

## **Pragmatist Transcendence in Rorty's Metaphilosophy**

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This article argues that a pragmatist ambition to transcendence undergirds Richard Rorty's metaphilosophy. That transcendence might play a positive role in Rorty's work might seem implausible given his well-known rejection of the idea that human practices are accountable to some external, Archimedean standpoint, and his endorsement of the historicist view that standards of rationality are products of time and chance. It is true that Rorty's contributions to epistemology, philosophy of mind and metaphysics have this anti-transcendentalist character. But in his metaphilosophy, Rorty shows great respect for pre-philosophical impulses aimed at transcendence of some kind, in particular the romantic (and indeed religious) experience of awe at something greater than oneself, and the utopian striving for a radically better world. These impulses do not disappear in Rorty's metaphilosophy but are reshaped in a pragmatist iteration of transcendence which, we argue, can be characterised as horizontal (rather than vertical) and weak (rather strong). We use this characterization to distinguish Rorty's metaphilosophy from other accounts that share a postmetaphysical ambition to transcendence.

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## 1. Introduction

Like Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein before him, Richard Rorty had a flair for exposing the foibles of professional philosophers. Nowhere is this talent more effectively on display than in his 1981 essay, “Philosophy in America Today”. Here Rorty observes, and tries to explain, the “condescension” philosophy professors often show to professors in other subjects and their “pretension” to possess a fixed set of concepts that enable them “to classify, comprehend and criticize the rest of culture” (1982, 221). The self-image of analytical philosophers as a “*corps d’élite*” (1982, 219), with an armoury of super-concepts (1982, 222) at their disposal, is not just a conceit: For Rorty, it is a delusion encouraged by identification with a tradition of inquiry whose key figures include Plato, Kant, and their most militant contemporary heirs (at least in Hans Reichenbach’s assessment), the logical positivists. In Rorty’s view, inquiry in that tradition is based on a series of super-distinctions – between reality and appearance, truth and illusion, the analytic and the synthetic, scheme and content, and so on – which apply to all other forms of inquiry without being properly understood by them. It is as if the philosophers themselves had a special, privileged place, a higher rank in the community of inquirers, on account of their specialised knowledge of these super-distinctions; in other words, on account of their unique grasp of the super-concepts Truth, Reality, and so forth. The best way for philosophers to rid themselves of this folly, Rorty urges, is for them to drop their allegiance to the Plato-Kant tradition, to abandon the idea that there is a special role, to be performed by a special class of inquirers, of guiding the broader culture or holding it to account, and to embrace a pragmatist self-understanding of their discipline as one amongst equals.

How are philosophers who imagine themselves to have the knack of understanding the super-distinctions to be persuaded to become philosophical pragmatists? Not by showing that their super-concepts fall short by their own standards as concepts of Truth or Reality. Rather, the pragmatist has to appeal to the ‘usefulness’ of the distinctions that shape inquiry in the Platonic or Kantian mould. By what criteria can distinctions be said to be useful or not? For this we need an overall conception of what the goals of inquiry are, and although Rorty does not always distinguish them as such, there are two outstanding candidates. One is the promotion of human happiness. Slowly and hesitantly, and always with an awareness of the frailty of human achievements, we can strive to ameliorate the condition of humankind, bit by bit, problem by problem. Philosophy, on an equal footing with other forms of inquiry, and rid of its super-

distinctions, can contribute to this end. The other goal is the promotion of democracy. Again, this can be done in a piecemeal way, by removing obstacles to democracy hurdle by hurdle. But it also helps to have a long-term goal, an image of a future in which there are no longer hurdles to be removed. This is the 'liberal utopia' which features prominently in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989) and Rorty's later writings. The denizens of the liberal utopia all enjoy a good share of happiness – they are rich, comfortable and free to pursue their own versions of self-flourishing – but they are also 'classless', 'casteless' and 'cosmopolitan'. They are, in other words, *equals*. None of them enjoy the kind of privilege that, prior to utopia, attached itself to wealth, status, and so on. There is no class distinction, not just in economic matters, but throughout society and culture. To learn to think without distinctions of the Platonic and the Kantian sort is good preparation for the liberal utopia to come, as well as for making small improvements to our actually existing democracies.

Rorty's liberal utopia offers a striking vision, an idealized symbol, of a world *without distinctions of rank*. Pragmatism, the philosophy based on the repudiation of super-concepts such as Truth and Reality, can be seen as a mode of thought well-suited to such a radically democratic world, a world of equals. In the immediate term, pragmatism levels the disciplines; in the longer-term, it might help to level society, by providing an image of what such a society would look like. But the levelling, which is so characteristic of pragmatism as Rorty propounds it and democracy as he envisages it, carries a danger. Fear of this danger has often been expressed, and sometimes mobilized, by critics of democracy and pragmatism alike. The worry is that the levelling in thought (consequent upon the repudiation of super-distinctions) urged by pragmatism, like the social levelling that characterizes radical democracy, has a spiritually deadening or *flattening* effect. Simply put, if we level all ways of thinking, being, and doing, if we think that "no kind of thing is more fundamental than any other kind of thing" (2007, 156), and understand the term 'thing' in its most general sense, then we cripple our ability to act on shared human purposes that are *truly* important. Utilitarianism, and the Enlightenment more generally, has often been accused of naivety in regard to the liberating force of the dismantling of hierarchies, in thought as well as practice. Furthermore, some of the most powerful formulations of the charge have been penned by thinkers whom Rorty also recruits into his pantheon of pragmatist post-philosophers - Nietzsche in particular. Rorty is of course aware of

this, and, so we shall argue below, it gives rise to a problem which it will be a central task of his metaphilosophy to address.

