably most especially then, "already *constructive* in the therapeutic manner of the later Wittgenstein, late Heidegger, Derrida, Rorty, and Foucault."⁴⁴ And, it is this side of the buried distinction that maps neatly onto Rorty's pragmatist approach to Nietzsche.

When Rorty stares into the mirror of Nietzsche's writings, he apparently sees a rough and ready reflection of himself: someone who wants to break free from much of the philosophical tradition and has overcome any residual need to rebuild anything even remotely similar in its place. The mapping in question avoids the tensions involved in making a quasi-classic

pragmatist out of Nietzsche because Rorty treats James and Dewey in precisely the same way, regarding them as therapeutic rather than standardly reconstructive thinkers. In 'Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism'⁴⁵, for example, he deplores the tendency to try to convert James and Dewey into contributors to 'neo-Kantian, epistemologically-centred philosophy' by taking them to be "suggesting various holistic corrections to the atomistic doctrines of the early logical empiricists."⁴⁶ James and Dewey should instead be viewed "as breaking with the Kantian epistemological tradition altogether."⁴⁷ For it is only by viewing them in this way that we can appreciate how radical they are:

As long as we see James or Dewey as having 'theories of truth' or 'theories of knowledge' or 'theories of morality' we shall get them wrong. We shall ignore their criticisms of the assumption that there ought to *be* theories about such matters. We shall not see how radical their thought was – how deep was their criticism of the attempt, common to Kant, Husserl, Russell and C.I.Lewis, to make philosophy into a foundational discipline.⁴⁸

These considerations help us to grasp why Rorty is keen to align Nietzsche with James and Dewey. What these three philosophers share, in his eyes, is not a penchant for certain pragmatist doctrines or theoretical preoccupations, but rather the intense desire to drop a lot of burdensome and unnecessary philosophical baggage that has no practical value, and blocks the path to human progress. All regard themselves as thereby clearing the way for some fresh, and more interesting, developments. Just as we should read Dewey's criticisms of 'spectator' accounts of knowledge as criticisms that obviate the very need for a theory of knowledge, we should recognize that, as Magnus, in true Rortian spirit, puts it, "A theory of

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ In *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Richard Rorty, Harvester Press" Sussex, 1982, pp.160-175.

⁴⁶ *Op.Cit.*,p160.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

knowledge is not something Nietzsche has; the yearning for its possession is what his tropes parody".⁴⁹

So much for Rorty roping Nietzsche and classic pragmatism together, what about his treatment of Nietzsche on New Pragmatist, terms? In this case, as we said, Rorty turns to Nietzsche mainly to help flesh out his views on how to deal with what he calls "the contingency of identity". But before we discuss that, it is worth looking at an additional suggestion from Magnus, one that sheds more light on the general pragmatist spin that Rorty tries to put Nietzsche's work.

Those who want to treat Nietzsche as just another contributor to the 'Kantian epistemological tradition'⁵⁰ presumably do so because they cannot imagine any other way of enabling him to play a substantial role in philosophy. The underlying assumption here is that if a thinker is not making moves that can be recognized within this tradition, then, whatever else is going on, the thinker is not playing the philosophy game. But, there is another factor. They do not know how to interpret Nietzsche's writings in a positive light unless they cajole him into playing *this* game and then try to conjure up some theoretical benefits from his critiques. For they cannot cross over to an intellectual space from where it might look as if the challenge to *abandon* that game is itself a *positive* philosophical phenomenon. And, they cannot do this because they believe there is no such space: in their eyes, the putative challenge is paradoxical. But, they only force themselves into such a corner by holding that a challenge of this kind still has to be part of the same game. And, within *that* game it seems to undercut itself. Or, more precisely, either it stands completely outside philosophy, in which case it has no philosophical significance, or it is supposed to be inside but implodes because it is self-refuting. They cannot accept the possibility that "perhaps Nietzsche's

