



Taking Rorty Seriously: Pragmatism, Metaphilosophy, and Truth

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Abstract

Although Rorty's work has become a touchstone for evaluating the metaphilosophical stance appropriate for pragmatism, the suspicion prevails that his 'neopragmatism' (NeoP) is undermined by a failure to take first-order philosophical problems seriously. We propose that this imputation is grounded in the assumption that he attempts to distinguish metaphilosophy from philosophy in order to insulate the former from the latter, and against it argue that pragmatism's experimental attitude towards inquiry entails that there is and can be no such separation. We go on to suggest that philosophers such as Misak who define their 'new pragmatist' (NewP) position partly in opposition to Rorty's, insist on this separation because they feel themselves answerable to some 'transcendental' urge. The conviction that to reject that urge is to reject the calling of philosophy itself is manifest in the debate between NeoP and NewP on the role of truth-talk. We argue that acceding to this urge prevents us from taking philosophy seriously, and by extension from taking Rorty's contribution to philosophy in like fashion.

Keywords

Richard Rorty, Metaphilosophy, Neo-pragmatism, New pragmatism, Truth.

I. Introduction

1. There has been a revival of interest in Richard Rorty's work recently¹: a revival, one might hazard, that evinces a desire to take it *seriously*. The aim of this paper is to inquire what it would be to take Rorty's neo-pragmatism (NeoP) seriously by evaluating the significance of what for many of those involved in that revival is the focus of their critical engagement: the emphasis on metaphilosophy. From one angle of inquiry this might be regarded as unsurprising. Pragmatists have themselves long found metaphilosophical reflection alluring. If you set yourself against a tradition (as you choose to define it) it behoves you to reflect on where it goes wrong, and that implies a heightened sense of what it might be to proceed correctly. Although this reveals something about why Rorty was interested in metaphilosophy, the question remains: why the interest in *Rorty's* metaphilosophy?

A second reason why an interest in metaphilosophy might be unsurprising hints in the direction of an answer to that question. Metaphilosophical reflection has become more common in mainstream analytic philosophy since at least the time of Williamson's *The Philosophy of Philosophy* (2007), a book which, he tells us, 'grew out of a sense that contemporary philosophy lacks a self-image that does it justice' (ix). Moreover, when in the 'Afterword' he chides his audience to 'Do Better', he means at the very least resist those latter-day 'Paleo-pragmatists' who 'invite everyone to relax, forget their futile pseudo-inquiries, and do something useful instead' (278). Here we encounter the converse function of such reflections, where they are used not to set philosophy off against a tradition but rather

¹ This interest is not wholly uncritical; indeed, much of it is highly unfavourable.

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3 to defend it against those who seek to undermine or overcome it. If we think of Williamson's
4 as representing a traditional understanding of the methods appropriate for philosophical
5 inquiry, then the pragmatism of Putnam, Brandom, Price, Williams, Misak, Kitcher *et al*
6 constitutes a challenge to that longed-for 'self-image', just as the 'theoretical ambitions'
7 (291) of 'armchair philosophy' (7) helped define a tradition against which pragmatism has
8 long set itself.
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19 This tells us something about why pragmatism is of metaphilosophical interest. But it also
20 picks up that hint concerning the more specific relevance of Rorty's thinking to the
21 contemporary debate. The temper of Williamson's defence of 'armchair' methods recalls the
22 attitude of those for whom *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* was heretically
23 eschatological. But it also reminds us that for others that work lent some Anglo-American
24 heft to the idea that the 'End' of (traditional) philosophy is nigh; indeed, that philosophy's
25 last task is to serve as a latter-day Pyrrhonian emetic. In this regard Rorty's apostasy has
26 served to locate contemporary pragmatism at or beyond the margins of the analytic tradition
27 while becoming a touchstone for evaluating the metaphilosophical stance appropriate for
28 pragmatism. To offer a preliminary answer to our opening question, then, NeoP should be
29 taken seriously because of its role in helping determine what pragmatism 'is' or should
30 become, where that disciplinary 'self-image' is understood to be shaped in part by
31 pragmatism's relation to the tradition represented by Williamson and others.
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51 2. If taking Rorty seriously requires an inquiry along the aforementioned lines it's unlikely to
52 appeal to those from philosophy's more 'traditionalist' wing. But although our emphasis in
53 this paper will be on evaluations of Rorty's metaphilosophy by those more sympathetic to
54 pragmatism, we will suggest that their criticisms of NeoP are founded on convictions that
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3 aren't alien to those shared by those traditionalists². In Part II we examine criticisms of
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5 Rorty's NeoP that are rooted in the charge that he 'actively' distinguishes metaphilosophy
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7 from philosophy in order to insulate the former from the latter. This is thought to render
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9 imperspicuous how, in the domain of what he calls 'cultural politics', his metaphilosophical
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11 pronouncements can be *efficacious* as opposed to mere exercises of rhetorical hand-waving.
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13 We argue that construing NeoP as a solely metaphilosophical exercise that renders its own
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15 position otiose presupposes a rather traditional—indeed, 'intellectualist'—understanding of
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17 what it is to take philosophy seriously. Against this, pragmatism as an essentially
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19 experimental attitude of inquiry entails that there is no place for a theoretical separation of
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21 philosophy from metaphilosophy. Part III serves two ends. Firstly, by examining the debate
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23 between Misak and Rorty on the uses of 'truth' we offer a practical example in support of the
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25 foregoing 'non-separation' thesis. But we also have a more diagnostic ambition; namely, to
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27 suggest that philosophers, including many pragmatists, feel themselves answerable to some
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29 'transcendental' urge, and to the conviction that to reject that urge is to reject the calling of
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31 philosophy itself. In our view, the lesson to be learned is that pragmatism teaches us that to
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33 take truth—as opposed to truths—seriously prevents us from making philosophy of use.
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35 Since no pragmatist has done more to bring this into focus, taking Rorty seriously is taking
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37 philosophy seriously.
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57 ² For an attempt to downplay the differences between neo-pragmatists and new pragmatists,
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II. Taking Philosophy Seriously