The question can be put like this: how can pragmatism be a leveller without being a flattener? Rorty's answer, to use an expression we admittedly have to put in Rorty's mouth, is through a notion of pragmatist transcendence. Pragmatist transcendence, we shall argue, saves the levelling moves at the heart of Rorty's pragmatism from being flattening ones. In order to make this a plausible reading of what is going on in Rorty's metaphilosophy, we first need to attend to Rorty's many disclaimers of the notion of transcendence and his repudiation of philosophical outlooks that have 'an ambition to transcendence' at their core (section 2). We acknowledge that, in the sense explained in this section, Rorty's pragmatism is against transcendence *tout court*. But repudiation of transcendence in this sense leaves room for other philosophical ambitions that can be, and in our view usefully are, described as matters of transcendence. We suggest that transcendence can and should feature in a description of Rorty's metaphilosophy because while the Platonic and Kantian ambition to transcendence goes awry, in Rorty's view, it is nonetheless informed by pre-philosophical impulses that endure and ought to be given *some* expression. Not that this is true of *all* pre-philosophical impulses: Rorty is convinced that the impulse to obey, to submit or to subordinate oneself to something greater, a higher realm of being or a quasi-divine law, had a key role in the development of Platonic and Kantian philosophy and has no place in philosophical pragmatism. But there are other impulses that lie behind the Platonist and Kantian ambition to transcendence that pragmatism does not seek to extinguish but to re-shape, and in Rorty's view, make more effective. In particular, Rorty thinks that it is possible to break the link between "the religious impulse, the impulse to stand in awe of something greater than oneself", which we should not give up, "and the infantile need for security, the childish hope of escaping from time and chance", which we should (1998a, 17-18). It is crucial to distinguish, perhaps more clearly than Rorty always does himself, between these different pre-philosophical impulses, for they give rise to quite distinct ambitions to transcendence, only some of which are antithetical to Rorty's project. Indeed, if our argument is sound, Rorty's project has the radical character it has precisely on account of its ambition to transcendence of the other sort, the sort energized by awe at something greater and hope for a radically better world, rather than submission to a higher authority. This is also what safeguards

pragmatism against the ‘flattening’ consequences feared by conservatives and anticipated by thinkers of the ‘immanent counter-Enlightenment’ such as Nietzsche (Taylor 2001).

In the remainder of the paper we try to show in more detail how Rorty, while renouncing the ambition to transcendence characteristic of philosophy in the Platonist and Kantian mould (let’s call it upper case ‘Philosophy’), nonetheless retains an orientation to transcendence in his pragmatist metaphilosophy. We invoke a distinction between vertical transcendence (section 3) and horizontal transcendence (section 4) for this purpose. Whereas vertical transcendence, the kind Rorty rejects, involves a bottom-up movement, and is satisfied by the presence of a higher, non-human power or authority to which human endeavours are accountable, horizontal transcendence moves sideways, and is defined by an extension or *enlargement* of a person’s relationship to other human beings. To be sure, Rorty is not the only philosopher to prefer a horizontal to a vertical model of transcendence. Levinas and Habermas, for example, share Rorty’s dissatisfaction with the vertical model of transcendence embedded in the onto-theological tradition and seek to replace it with a horizontal conception. We therefore need to distinguish Rorty’s version of horizontal transcendence from these other conceptions of it, which we do by way of introducing a distinction between strong and weak transcendence (section 5). We conclude with a short restatement of our case for taking Rorty’s metaphilosophy to be oriented by a notion of pragmatist transcendence (section 6).

## **2. The ambition to Transcendence**

We are aware, in proposing that an idea of transcendence informs Rorty’s metaphilosophical thinking, that there are occasions when Rorty explicitly repudiates the ambition to transcendence that some other philosophers take to be indispensable to the subject. We are also conscious of the fact that some of Rorty’s most characteristic philosophical moves – in epistemology, philosophy of mind and language, and ethics – involve rejecting the possibility or desirability of transcendence as traditionally understood. Whatever we go on to say about transcendence as a guiding idea in Rorty’s metaphilosophy has to be consistent with these well-known criticisms of transcendence, so basic are they to the overall philosophical position he defends. In order to avoid confusion, and to offset the *prima facie* objection that there is no room for transcendence in Rorty’s pragmatism at all, let us very briefly rehearse the case against transcendence that Rorty is so famous for.