critiques just *are* the new game"⁵¹ because they cannot make coherent sense of those critiques from *within* the old one. Consider Nietzsche's supposed denial of 'truth'.⁵² What is the status of that denial? If it is true, then technically speaking it grinds to an incoherent halt while attempting to assert something that, if true, would topple its own truth. Magnus claims that there is another way of construing the kind of claims Nietzsche is making when he challenges the philosophical tradition in this seemingly anomalous way. These are not, themselves, *theoretical* claims. The terms they introduce, terms such as "perspective" and "error", are neither meta-theoretical (they do not usher in a theoretical commentary on the status of 'truth', 'knowledge', and so on – hence they are not vulnerable to the charge of self-refutation) nor the proposed basis for an additional theoretical account. They are rather new names for philosophically slippery phenomena such as facts, names that enable the development of a fresh vocabulary, one which enables talk about the world to be engaged in outside the net of traditional theoretical considerations attached to the old names, and within which such phenomena seemed to have a natural, though problematic, philosophical home. Furthermore:

Nietzsche's tropes concerning "truth" and "error", "fact" and "interpretation" are best understood as rhetorical devices to help the reader understand and confront the widely shared intuition that there must be something like a final truth about reality as such, which it is the goal of philosophy to disclose. The reader's own penchant for the God's-eye-view is surfaced and called into question.⁵³

All this links up quite suggestively with Rorty's emphasis on metaphor creation and vocabulary shifts as the prime motors of intellectual and cultural change and, indeed,

⁴⁹ Magnus, *Op.Cit.* p.263

⁵⁰ We assume, as Rorty does, and for the reasons he gives in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, that most analytic philosophers are still working within that tradition broadly construed,

⁵¹ Magnus, *Op.cit.*, p.266.

⁵² Bernard Williams launches a vigorous defence of Nietzsche as someone intensely attracted to truth in his *Truth and Truthfulness*, Princeton University Press: Princeton NJ. 2002, pp.12-19.

⁵³ Magnus, *Op.Cit.*, p.263

progress.⁵⁴ The poet of personhood is now but one small step away.

Nietzsche plays an important role in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, the book in which Rorty makes his first, and most concerted, effort to spell out what a pragmatist-inspired, 'post-metaphysical culture' might look like and how philosophy might still raise and deal with important issues after the lessons of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* have been heeded. Under influence from Alexander Nehamas's *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*⁵⁵ and to a lesser extent Sartre, Rorty shows, for example, how the traditional issue of personal identity can be linguistically modulated so that the vocabulary in which it is discussed concerns matters of self-creation rather than an attempted ontology of the self and/or its features. Then the age-old epistemological and metaphysical questions associated with the latter drop out of the picture. Here, the main contributors to the discussion are icons of culture in general, such as Nietzsche, Freud, and Proust, rather than those mainstream philosophers, running from Descartes and Locke through to Parfit, thinkers who brought the epistemological and metaphysical questions to the fore, all the while making it seem as if this was their rightful location.

In the place of traditional essentialist questions regarding what it *is* that distinguishes one person from another or persons from other kinds of things and epistemological questions concerning how we *know* this person is the same person today that she was yesterday (the hard case supposedly being where "this" is first-personally indexical), Rorty suggests pursuing questions about what can be *created* rather than discovered. These are questions such as: "What can I do to become the kind of person I would prefer to be?" or "How can I

create a *unique* self, one that differs in useful ways from other run-of-the-mill selves?" And, they are *pragmatist* questions because they acknowledge that, on its own, so to speak, the world cannot answer questions of personal identity for us. This follows the practical adage, made much of by James in particular, that useful specifications of reality need to cater for the human contribution.⁵⁶ And, they are Nietzschean because Nietzsche was probably the first philosopher to cut off all human-transcendent sources of personal identity at the roots, making *everything* depend on the will to self-creation. But, for Rorty, although it is inspiring, Nietzsche's own account of self creation cannot be taken on wholesale by pragmatists. It is inadequate in two important respects.