1. In their *Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Nature of Philosophy*, Talisse and Aikin argue that pragmatism is at heart a metaphilosophical programme, concerned with the issue of ‘how philosophy is properly done’ (2017, 165)—how, in our terms, to take it seriously. They are however concerned that it should not be identified with any particular first-order philosophical view of truth, meaning, or knowledge. Indeed, the degree to which one is tempted towards the latter stance is a measure of one’s susceptibility to what they call ‘metaphilosophical creep’, the phenomenon by which a philosopher moves from the recognition that their metaphilosophical commitments *inform* their first-order philosophical views to thinking that the former *explains* the latter without remainder. Metaphilosophical creep reaches its supposed apotheosis with Rorty’s Neop, according to which ‘metaphilosophy... [is] all the philosophy there could be’ (159). This flattens the philosophical terrain, leaving all first-order philosophical problems simple pseudo-problems. But as a consequence it also serves to insulate metaphilosophy from first-order critique; reducing it, perhaps, to the merely gestural and leaving philosophers to join the ranks of ‘all-purpose intellectuals’ (159, quoting Rorty 1982, xxxix) offering ‘social commentary’ that is ‘nothing other than interesting chatter’ (159).

Jonathan Knowles has likewise objected that what he thinks of as the excessive attention Rorty places on metaphilosophy comes at the cost of compromising his first-order philosophical commitments, destabilising thereby his revisionary programme. Although he explicitly distances himself from those like Misak and Talisse and Aikin who reject the cogency of Rorty’s ‘rejectionist attitude towards... objective truth’ (2019, 91), he maintains nonetheless that his antirepresentationalism (AR) is formally distinguishable from the metaphilosophical interpretation of it. Specifically, Knowles maintains that Neop—glossed