Rorty takes up Thomas Nagel's use of the expression 'the ambition to transcendence' to designate an approach to philosophical problems, and indeed the very impulse to philosophize (1998b, 121), which is just about the polar opposite of Rorty's own view. In the first instance, Rorty takes issue with Nagel's approach to the problem of 'intrinsicity': is consciousness what it is on account of properties that are 'intrinsic' to it (Nagel's view), or can consciousness be explained 'relationally', as Dennett proposed, without any reference to putative intrinsic qualities (in this case, an ineffable feel)? After siding broadly with Dennett in this debate, Rorty examines in more detail the motivation behind Nagel's position and the metaphilosophical reasons for supposing that intrinsicity must be defended. These all have to do with the need to respect the gap between "what there is or what is true" and what we "could discover or conceive of or describe in some extension of human language" (Nagel 1986, 105-6, cited in Rorty 1998b, 104). That gap is preserved by a series of other fundamental philosophical distinctions, including the modern scheme-content and real-intentional object distinctions, but also the longer standing distinctions between truth and illusion and between reality and appearance. As Rorty describes it, the ambition to transcendence is responsible for all the characteristic – and characteristically problematic – distinctions of modern philosophy, including "the distinction between the world and our conception of the world, between the content and the scheme we applied to that content, between the truly objective and the merely intersubjective" (1998b, 109). It was this ambition that led philosophers to strive to formulate an 'Archimedean' standpoint, a 'God's-eye point of view' or a 'view from nowhere', from which the gap, as Rorty puts it, between 'Us and What We May Not Be in Touch With' (1998b, 108) could faithfully be witnessed. In other words, the ambition to transcendence gave rise to nothing less than the super-concepts and super-distinctions the dismantling or overcoming of which it is precisely the ambition of Rorty's philosophical pragmatism to achieve.

Given that the ambition to transcendence so understood yields super-concepts and super-distinctions, it would not be out of place to relabel it slightly as the ambition to upper case "Transcendence". And, of course, Rorty must repudiate it. He concludes his discussion of Nagel by noting that his "own sense of what is worthwhile and important for human beings to do requires abjuration of the ambition of transcendence to which Nagel remains faithful" (1998b, 121). Elsewhere, he describes as his "principal motive" the belief that "we can still make admirable sense of our lives" without the ambition to transcendence and that a culture without

that ambition is “preferable” to “the onto-theological tradition” the ambition helped to sustain (1990, 12). The ambition to Transcendence, then, is not just a quirk of modern philosophers such as Nagel, but the driving force behind the whole onto-theological tradition beginning with Plato. Unless we get rid of this metaphilosophical commitment to Transcendence, Rorty is suggesting, we will remain in the thrall of the super-concepts and super-distinctions, however resistant these concepts and distinctions are to rational justification. In other words, we will never be able to move on from Philosophy to philosophical pragmatism.

Given that the ambition to transcendence Rorty decries in Nagel’s work turns out to be an atavistic recurrence of the ambition to Transcendence, we should look more closely at Rorty’s account of the historical roots of this ambition in the onto-theological tradition. If we do this it becomes clear, according to Rorty, that the ambition is a response to pre-philosophical impulses that find expression not just in philosophy, but religion and other forms of culture. In light of the story we are able to tell about the main transitions in the form given to these impulses, the contingency of the ambition to Transcendence that informs the onto-theological tradition becomes apparent and alternative modes of expression – which we can now call without distortion alternative expressions of the ambition to transcendence – open up for exploration. Our claim is that the metaphilosophical commitment underlying Rorty’s pragmatism is to open up and explore the frontiers of a horizontal plane of transcendence. Occupied by that task, pragmatist philosophers will no longer be drawn to the vertical plane, they will have no ear for its promises of true spiritual fulfilment and completeness, though they may need occasional reminders of the dead-ends in which it abounds.

Before looking in a little more detail at Rorty’s account of the main mutations undergone historically by the ambition to Transcendence, a comment is in order about what Rorty takes to be at stake in his critique of its contemporary manifestations in academic philosophy. The tendency, noted above, of philosophers to exaggerate the cultural significance of the concepts at their disposal is mirrored, in Rorty’s view, by an inflated sense of the sociological and political significance of academic philosophy itself. It is a theme of much of Rorty’s writings on metaphilosophy, from the 1980s to 2000s, that professional philosophy has lost its cultural centrality and that it should adjust its self-image to fit the sociological facts. And Rorty is surely right in saying that the debates that many professional philosophers most care about qua philosophers, such as the ‘realism vs anti-realism’ or ‘internalism vs externalism’ debates, are

largely ignored by non-philosophers without any sense of embarrassment or shame about their ignorance. If academic philosophy is now a culturally marginal activity, which Rorty thinks it is, then criticizing the manifestations of the ambition to Transcendence within it, in the manner Rorty does, is unlikely to have a great cultural impact. It is unlikely to make much practical difference in matters of everyday life. For this reason, it could be argued that Rorty would be more consistent in his pragmatism if he were to just do something else, to jettison academic philosophy altogether and do something more consequential. For better or worse, though, academic philosophy is the medium of most of Rorty's cultural interventions. He has sought to exert influence in this particular cultural niche so as to make it more oriented by the goals of happiness and democracy. In Rorty's view, this is best achieved by replacing the super-distinctions philosophers have traditionally relied on with pragmatist ones. While philosophers adopting a new vocabulary does not change much, it would at least be a small a step forward, in Rorty's view, towards a more democratic, liberal culture.