In one sense, the account does not go far enough. And in another, it goes too far. The account falls short because it does not extend to *everyone*, to ordinary people. Nietzsche's self-creators are a very select breed. Rorty, with his highly developed democratic instincts, balks at this. But, it is not clear that he fully understands, or, more charitably, is prepared to accept, what Nietzsche is angling for.

A Nietzschean self-creator is rather like one of those characters in the movies who turn out to be the last person left alive after everyone else has been destroyed. Such a 'last person standing' stands on only the rubble of past civilizations, and has to start doing everything for themselves. By analogy, an evolved Nietzschean looks around to witness only the debris of destroyed values, metaphysical systems, and religious beliefs; indeed, of everything that might provide intellectual sustenance for an *other-dictated*, or *impersonal*, conception of personal identity. This last remaining self just *has* to start its future self from scratch. But here, there seems to be a need for something magical, something that, in the midst of the utter destruction of the socio-historical

⁵⁴ Though we should note that for Rorty progress is often defined in circular terms of the kind of social freedom that both allows and encourages creative vocabulary changes.

⁵⁵ Nietzsche: *Life as Literature*, Alexander Nehamas, Harvard University Press: Cambridge Massachusetts, 1987.

⁵⁶ For further discussion of this see 'The human contribution: James and modernity in *Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth*', Alan Malachowski; in *Understanding James, Understanding Modernity*, David Evans (ed.), Bloomsbury: London, 2017 (forthcoming)

props for human identity, somehow pumps up the internal means of creating a prop-free person. Only someone very special, *der Uebermensch*, can step up to the task.

Rorty, by contrast, wants to sell a conception of self-creation that can be put into practice by just about all of us. Then the question arises as to whether, in aiming for this, he has to become yet another bomb disposal expert, someone who cannot let Nietzsche's dangerous side be let loose because at the end of the subsequent trail of destruction will stand only those radical individualists who have neither the time nor the inclination for normal politics, progressive public policy, reform, and 'solidarity'. Such beings have no truck with the kind of picture of social hope that pragmatists like Rorty normally want to paint.

However, Rorty can contend that his second reservation about Nietzsche's account of self-creation gets him out of trouble here. For he argues that the account also goes too far by incorporating an unobtainable ideal, that of complete and perfect self-creation – what he calls, nodding towards Heidegger, 'Nietzsche's inverted Platonism'. There is no point in letting Nietzsche's destructive demons roam free because the account that supposedly justifies the ensuing philosophical mayhem fails on its own terms. Even the would-be Nietzschean elite will not be able to work the magic necessary for conjuring up a self out of *nothing*. Some people may feel special enough to step up to the task, but they will never be able to complete it.

There is ambiguity, equivocation perhaps, in Nietzsche's own writings on this score. At times, he seems to advocate a sort of all-enveloping cosmic holism, in which everyone is part of the greater whole and, since no one is 'responsible' for anything on an individual basis, the very possibility of self-creation goes out the window. Then there appears to be no wiggle room for building one's *very own* sense of self:

What alone can *our* teaching be? – That no one *gives* a human being his qualities: not God, not society, not his parents or ancestors, not *he himself* ... *No one* is accountable for existing at all, or for being constituted as he is, or for living in the circumstances and surroundings in which he lives. The fatality of his nature cannot be disentangled from the fatality of all that which has been and will be.⁵⁷

However, Nietzsche also writes of the possibility of a 'great liberation', as if this 'holistic fatality' story is just another one that any person with sufficient insight, courage, and will power can still break out of.⁵⁸ Those who manage to do that will then start creating a self out of resources *they have chosen*. But, what Nietzsche seems to lack is a clear explanation as to how all this is possible, how choice makes sense in a human wasteland.