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3 as the claim that philosophy should be pursued as cultural politics—is in fact in ‘deep
4 tension’ (99) with AR. At her plainest, Eris takes the form of a dilemma: ‘[I]f philosophy
5 generally is ineffectual, then so in particular are the philosophical grounds for his
6 pragmatism, that is, AR; and if AR is not ineffectual, then neither, surely, is philosophy
7 generally’ (103). The implication is that the discordancy internal to NeoP manifests itself as
8 an inability to make evident how philosophy, in the guise of AR, can be efficacious in
9 relation to cultural politics since the latter is a ‘merely... rhetorical’ as opposed to ‘scientific’
10 (97) interpretation of it. Like Talisse and Aikin, then, for Knowles Rorty’s attitude to
11 philosophy lacks seriousness because his metaphilosophy aims to immunise itself against the
12 scrutiny of ground-level philosophical thinking.³ And although the assurance that if one is
13 disarmed of a robust philosophical language one is, as Talisse and Aikin claim, reduced to
14 mere ‘chatter’ might strike some as harsh, it chimes with Knowles’ thought that Rorty’s
15 metaphilosophical interpretation of AR would be a hard-sell to the academy because it offers
16 no more than the self-understanding that what one is doing is ‘developing edifying
17 metaphors’ (op. cit., 107). This is revealing because—as we have noted—although Knowles
18 shares the assumption that metaphilosophical creep involves an insulating move away from
19 the (first-order) philosophy that gives it its life-blood and therefore its seriousness, he does
20 not regard the ‘rejectionist’ attitude towards such key concepts as truth and objectivity as a
21 sufficient condition for Rorty’s metaphilosophy. To see this, we can deploy a distinction
22 Aikin and Talisse themselves draw on to avoid metaphilosophical creep; namely, the one
23 Price makes between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ rejection (2011, 258). Accordingly, all three
24 could then concur that the lack of seriousness that is discerned in Rorty’s attitude towards
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57 ³ Knowles is explicit about this (cf. 99—100).
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3 philosophy relates to the impossibility of seeing how it could be effectual. And that in turn
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5 derives not from his *per se* rejectionist attitude towards concepts like ‘truth’ and ‘objectivity’
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7 but on his (‘active’) attempt to evaluate metaphilosophically—to treat *as* the topic of cultural
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9 politics; interpret ‘rhetorically’—concepts, debate about the status of which for them should
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11 take place at the philosophical level; that is to say, at the level of AR (‘passively’,
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13 ‘scientifically’: whether the outcome is rejection *or* affirmation).
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19 2. At this point, our thesis is that the lack of seriousness imputed to Rorty concerning
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21 philosophy is grounded in the assumption that he ‘actively’ attempts to distinguish
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23 metaphilosophy from philosophy in order to insulate the former from the latter. This in turn
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25 renders imperspicuous how philosophy can be effectual, relegating Rorty’s
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27 metaphilosophical pronouncements to the status of rhetorical hand-waving. We will now
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29 proceed to challenge that assumption. The first step is to bring it into clearer focus by
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31 examining a more strident antagonist. In the preface to his book, Williams (2007) observes
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33 that the choice of title reflects the fact that ‘The philosophy of philosophy is part of
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35 philosophy... whereas metaphilosophy sounds as though it might try to look down on
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37 philosophy from above, or beyond’ (ix). Although this distinction may strike the reader as a
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39 mere terminological matter, Williamson means to imply rather more by it. In striving to ‘look
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41 down on philosophy’ metaphilosophy aims to absolve itself of the scrutiny due to philosophy
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43 proper. It passes off as ‘platitudes’ what are in fact ‘epistemologically and logically naïve
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45 presuppositions’, thereby derogating ‘what can only be done well by those with some respect
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47 for what they are studying’ (x). From this perspective, the ‘creep’ that Aikin and Talisse
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49 discuss is but a more muted expression of the conviction that Rorty’s metaphilosophical
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51 ascension disregards the intellectual obligation to take philosophy seriously; that it is an
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53 attempt to insulate from scrutiny commitments that are themselves the legitimate topic of
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3 ('passive') philosophical evaluation. Moreover, since the philosophy of philosophy is part of
4 philosophy, in doing so it sustains an 'implausible self-image' of that intellectual activity as a
5 whole, one that fails to 'do it justice' (x) (by relegating it to 'merely rhetorical chatter').
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12 Notwithstanding questions about their own status, what is important about Williamson's
13 prefatory comments is that they present an unequivocal account of what it is to take
14 philosophy seriously. Or to put it another way, metaphilosophical creep—the attempt to
15 distance one's activity from the responsibilities that come with the practice of philosophy *per*
16 *se*—is from this standpoint the movement away from philosophical seriousness. The
17 question, then, is does it diagnose a failure on Rorty's part to take philosophy seriously; or
18 rather, does it register a failure to take Rorty seriously as a philosopher? In order to respond