### **3. Vertical transcendence and the onto-theological tradition**

But the ambition to transcendence is by no means restricted to contemporary practitioners of Philosophy. It is one of the key impulses for the whole of what Rorty calls, following Heidegger, the 'onto-theological tradition'. This tradition is characterized throughout its history by the pursuit of transcendence in the vertical plane. In its first phase, it does this through the super-concept of God. Human beings are considered to be made in God's image, ranked higher than non-human animals, are tasked to do good deeds and avoid sin. In order to achieve this purpose, they must subject themselves to the higher authority of God or his representatives on earth and, so far as possible, partake in the goodness of His Being. Their reward is eternal happiness in the afterlife. The indebtedness of this vertical transcendence narrative to Platonic philosophy is well known. For Plato, the true, universal, and timeless forms exist in the Ideal world. All we find in the physical world are imperfect copies of the original. Human beings, finding themselves in the physical world, cannot realise their true nature there, or occupy their proper place in the hierarchy of being. They must seek to rise above their finite, corrupted earthly condition. They can only do this effectively by imitating the pure forms, which means yielding to their power and authority after a long and arduous spiritual/intellectual ascent. Socrates provided Plato with the prototype: he showed us, as Rorty puts it, how to "gain access to what he [Plato]

called ‘the really real’, how to gain access to Reality” (2007, 105). The reward for those who follow this path is the Truth, though a propitious place in the after-life may be waiting too. And if we are to believe Kant, the story of those lives guided by respect for the Moral Law rather than the most real being, by an ideal of the Right rather than the True, has a similar ending.

In Rorty’s story, Kant initiates a later phase of the onto-theological tradition. Since Kant famously repudiated the mix of ontological and theological speculation that characterised pre-critical philosophy, this characterization of Kant, as a standard-bearer of the onto-theological tradition, may seem absurd. But in Rorty’s view, Kant’s critique of ‘onto-theology’ was not the radical departure Kant thought it to be, and his critical philosophy merely altered the manner in which the ambition to Transcendence came to be expressed, without fundamentally transforming that ambition. For Rorty, Kant’s resetting of the philosophical agenda, the primacy he gave to epistemology over ontology, to reflection on the conditions of objective experience rather than the grounds of being, merely replaced one set of super-concepts and super-distinctions with another. So did his proposals for replacing Divine Command theories of morality with a theory grounding morality in rational (human) agency. In Rorty’s view, distinctions such as those between appearances and things-in-themselves, between phenomena and noumena, and between conditional and categorical worth, betray a dualism in Kant’s thought that shows its underlying continuity with Platonism. They are distinctions of a kind that are at home in the onto-theological tradition - super-distinctions - rather than challenges to onto-theological thinking as such. This also holds, in Rorty’s view, for the whole epistemological turn in modern philosophy, indebted as it is to Kant, and even for the Enlightenment more generally. Insofar as modern epistemology and Enlightenment thought remain wedded to their own super-concepts and super-distinctions, such as Truth/Illusion, Reality/Appearance, Analytic/Synthetic, Scheme/Content and so forth, they continue the onto-theological tradition even though they explicitly repudiate ontology (or ‘metaphysics’) and religion.

The reliance of the onto-theological tradition, so understood, on a vertical model of transcendence becomes particularly vivid when what Rorty calls the ‘redemptive’ function of religion and philosophy is considered (Rorty 2004/2010). In Rorty’s view, both religion and philosophy are rightly understood as responding to impulses in which something like a yearning for redemption is at stake. The source of this impulse may be a sense of the futility of life, of its needless suffering, of the inclination to sin, or most typically in the onto-theological tradition, the

imperfection of self and world. How can we be saved from the misery, shame or dishonour of our condition? Rorty distinguishes various phases in the onto-theological tradition's answer to this question, each of which involves a *relationship* of some kind. The first is through a relationship to God. On this understanding, it is the religious life that provides the path to redemption, which is typically conceived as a life of obedience to God's will and commands, of submission to God's higher authority. In the beginning this is a pre-rational relationship, but over time the redemptive relationship to God acquired a more cognitive character. As it did so a second phase began: redemption through a relationship to the Truth. The path to the Truth was initially thought to be the same as the path to God, but with the Enlightenment and the rise of science, the paths diverged. Philosophy as science, oriented to the Truth shorn of all religious Error, offered a new route to salvation. It promised to reinstate human dignity after its fall into religious darkness; to redeem us by making available a cognitive standpoint that puts us in touch with the Truth or how things really are. Understood in this way, redemption through science retains the vertical structure typical of the onto-theological tradition.

As we noted earlier, Rorty's argument with Philosophy, with its super-concepts and super-distinctions, is to be won not by refining those concepts and distinctions, or by showing how they fall short by their own measure, but by proposing a different measure, by suggesting new distinctions that are more effective for inquiry whose goal is the promotion of human happiness and the realization of democracy. It is not hard to see that those goals might be ill-served by the vertical model of transcendence and its concomitant mode of redemption. First, it downgrades ordinary human happiness, making it seem as if it were an unworthy goal to pursue. It makes it seem as if true honour and dignity is to be obtained by rising above the purposes and desires that ordinarily make human beings happy, as if redemption required self-sacrifice or self-abnegation. Indeed, the link between redemption from imperfection and a process of self-purification, understood as a cleansing of those imperfections, is often explicit (see Rorty 1986/2010, 269). Second, the religious and philosophical cultures that integrate the vertical model of transcendence and its modes of redemption are hierarchical at their core. Not only are they unlikely to be conducive to democracy, understood as a classless, casteless, cosmopolitan way of life, they are likely to be in conflict with it. Transcendence, in the onto-theological tradition, is a matter for the elites, for philosophical geniuses like Socrates or moral saints who achieve purity of heart. The idea that sources of meaning, moral duties toward others, and

conceptions of self-flourishing must be framed as a matter of getting in touch with some universal or absolute law, or a metaphysical power that is higher or deeper, attaches itself only too readily to categorizations of people who are especially talented in that capacity or perhaps lack it altogether. And a culture that inculcates obedience and submission to father figures as the surest pathway to redemption is hard to reconcile with the self-managing ethos of a democracy.