Rorty is very happy to take up Nietzsche's idea that a self that plays little or no part in the forging of the materials out of which it is constituted is somehow inauthentic, but he drops the magical implication that self-creation can only occur when the individual concerned has been able to leap beyond the realm of the ordinary and then fabricate a self out of socio-historical thin air. Moreover, with the help of Freud, Rorty shows no such leap is necessary, that unique and fascinating selves can be, and are, made from the most mundane materials, that everyday life provides an adequate stage-setting for authentic, self-fueled, existence. Rorty does this by developing Lionel Trilling's interpretation of Freud, one in which he claims:

The great contribution [Freud] has made to our understanding of literature does not arise from what he says about literature itself but from what he says about the nature of the human mind: he showed that poetry is indigenous to the very constitution of the mind; he saw the mind as being, in the greater part of its tendency, exactly a poetry-making faculty.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ TI, 8, p.65.

⁵⁸ There is a sort of conditional necessity about all this in Nietzsche's writings: there *has to be* such a leap and those with the capacity to make it *have to do so* (if they are to attain their potential).

⁵⁹ 'Freud: Within and Beyond Culture'; in *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning*, Lionel Trilling,

This Freud speaks to both Rorty's deep-seated, democratic instincts and his romanticism. For he holds that the mind does not simply wax poetic in the dark, in its creative handling of dream imagery, but also in its daylight dealings with the nitty-gritty of normal life, details of which, when modulated by unconscious fantasy, are woven into complex and intriguing 'life-poems'. Freud's trick was to show that when we dig beneath the seemingly banal nature of the surface features, *everyone's* life breaks out into a work of art:

For Freud, nobody is dull through and through, for there is no such thing as a dull unconscious. What makes Freud more useful and more plausible than Nietzsche is that he does not relegate the vast majority of humanity to the status of dying animals. For Freud's account of unconscious fantasy shows us how every human life is a poem – or, more exactly, every human life not so racked by pain as to be unable to learn a language nor so immersed in toil as to have no leisure in which to create a self-description.⁶⁰

However, Rorty's socio-pragmatic account of self-creation preserves a bit more of Nietzsche's individualistic, anti-social approach than might at first seem apparent. Nietzschean self-fashioners rise high above the shackles of culture and society. However, social hope then evaporates and the air is too rarefied to sustain existence outside the covers of Nietzsche's books. By contrast, the down-to-earth, Rortian versions put to use what these self-fashioners would only wish to rise above. This is the raw material with which they weave their identity. But, their social hopes are also thinned out in the process. Without a Supreme Being, Grand Theory, or a Reality-based surrogate at hand, there seems to be no basis for creating overarching life poems, the sort of epics into which all other poems can fit and with which they can creatively interact, gaining self-expanding sustenance in the process. These 'clever animals' know that they can hope for no more than the minimal social conditions of Millian-style freedom:

conditions that allow more and more of them to get on with composing the quirky, private poems of their own lives without harming the lives of others. It may well be a distinctive characteristic of Rorty's New Pragmatist account of self-creation, that it necessitates the reduction of social hope in this way.

Does it do justice, in the end, to Nietzsche's dangerous streak? It certainly allows Nietzsche to have a fair crack at bringing down the ivory towers protecting a moribund philosophical tradition. And, it need not consider itself as having actually prevented the emergence of the sort of self-creators that were supposed to rise up from the rubble. For it regards these to be merely mythical creatures in any case. They are flimsy, idealized counterparts of the previous diaphanous inventions of the great metaphysicians. Its own social hopes are banal and subdued by comparison. But, it consoles itself with a vision of ordinary people left standing, composing their life poems, day in and day out, without the distractions of other worlds and related philosophical extravagances. In helping remove such distractions, Nietzsche undoubtedly made a very important contribution to pragmatism's most recent revival.

Penguin: Middlesex, 1966, p.89.

⁶⁰ *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, Op.Cit.*, pp.35-6.