19 to these questions we require a contrasting account of what taking philosophy seriously might
20 consist in. To that end, recall Part I where it was noted that the pragmatist's anti-traditional
21 stance inclines her towards a heightened awareness of metaphilosophical—or, as we'd prefer,
22 *methodological*—issues. This is a model of reflection brought to self-conscious perfection by
23 Hegel. And just as German Romanticism sought to refashion philosophy in terms of its own
24 linguistic identity, pragmatism offers a variation on that nationalistic turn. If America is
25 Europe's dream—'the land of desire for all those who are weary of the historical arsenal of
26 old Europe'—then pragmatism has oftentimes aimed to be the philosophy fit for the 'country
27 of the future', revealing its 'world-historical importance' by helping it 'abandon the ground
28 on which world history has hitherto been enacted' (Hegel 1975, 170—1).
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53 The break with 'old Europe' that the golden age of pragmatism promised involved the
54 abandonment of the assumption that a solution to the problems of 'Truth' and 'Justice' had
55 already been woven into the fabric of being and time, and just required more careful scrutiny
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3 to discern their warp and weft. To respect these as guides to what humans should be is to
4 remain in thrall to the authority of that tradition. For philosophy to take itself and be taken
5 seriously it must, as Dewey has it, acknowledge two related desiderata:
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12 i. Recognise that ‘under disguise of dealing with ultimate reality, philosophy has been
13 occupied with the precious values embedded in social traditions’ (1988, 94); and,
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19 ii. Oppose ‘the classic notion’ of its nature, according to which it ‘has arrogated to itself the
20 office of demonstrating the existence of a transcendent, absolute, or inner reality and of
21 revealing to man [its] nature and features’ (ibid, 92).
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28 The first recalls what Rorty hails as ‘Hegel’s thesis’ from the ‘Preface’ to the *Outlines of the*
29 *Philosophy of Right*: ‘To comprehend *what is*, this is the task of philosophy, because *what is*,
30 is reason... philosophy... is *its own time apprehended in thoughts [ihre Zeit in Gedanke*
31 *erfaßt]*’ (Hegel 2008, 15). For Hegel—writing here about freedom—there are sufficient
32 intimations in history for philosophy to identity the concept and hence the ‘what is’ of reason.
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39 America, however, is but ‘an echo of the Old World and the expression of an alien life’ and
40 thus the subject *not* of philosophy, which is ‘concerned... with that which *is*’, but of
41 ‘prophecy’ (Hegel 1975, 171). For Dewey, then, pragmatism represents the moment of
42 disciplinary self-consciousness when the ‘world-historical importance’ of America is grasped
43 and Hegel’s ‘alien life’ is revealed as part of the ‘what is’ of reason. And with that self-
44 understanding comes the realisation—the second desideratum—that what must be opposed is
45 the ‘echo of the Old World’ (ibid), that lingering sense of the ‘classic notion’ of philosophy
46 with its attendant sources of authority.
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3 3. For Rorty (1998a), filtering Hegelianism through Darwin gave Dewey the conceptual
4 resources to naturalise away the distinction between the human and nonhuman and thus open
5 up the possibility of inventing a new category of the former: one that allowed for the reversal
6 of the priority of philosophy and democracy by asking not how philosophy could justify the
7 latter, but how it could be of service in that great experiment. But while Dewey's advocacy of
8 the primacy of the practical helps loosen the bonds of 'old Europe', his espousal of a
9 metaphysics of experience and faith in the emancipatory promise of science leave him
10 ultimately only semi-detached from that tradition. Dewey fails to embrace fully the sense that
11 the philosophy fit for the 'country of the future' is indeed 'prophetic' as Hegel would have it;
12 but that does not signify that it cannot *become* the 'what is' of reason if it is taken up by the
13 relevant community. Returning to our two desiderata, if breaking with the tradition means
14 abandoning the idea that one's proposal is a representation of the *really* real (as in
15 'philosophy has *really* been occupied with precious values *and not* with some transcendent
16 reality')—if, that is to say, (i) has the character of a prophetic proposal—then (ii) clearly
17 cannot function in the way Dewey intended to bring (i) about. But if (ii) cannot be, as one
18 might put it, 'scientific' *as opposed to* 'rhetorical'—serious as opposed to gestural—what
19 does taking philosophy seriously require?
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45 A clue here comes from Rorty. As he tells us in 'Trotsky and the Wild Orchids' his
46 'rediscovery of Dewey' coincided with his 'first encounter with Derrida', beginning a
47 'journey' that culminated with *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1999, 12). Concluding
48 'The Ends of Man', Derrida (1982) reflects on the peculiar 'logic' of escaping the
49 metaphysical tradition. Since any attempt that places itself radically outside that discourse is
50 open to the charge that it is at best a 'false exit', deconstruction must start from 'where we
51 are' (135). There are thus two options: either,
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6 A. One uses ‘against the edifice the instruments or stones available in the house’, or
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10 B. One attempts to ‘change terrain in a discontinuous and irruptive fashion’ (op. cit.).
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14 However, while (A) risks ‘ceaselessly confirming, consolidating, relifting’ that which one
15 aims to escape, (B) attempts to ‘affirm an absolute break’ and thus falls foul of the fact that
16 ‘the simple practice of language ceaselessly reinstates the new terrain on the oldest ground’
17 (op. cit). The dialectical response to this challenge of reappropriation and exclusion is to do
18 both: ‘weave and interlace these two motifs... produce several texts at once’ (op. cit.).
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28 Although the best example of Rorty’s use of this polytextual approach is *Contingency,*
29 *Irony and Solidarity*, the book he nominates as his favourite (2010, 17), we get a clear