But exposing the conflict or incompatibility between the vertical model of transcendence and the goals of happiness and democracy is only the negative side of the argument. Rorty must also show, more positively, that a horizontal model of transcendence and redemption, a model better suited to the goals of happiness and democracy, is within reach if we adopt a pragmatist outlook.

#### **4. Horizontal transcendence and pragmatism**

By a horizontal axis of transcendence, we mean an articulation of the pre-philosophical impulse to stand in awe at something greater than oneself, and to find redemption, by way of a sideways rather than a vertical movement, a movement that does not involve rising up a hierarchy. We have already seen that *justificatory* relations, in Rorty's pragmatist view, have a horizontal rather than vertical structure. That is because human beings are answerable only to themselves, in conversations they have between each other as epistemic equals, rather than being answerable to some higher truth-making or validity-conferring power. The pre-philosophical impulse to submit to such a power, and the reflective idea that contact with it is the goal of inquiry, is not so much to be reconfigured as to be rejected by pragmatism. There is no higher authority than human conversational practices by which to justify beliefs. But we are talking now of an awe-inspiring ideal and a source of redemption, and Rorty does want to say that the impulse that gives rise to articulations of these, whether in religion or philosophy or another cultural form, finds a voice in pragmatism. Indeed, he wants to say that it finds a clearer and more compelling voice there than in the old onto-theological tradition. It is this metaphilosophical ambition of Rorty's that provides him with an ambition to transcendence, albeit in a horizontal plane.

We can summarize Rorty's horizontalist redescription of transcendence by saying it is fundamentally a matter of *self-enlargement*. The two chief pathways to self-enlargement are projects of self-creation that expand personal horizons, on the one hand, and entering into ever-widening relations of solidarity and social cooperation, on the other. It is by engaging in such

projects and entering into such relations that we become aware of and participate in the life of something 'greater'. But the greater thing we imagine ourselves to be part of, when 'self-enlargement' in the relevant sense is at stake, cannot be some hierarchically ordered entity, and it cannot be by imagining oneself to be closer to the top of some social or natural hierarchy that self-enlargement, understood as the ideal of horizontal transcendence, is attained. Two points about self-enlargement, which is our phrase not Rorty's, need to be stressed here. First, it is an ideal of *individual* self-realization, a matter of happiness-for-the-individual, rather than happiness for the *kind of entity* an individual is. It resembles authenticity to the extent that self-experimentation is involved, but unlike authenticity it is not well captured by descriptions such as being 'true to oneself' or finding out 'who one really is'. This is why Rorty prefers the expression 'self-creation' to 'self-discovery'. Self-enlargement also resembles autonomy, in being a matter of individual freedom, but again is not well expressed by talk such as 'giving the law to oneself' or having a 'self-determining, non-heteronomous will', to mention the common Kantian formulations. The second point to be emphasized is that the 'something greater' the self becomes enlarged by cannot be antagonistic to the freedoms and opportunities for self-experimentation available to each individual. There can be no in principle exclusion from access to these freedoms and no in principle limits to the bonds of solidarity between individuals. Self-enlargement through solidarity with others, as Rorty conceives it, is in principle *unbounded* and is never a matter of identification with a group defined by its natural or intrinsic superiority over others. Racist and ethno-national forms of identification, though they may bring intra-ethnic or racial forms of group 'solidarity', are not self-enlarging in the sense that makes for horizontal transcendence. They are rather *self-enclosing* forms of identification that work by assuring the members of certain groups that they are higher, or superior, or hierarchically set apart from other groups.

As is well known, self-creation and solidarity are the two chief ideals of Rorty's liberal utopia. But there has always been some ambiguity and tension in Rorty's account of how these ideals are supposed to relate to each other. Rorty himself initially insisted that they must be considered as distinct goals, separate in a similar way that, in the liberal tradition, 'private' and 'public' concerns are (Rorty 1989). This invocation of the private/public distinction drew many criticisms and Rorty subsequently dropped it (Janack, 2010; Schneewind 2003/2010; Rorty 2007/2010, 20-21; 2010b, 479-505). One advantage of the metaphilosophical view we are

attributing to Rorty is that it helps clarify how self-creation and solidarity can work together. For both self-creation and solidarity are matters of enlarging the self, and it is through self-enlargement that horizontal transcendence is to be achieved. Furthermore, self-enlargement so understood has a redemptive function: it redeems us from what Rorty calls ‘egotism’ (see Llanera 2016, 2017). The idea that horizontal transcendence is a matter of ‘redemption from egotism’ is a crucial insight of Rorty’s later writings and a distinctive mark of the pragmatist metaphilosophy Rorty outlines there. Let us look at this idea, and how it relates to the more familiar Rortyan notions of self-creation and solidarity, a little more closely.