30 statement of it in the ‘Preface’ to his last collection of papers (2007):
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38 Like my previous writings... [m]ost of the papers collected in this volume... are attempts
39 to weave together Hegel’s thesis... with a non-representationalist account of language... I
40 argue that Hegelian historicism and a Wittgensteinian ‘social practice’ approach to
41 language complement and reinforce one another. (ix)
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49 According to Rorty’s take on ‘Hegel’s thesis’, what is ‘apprehended in thought’ is not the
50 ‘what is’ of something that is fully rationally evaluable (something ‘scientific’) but what
51 Derrida calls ‘the trembling’ that derives from a ‘philosophical thought after some internal
52 maturation of its history’ (op. cit., 134). To take philosophy seriously requires of it that it
53 attempt to articulate that prophetic trembling and begin to map-out the possibilities that have
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3 been glimpsed.⁴ Philosophy as ‘cultural politics’ is the term Rorty gives to this ‘new terrain’.
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5 It ‘covers, among other things, arguments about what words to use... It includes projects for
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7 getting rid of whole topics of discourse’ (2007, 5).
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12 Returning to that charge of ‘metaphysical creep’, our challenge is to the assumption that
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14 Rorty tries to hold apart and insulate metaphilosophy from philosophy. From the perspective
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16 of the alternative model of seriousness proposed, this presupposes that given the two styles of
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18 deconstruction characterised (A) is essentially separable theoretically from (B). That is
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20 clearly not compatible with Derrida’s conception: as he notes, in breaking with the tradition
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22 one risks ‘ceaselessly confirming, consolidating... that which one allegedly deconstructs’
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24 (op. cit.); the new terrain that is championed ends up being reinstated on old terrain. That is
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26 what leaves Dewey only ‘semi-detached’. To get ‘rid of whole topics of discourse’, then,
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28 requires us to resist the ‘simple practice of language’ by moving (pragmatically) backwards
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30 and forwards between the ‘deconstructive’ modes, attempting to undercut one way of talking
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32 while at the same time sketching out an alternative. In this light, consider a suggestion
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34 evocative of Williamson’s formulation: ‘I want to argue that cultural politics should replace
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36 ontology, and also that whether it should or not is itself a matter of cultural politics’ (Rorty
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38 op. cit., 5). Instead of ‘the philosophy of philosophy’ we have ‘the cultural politics of cultural
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40 politics’. And as with Williamson, there is no metaphilosophy to stand formally outside and
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42 in judgement. In this sense NeoP isn’t akin to Montaignian rhubarb: it isn’t intended to
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44 merely expel the ‘ill humours’ of traditional philosophy and thereby bring about its ‘End’
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55 ⁴ This is the sort of change in self-understanding that Knowles would appear to disallow as
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57 being ‘pragmatic’.
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3 (Hazlitt 1877, II, 262—63. Cf. Hicks 1925, 76). Cultural politics is the name given both to
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5 the new terrain *and* the means proposed for getting there.
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10 As presented, philosophy as cultural politics is a natural extension of Rorty's early
11 eliminativism⁵, where the *sui generis* ontological status of the mental is impugned by
12 demonstrating the in-principle intelligibility of materialism. But as he observes, the greatest
13 impediment to embracing the prophetic suggestion that philosophy is cultural politics; that is
14 to say, to the determination that this is itself a 'cultural political' question (a question of how
15 we chose to talk); is the 'ontological' alternative, elliptical for the 'old terrain', Dewey's
16 'Ultimate and Absolute Reality'. This is why so much attention is paid to concepts like
17 'truth' and 'objectivity', the traditional understanding of which—exhibited through 'the
18 simple practice of language'—sustains the 'old terrain'. But these concepts are not
19 'interpreted rhetorically', or subject to metaphilosophical imposture. Rather, suggestions are
20 made, in engagement with 'realist' and other competing accounts, that might help bring about
21 the new rational standard (the 'what is') by which they will come to be evaluated *as such*.
22 There can be no insulation of the metaphilosophical stance from first-order philosophical
23 debate because this experimentalist approach⁶ signifies that any changes to the way we think
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46 ⁵ For a defence of this point and of the associated claim that Rorty's work from the 1970s
47 offers a vindication of the practice of 'traditional' philosophy—albeit as part of 'cultural
48 politics'—see Gascoigne (forthcoming).
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53 ⁶ The temptation is to contrast theory with method. But as Rorty notes while for the
54 pragmatist 'it becomes easy to recommend an experimental, fallibilist attitude' it is 'hard to
55 isolate a 'method' that will embody this attitude' (1991, 66).
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3 and talk come about by the displacement of one vocabulary by another, and such a
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5 *theoretical* distinction has no pragmatic value in such a setting.
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10 11 12 **III: Truth and Transcendence** 13 14 15

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17 1. In II.1 we noted that the critics considered concur that if the concepts like ‘truth’ and
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19 ‘objectivity’ are restricted to first-order (‘passive’) evaluation then ‘metaphilosophical creep’
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21 can be avoided. This suggests that it is Rorty’s elimination/redescription of key philosophical
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23 terms in the interest of cultural politics that is moot. So when Rorty avers that part of the
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25 philosopher’s job is to examine ‘technical debates between contemporary philosophers in the
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27 light of our hopes for cultural change’ (2007, x) the assumption is that this promotes an
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29 ‘active’ mode of rejection that connotes an unwillingness to take philosophy seriously. Our
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31 response to this assumption has been to show that, on the understanding of Rorty’s attitude
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33 we’ve advanced, the philosophy-metaphilosophy distinction on which it depends presupposes
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35 the sort of dogmatic idea of what is the appropriate ‘self-image’ for philosophy that
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37 Williamson aims to promote. Given the latter’s defence of the traditional ‘armchair’ method
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39 of philosophising, that seems like an ill-conceived line of criticism for pragmatists of any
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41 stamp to take.
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49 Having said that, there remains a further objection, which is that the charge that philosophy
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51 isn’t being taken seriously cuts more deeply than this; that the imputed ‘creep’ and
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53 correspondingly ‘active’ redescription of the key concepts of philosophy are but proxies for a
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55 rejection of something more fundamental that even (or perhaps, especially) pragmatists
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57 should acknowledge. The suspicion here is not so much that NeoP is rendered dialectically
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3 ineffectual by its insistence on dealing ‘actively’ with those key concepts, but that doing so
4 amounts to a slight on some ineliminable mode of our relationship to the world: a failure to
5 respect an all-too-human desire for ‘transcendence’. In this section we’ll contend in a
6 diagnostic vein that for Rorty’s critics taking philosophy seriously requires that one take *truth*
7 seriously⁷, and that to take truth seriously requires an acknowledgement of that desire for
8 ‘transcendence’.
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19 As a criticism of Rorty, the ‘transcendence charge’ goes back to at least Nagel. In *The View*
20 *of Nowhere* he diagnoses the appeal of ‘deflationary metaphilosophical theories like ...
21 pragmatism’ to those ‘who are sick of the subject and glad to be rid of its problems’ (1986,
22 11). For Nagel, theirs amounts to ‘a rebellion against the philosophical impulse itself’. Nagel
23 in contrast urges us to acknowledge this impulse, thinking it ‘necessary to combine the
24 recognition of our contingency, our finitude, and our containment in the world with an
25 ambition of transcendence’ (9). How are we to combine these two elements? Nagel proposes
26 that while we will never do so perfectly, we can nevertheless maintain what he calls a ‘robust
27 sense of reality and of its independence of any particular form of human understanding’ (5).
28 We are supposed to be able to retain this sense by committing ourselves to pursuing the truth,
29 which Nagel takes to require ‘the generation and decisive elimination of alternative
30 possibilities until, ideally, only one remains, and it requires a habitual readiness to attack
31 one’s own convictions’ (9).
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55 ⁷ We might just as easily have chosen any one of the constellation of philosophical
56 concepts that include ‘objectivity’, ‘reality’ etc.
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3 For pragmatists, the difficulty with Nagel's position begins with the very idea of a position
4 independent of any particular form of human understanding. We are natural creatures who
5 seek to contend with our environment, and as we change that environment we change
6 ourselves along with it. We cannot aspire to a position of *independence* from any particular
7 form of human understanding (of *where we are*), but only to revise that understanding as we
8 move around the world. Accordingly, there is no test for the truth of our beliefs other than
9 their suitability to enable us to cope with it. As Rorty notes: 'On James's view, 'true'
10 resembles 'good' or 'rational' in being a normative notion, a compliment paid to sentences
11 that seem to be paying their way and that fit in with other sentences which are doing so'
12 (1982, xxv). Since we have no test for the truth of a belief other than its usefulness for a
13 particular purpose, this means that truth drops out as a distinct goal of inquiry. The most
14 inquirers can do is secure justification for a belief; but once they have done so there is no
15 additional means to go on to establish its truth:
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35 If I have concrete, specific doubts about whether one of my beliefs is true, I can resolve
36 those doubts only by asking whether it is adequately justified—by finding and assessing
37 additional reasons pro and con. I cannot bypass justification and confine my attention to
38 truth: assessment of truth and assessment of justification are, when the question is about
39 what I should believe now, the same activity. (1998b, 19)
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49 This seems a long way from Nagel's 'ambition of transcendence', although exactly how far is
50 not clear; as Nagel tells, philosophy 'is after eternal and nonlocal truth, *even though we know*
51 *that is not what we are going to get*' (op. cit., 10. Emphasis added). Since our interest in
52 transcendence is not with Nagel's realism but in the role it plays in contemporary
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3 pragmatism we will not tease out the implications of this rather gnomonic reflection directly,
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5 but show instead how something like it plays out in Misak's influential version of NewP.
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10 2. Unsurprisingly, for any pragmatist, Misak is in accord with Rorty's criticisms of the