Egotism, in the sense Rorty is concerned with, is a condition of inflated self-sufficiency and knowingness. It is a regrettable feature of the onto-theological tradition, in Rorty’s view, that it provides fertile ground for egotism so considered. Philosophical egotists “hope to short-circuit the need to find out what is on the mind of other people. They would like to go straight to the way things are (to the will of God, or the moral law, or the nature of human beings) without passing through other people’s self-descriptions” (2001/2010, 395). In their private *and* public lives, egotists are rigid in their thinking and action, satisfied with their intellectual, moral, and spiritual frameworks. Philosophical egotists may not be satisfied with conventional frameworks for understanding the way things really are, but a settled framework for such understanding, reachable in principle monologically, is what they seek. Self-creation *and* solidarity turn this egoistic impulse against itself. To the extent that they involve *self*-enlargement, they can be said to spring from an ‘egoistic’ source. But in their case, the self-enlarging movement is shaped by encounters with other voices, imaginings and points of view, rather than a narrowing in on or purification of the self. Self-creation, so understood, is achieved by expanding one’s repertoire of human experiences and encountering a great variety of human beings by way of exercises of the imagination. Solidarity, on the other hand, involves enlarging our loyalties to include more people as part of our moral kin. This too is activated by reading literature and exercising the creative imagination. Solidarity in the Rortyan sense means connecting and identifying with people previously beyond our ken, a feat that exercises of the creative imagination help to sustain. Literature, art, film, and philosophical redescrptions in the pragmatist vein, work to enlarge our understanding of various kinds of people, people who otherwise might appear as alien or inscrutable or inferior on account of caste or class. For this reason, exercises of creative imagination, including philosophical ones, serve the goal of democracy. This interpretation of

horizontal transcendence shows that Rorty's ideals of self-creation and solidarity suggest forms of human life that are not answerable to something divine and non-human, yet they are not flattened in terms of spiritual and existential meaning. They help to provide nuance to our understanding of the goals of human happiness and democracy, in a way that shows them to be in no way spiritually second class, without the conceit of claiming privileged access to a super-concept of Transcendence.

Pragmatist transcendence is also future-oriented, with its temporal dimension assuming a diachronic rather than synchronic form (see Rondel 2011; Kuipers 2013). Together with Dewey and Whitman, Rorty dreams of a future society where "the possibility of as yet undreamt of, ever more diverse, forms of human happiness" will come to fruition (2007, 41). His liberal utopia may lie in the distant future, and may be causally very remote (1999, xiv), but it does not reside outside of time and chance. It is a task of pragmatist philosophy, in Rorty's view, to imagine by way of thought-experiments what that future might look like and how, once there, the path leading from the present to that future might be described. Such philosophical reflections do not provide predictions, based on knowledge of putative laws of history. And they do not provide rational reconstructions, in the sense of accounts of the steps that would *have to be* taken if utopia were ever to be reached. There is nothing *but* time and chance to be taken into consideration from a philosophical point of view. But this does not prevent pragmatism from taking up and reshaping pre-philosophical impulses to transcendence, as the following passage makes clear:

"So, pragmatists transfer to the human future the sense of awe and mystery which the Greeks attached to the non-human; it is transformed into a sense that the humanity of the future will be, although linked with us by a continuous narrative, superior to present-day humanity in as yet barely imaginable ways. It coalesces with the awe we feel before works of imagination, and becomes a sense of awe before humanity's ability to become what it once merely imagined, before its capacity for self-creation" (1999, 52).

Pragmatist transcendence is thus based on "an exalted sense of new possibilities opening up for finite beings" (2010a, 14). The religious imagery Rorty invokes when describing liberal utopia can hardly be missed. But he uses it in a manner consistent with deep suspicion about the use of such imagery and its interpretation in the onto-theological tradition. In that tradition, as Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud helped us to see, a fraudulent idea of Transcendence served to mask the powers of the human imagination and the human capacity for self-creation.

Pragmatism can contribute to that unmasking, not by appeal to a hidden human nature, metaphysical principle or the secret workings of the unconscious, but by reminders of what the human imagination has achieved and suggestions for how humanity might become what it imagines itself to be at its best. We return to this below.

## **5. Strong and weak transcendence**

We have been suggesting that a pragmatist ambition to transcendence persists in Rorty's metaphilosophy. His metaphilosophy shows a way of describing spiritual possibilities, achievement and fulfilment without invoking the problematic hierarchies of the onto-theological tradition. The transcendence at stake is horizontal in the literal sense that it pertains to 'horizons', or a going beyond given horizons of meaning through a merging with others. Rorty is fond of Gadamer's metaphor of a fusion of horizons, but in Rorty's case it is not so much historical understanding that the image serves to illuminate as an endorsement of an other-orientated culture of self-enlargement and what the future may hold for it. But we need to qualify this further, to avoid over-dramatizing Rorty's orientation to transcendence and conflating Rorty's version with others. Rorty is certainly not the only philosopher to want to overcome the onto-theological tradition without reinstating hierarchical orders of meaning or being on the one hand, and abandonment to spiritual emptiness or flattening on the other. We believe we can avoid both these potential pitfalls by characterising Rorty's pragmatist metaphilosophy as oriented by a weak rather than strong form of transcendence as well as by a horizontal rather than vertical form of transcendence.