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12 correspondence theory of truth, noting that it precludes the possibility that propositions about
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14 politics and morality can be true: if truth is a matter correspondence, there seem to be no
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16 items in the world to which such propositions might correspond. However, Rorty is said to
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18 have mistakenly moved from giving up the idea of truth as correspondence to rejecting the
19
20 idea that truth plays *any* role in inquiry. In a criticism we have associated with Price's notion
21
22 of 'active' rejection, Misak writes that 'when Rorty examines our practices of inquiry, he
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24 finds that truth plays no role whatsoever' (2010, 34).
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30 Now on the face of it, it is odd for Misak to claim that Rorty takes truth to play *no* role
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32 whatsoever, since she notes that he employs what he calls the 'endorsing' use of truth,
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34 according to which to assert *p* is to assert that *p* is true (Rorty 1991, 128; Misak 2013, 236).
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36 We leave this tension aside for a moment in order to examine Misak's NewP alternative.
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38 Drawing on Peirce, Misak argues that the concept of truth is closely connected to the practice
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40 of inquiry. Peirce speaks of truth as what would be reached at the 'end of inquiry', but
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42 commentators have often noted problems with this idea. Bertrand Russell, for example,
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44 pointed out that it implies the obviously false consequence that whatever beliefs happen to be
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46 held by those when the world ends will be true (Misak 2004, 67). Misak acknowledges this
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48 objection, but argues that this is not the only formulation of Peirce's position:
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56 a better characterisation is that a true belief is one that would withstand doubt, were we to
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58 inquire as far as we fruitfully could on the matter. A true belief is such that, no matter
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3 how much further we were to investigate and debate, that belief would not be overturned
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5 by recalcitrant experience and argument. (2000, 49)
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10 A commitment to what Misak calls ‘truth as indefeasibility’ avoids the problem that Russell
11 identified in Peirce’s account, but at the same time she thinks that it enables her to hold onto
12 what she describes as ‘low profile, non-absolutist conceptions of truth and objectivity which
13 can guide us in our inquiries and deliberations’ (2013, 231).
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21 Misak holds that truth is closely connected to inquiry but, importantly, not to any *particular*
22 community of inquiry. Truth ‘guides’ inquiry because it requires that inquirers not limit
23 themselves to their conversational partners but must address reasons and argument from
24 wherever they come. Misak claims that what she variously calls ‘a methodological
25 requirement’ and ‘methodological principle’ follows from truth as indefeasibility: ‘a
26 methodological requirement falls out of the idea that a true belief would be the best belief,
27 were inquiry to be pursued as far as it could fruitfully go. That methodological principle is
28 that the experience of others must be taken seriously’. (2000, 6) Misak can be seen to hold
29 onto a notion of transcendence, insofar as truth outruns whatever inquirers happen to believe
30 at any particular point in time. By hewing to the Peircean methodological ‘requirement’ or
31 ‘principle’, inquirers avoid what Misak calls the ‘sea of arbitrariness’ into which Neop
32 purportedly plunges us (2013, 4), in which truth comes to nothing more than whatever a
33 community believes, and which accordingly will vary from culture to culture. Rorty objects
34 that infeasibility adds nothing to the idea of securing justification with one’s conversational
35 partners (2010b, 45), but Misak disagrees, spelling out what she takes it to add in this way:
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3 ...an enhanced willingness to see out and take seriously new evidence and argument. The
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5 Peircean inquirer aims at getting beliefs that *would* stand up to whatever evidence and
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7 argument could come their way, hence it is only rational to expose beliefs to all the
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9 available evidence and argument to see if they meet interim bar. (2013, 233)
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14 This 'enhanced willingness' is held by Misak to mark a key difference between NewP and
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16 NeoP. It is important for NewP because it enables inquirers to hold onto the intuition that
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18 truth transcends what they currently believe, while at the same time seeing truth as a part of
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20 the practice of inquiry. We can ask, however: what is to stop the NeoP striving to
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22 accommodate new evidence and argument? Rorty often speaks about the importance of
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24 imagination as the means to extend the scope of 'we' as widely as possible; his 'ideally
25
26 liberal society' set out in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* is ideal precisely because it is
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28 open to encounters between different people and vocabularies. Misak's claim is that while
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30 Rorty might *say* this, in the absence of the methodological requirement that she claims falls
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32 out of an understanding of truth as indefeasibility, he cannot explain *why* inquirers must be
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34 open to others in this way. To do that, what is needed is a notion of truth which firmly
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36 distinguishes between justification and truth; between what is agreed to by a community of