The idea that a distinction between weak and strong transcendence can help situate Rorty's metaphilosophy is suggested by Rorty's avowed alignment with what Gianni Vattimo and other Italian philosophers have called 'weak thought'. In the 'Introduction' to *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, Rorty states that his readers should judge his essays only as 'weak thought', that is, as a kind of "philosophical reflection which does not attempt a radical criticism of contemporary culture, does not attempt to re-found or re-motivate it, but simply assembles reminders and suggests some interesting possibilities" (Rorty 1991, 6; see Vattimo/Rovatti 1983). While this may be an unduly modest summary of his metaphilosophical ambitions, we can take Rorty at his word here. Weak thought, as characterised by Vattimo, avoids making strong ontological claims, especially concerning human being. In a manner inspired above all by

Nietzsche's perspectivism, weak thought insists that there is nothing 'beyond interpretations', and thus no interpretation-free way to criticize, re-found or re-motivate the interpretations that make up a culture as a whole. Clearly, there is no question of a transcendence of culture or interpretations in general being at stake in Rorty's metaphilosophy: there is no *strong* transcendence. But it would be a mistake to take the assemblage of reminders and suggestions of interesting possibilities that replaces 'strong' thought as ends in themselves, as if the putting together of such reminders and possibilities were to be done for *its own sake*. It is not: philosophical reflection in the pragmatist mode aims at promoting human happiness and democracy. And it aims to do so in a manner that captures the humane and democratic content of the pre-philosophical impulses also expressed, only less effectively, in religious language and imagery. The task of pragmatist philosophy as Rorty understands it is to help provide a language and imagery that is more conducive to a democratic culture, and more at home in one, than the distinctions that inform the onto-theological tradition. The *point* of the 'reminders', and what makes suggestions of possibilities 'interesting', is precisely to bring the democratic ideals to life; to make the liberal utopia in some sense closer. If it does not exactly seek to 're-found' or 're-motivate' liberal democratic culture in that way, as it would if it were oriented by a 'strong' form of transcendence, pragmatism does re-energize the democratic impulses embedded within a liberal democratic culture, or at least it does at its best.

The notion of weak transcendence can also help us see how Rorty's metaphilosophy differs from others that share the motivation to overcome the hierarchies sedimented in the onto-theological tradition by way of a broadly horizontalist model of transcendence. Rorty accepts that this motivation was shared even by Kant: 'The secularization of high culture that thinkers like Spinoza and Kant helped to bring about has put us in the habit of thinking horizontally rather than vertically', Rorty wrote, though of course in Rorty's view Kant's super-concepts and super-distinctions were at odds with such a habit of thought (Rorty 2007, 88). But it is those modern philosophical outlooks that propose an *intersubjectivist* alternative to the vertical transcendence of the onto-theological tradition, and are horizontal in that sense, that come closest to Rorty's own proposals for overcoming that tradition. For this reason, it is instructive to compare Rorty's metaphilosophical position with those of two prominent intersubjectivist philosophers – Levinas and Habermas. While both Levinas and Habermas, like Rorty, are advocates of horizontal transcendence, unlike Rorty they also share some commitment to a strong notion of

transcendence. And this latter commitment, from Rorty's perspective, ends up spoiling their intersubjectivist credentials and re-introduces features more characteristic of the vertical model of transcendence.

Levinas famously rejected the thesis that human beings are fundamentally answerable to Being in their thought and actions (1961/1969; 1974/1981). While drawn to Heidegger's reformulation of the phenomenological method, he was adamantly opposed to Heidegger's use of it to reconceptualize the human vocation in terms of an authentic appropriation of being (or in his later work, letting being be). In Levinas's view, what redeems human beings from their merely ontic status, their status as one kind of being struggling for existence among others, is not the thought of, or approximation to, the Being of beings, but an acknowledgement of the 'rupture' within being established by the ethical relation. The ethical relation, for Levinas, involves the substitution of the other for the self, and it is only in and through the substitutive relation to the human other that human beings achieve transcendence and get close to 'the holy'. As in Rorty's pragmatism, Levinas's 'humanism of the other person' has no place for ontic transcendence. And like Rorty in his later work, Levinas sees philosophy at its best as offering reminders of how 'redemption from egotism' can be achieved, and thereby a mode of transcendence. But whereas Levinas presents these reminders in the 'strong' register of pure phenomenological description, responsive to the 'thing itself', for Rorty they are just a matter of replacing one mode of description with another, more useful one. And whereas for Levinas the egotism to be redeemed from is essentially self-interestedness, understood as an ontic characteristic, to be opposed by self-*dis*interestedness (substitution) understood hyperbolically as a rupture within being, Rorty views the ontological difference itself as an ember of the onto-theological tradition, and he takes the problem with egotism to be *narrowness* of interest and self-*enclosure*, to be countered by a broadening of the self's horizons, a widening of the self's loyalties, or self-*enlargement*. These differences between Levinas's and Rorty's metaphilosophy can usefully be summed up, we suggest, as a difference between philosophies of strong and weak horizontal transcendence respectively. Admittedly, this is not quite how Rorty himself characterizes his disagreement with a Levinasian understanding of the tasks of philosophy, but our interpretation of the basic difference between their metaphilosophical positions is consistent with what he does say. (See Rorty 1996, 42; Kuipers 2013, 127-132).

Habermas, who unlike Levinas is strongly influenced by pragmatism, shares Rorty's scepticism about the ability of the phenomenological method to yield pure descriptions and to bypass the onto-theological tradition by that route. Habermas also shares Rorty's commitment to the secular premises of philosophy in 'post-metaphysical' conditions, a phrase Habermas often uses to describe the conditions of contemporary thought, which rules out the commitment, maintained by Levinas, to the philosophical centrality of the idea of God (see also Smith 2008). Furthermore, Habermas agrees with Rorty that a secular, post-metaphysical understanding of the tasks of philosophy is compatible with an acknowledgment of a 'semantic potential' (Habermas 1992, 15) within religious language and imagery that philosophy should recognize and somehow help keep available. Indeed, Habermas's later work, much like Rorty's, is marked by an increasing preoccupation with this problem—the problem, as we are putting it, of pragmatist transcendence (see Habermas 2002). And it is not just that they share a concern for the problem: they also propose solutions that overlap in bringing an idea of democracy decisively into play. But the manner in which they bring it into play is different. For Habermas, the norms of mutual recognition, reciprocity, and solidarity that are central to the democratic ethos are, in a certain sense, written into the pragmatics of language as 'counterfactual presuppositions' of communicative action (1981/1984). It is the task of 'transcendental pragmatics', the label Habermas and Apel gave to their early philosophical project, to reconstruct those norms and on that basis provide a foundation for social criticism, even if it by no means conflated the tasks of normative reconstruction and utopian description or saw itself as grounding criticism of cultures as a whole (see Apel 1973, 1976; Habermas 2001, 75). Although Habermas always understood transcendental pragmatics to have a fallibilistic character, he nonetheless took it to be reconstructing norms that were intrinsic to language use and of universal reach. To that extent, and in aiming to provide a 'grounding' for social criticism, it departed from the conception of 'weak' thought Rorty sought to advance. Its post-metaphysical character ensured that transcendence was to be secured on a horizontal plane, but its universalist and transcendental mode of argumentation (in the Kantian sense of the super-concept) made it a 'strong' as opposed to a 'weak' version of such transcendence. In Rorty's view, by contrast, democratic norms are simply products of time and chance, and are better advanced by imagining future liberal utopias than by reconstructing norms that are 'always already' in play whenever we engage in communicative action.

## 6. Conclusion

We concede that there is something awkward in the expression ‘pragmatist transcendence’, as if the component parts don’t quite belong together. But such awkwardness isn’t something that would worry Rorty. In Rorty’s view, philosophy gets its point from the contribution it has to make to the promotion of human happiness and democracy, goals that are fused in the idea of a prosperous, classless, casteless, cosmopolitan society. One way in which it can make such a contribution is by replacing concepts and distinctions made familiar through the onto-theological tradition by new ones. The new concepts and distinctions may seem incoherent or clumsy at first, but when successful they loosen the grip of familiar modes of thought that impede the promotion of happiness and democracy and enable us to envisage, and inch closer to, liberal utopia. The idea of pragmatist transcendence serves this purpose by highlighting the awe-commanding character of this utopia, by presenting it as just as worthy of edification as traditional ideas of God, Truth, Reason and so forth. The idea of pragmatist transcendence, as outlined by Rorty, signals an invitation to reclaim philosophy’s spiritual ground in a manner consistent with the sober disenchantment of the Darwinian worldview. For those who see that worldview as having no spiritually redeeming features, the idea of pragmatist transcendence will seem a sham. Rorty’s challenge is to make them think again. Elsewhere, Rorty invites a similar re-thinking by adopting another awkward term: ‘Romantic utilitarianism’ (2007, 27). Originally coined as a condemnation of the incoherence of pragmatism, it is a term that Rorty urges pragmatists to embrace on account of it signalling a commitment to goals that flourish together in liberal utopia, but which traditional philosophical language and imaginaries render distinct and incompatible. The pragmatist, in being a utilitarian, need not be advocating a pig-philosophy, but can let her imagination soar in the manner of the most inspired poet. The pragmatist can be a leveller, in counting each person as an equal, without flattening the spiritual possibilities of the culture in which they do so count.

At the same time, it is hard to avoid the impression that *something* in the spiritual and cultural landscape gets flattened, or goes missing, once we adopt the pragmatist’s vantage point as Rorty envisages it. Perhaps the most striking one is the range of spiritual impulses bound up with a sense of attachment to, and responsibility for, the natural environment. Rorty’s pragmatism is unabashedly anthropocentric and his notion of transcendence shares this feature.

This is related, of course, to his Darwinism, which seems to rule out from the start any notion of there being claims on human beings from a non-human source. Not only does this threaten to short-circuit the flourishing of spiritual possibilities that take their departure from this impulse, but also it is far from implausible to suppose that the coming-to-be of a liberal utopia - the rich, classless, casteless cosmopolitan society of which the pragmatist dreams - is dependent on such impulses being acknowledged and allowed fuller expression. A second area of concern relates to the religious provenance of pragmatist transcendence. Rorty's metaphilosophy is very much focused on how things might be better, on how the human condition might be improved in terms of prosperity, self-creation, and equality. It has little to say though about the persistence of human failure and suffering, other than to increase our sensitivity to the suffering of others and to get us to think that 'cruelty is the worst thing we can do' (1989, xv). Arguably, the transition from religion to pragmatism may represent a loss or a decline in the capacity to make sense of that suffering (see Dews 2010, Smith 2005). And third, the social hope at the core of Rorty's metaphilosophy surely needs much more than awareness of possible routes from here to utopia, conjured in the thought-experiments of pragmatist philosophers, to sustain it. A believable route must be to hand somewhere, and this arguably requires a more critical and jaundiced view of actually existing liberal societies than Rorty often expressed (1998a).

So even if, as we have argued, a notion of pragmatist transcendence does inform Rorty's metaphilosophy, and does so in a way that contributes to its attractiveness, it is an open question whether it equips philosophy sufficiently for the tasks that face it today.

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