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38 inquiry and what would stand undefeated no matter how far inquiry were to be pursued.
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46 For Misak, the advocate of NeoP has no reason to move beyond her conversational partners
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48 whereas NewP provides reason to do so in the form of its 'methodological requirement'. But
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50 this is not a difference that makes a difference. Rorty is clear that truth does not reduce to
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52 what is justified to any *particular* community of inquiry. Inquirers cannot step over the
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54 practice of justifying beliefs to one another and turn their attention directly to the truth, but
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56 that does not mean reducing the latter to the former. Rorty gets at this difference in the one
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3 sense of truth he thinks indispensable, the 'cautionary', according to which a belief, no matter
4 how justified, may turn out not to be true (1991, 128).
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10 3. Misak begins an exchange with Rorty by writing that: 'I am starting to think that the
11 disagreements between Rorty and the pragmatist who wants to acknowledge the objective
12 dimension of human inquiry may be starting to fade away' (2010, 28). In her view, Rorty's
13 acceptance of the distinction between justification and truth (the 'endorsing use') commits
14 him to 'a substantial notion of truth' (37). However, Rorty is said not to recognise the
15 consequence of accepting this. Misak claims that Rorty's 'endorsing' use of truth, which as
16 we saw above holds that to assert that p is true is to endorse p as true, is contradicted by the
17 'cautionary' use which holds that p may turn out to be untrue. As she puts it, Rorty
18 'require[s] us to think, in one thought, that p is true, but it might be shown to be false' (236).
19 The NewP account of truth as indefeasibility is said to resolve this tension. If truth is seen as
20 indefeasibility, to endorse p as true is to claim that p will *not* subsequently be shown to be
21 false: 'Someone who asserts p needs to predict that her assertion would stand up to the
22 evidence and argument now and to subsequent evidence and argument' (236).
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42 However, the tension that Misak identifies in Rorty's position is overstated. To affirm both
43 the truth of p and that p may yet turn out to be untrue, far from being unique—and uniquely
44 problematic—for NeoP, is a central pragmatist commitment. From Peirce onwards,
45 pragmatists have sought to steer a course between dogmatism and scepticism by arguing that
46 practices are adequate to the purposes they serve until such time as they are called into
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3 question.⁸ To be sure, they might come to be revised or replaced, but that requires concrete
4 reason. As a Peircean, Misak is committed to this; as she writes, '[a]ll of our beliefs are
5 fallible but they do not come into doubt all at once. Those which inquiry has not thrown into
6 doubt are stable and we should retain them until a reason to doubt arises' (34).
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14 Misak, then, does not want to say that willingness to endorse *p* commits inquirers to say
15 that *p* will never turn out to be untrue. The difference between NewP and NeoP concerns not,
16 as she claims, different understandings of the relationship between the endorsing and
17 cautionary uses of truth, but rather what the latter entails. Here, Rorty denies something that
18 Misak affirms: that '[a] believer both accepts this possibility [of falsification] and bets that it
19 will not come about' (236). Rorty denies this because to claim that a belief will never be
20 falsified is to predict what 'would happen in a potentially infinite number of justificatory
21 contexts before a potentially infinitely diverse set of audiences' (cited in Misak 2013, 236).
22 This is certainly a difference in their stated positions, but when pressed the difference can be
23 seen to be merely terminological. Misak says that Rorty's summary is an 'infelicitous way of
24 stating the required prediction'. The correct way to put it is, she continues, to say that an
25 assertion 'would stand up to the evidence and argument now and to subsequent evidence and
26 argument' (236). However, we at least are unable to make out the difference between the two
27 formulations. Rorty's way of putting things captures the fact that inquirers have no idea what
28 evidence and argument might emerge in the future, and Misak's term 'subsequent evidence
29 and argument' says the same thing, albeit downplaying the potentially infinite number of
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55 ⁸ Cf. Putnam: 'That one can be both fallibilistic *and* antiskeptical is perhaps the basic insight
56 of American Pragmatism' (1992, 29).
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3 directions from which they might come. And if this is acknowledged, Rorty is surely correct
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5 to say that the prediction that a belief will never be overturned is unjustified, for the reason
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7 that inquirers simply have no idea what new reasons and evidence might come to them in the
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9 future and therefore have no basis on which to make such a prediction.
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15 Misak has not identified a difference to behaviour that the notion of truth as indefeasibility
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17 might produce in inquirers. Although she claims to accept fallibilism, her insistence that the
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19 inquirer ‘bets’ and ‘predicts’ that her beliefs will not turn out to be untrue betrays a residual
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21 attachment to the ambition of transcendence. That ambition is perhaps understandable in the
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23 case of a writer such as Nagel, but is out of place for pragmatists. Is there a means by which
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25 pragmatists might be weaned from this ambition? In closing, we will suggest so.
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33 **IV. Conclusion**

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38 1. In this paper we have defended the claim that Rorty should be taken seriously. Firstly, we
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40 endeavoured to show that construing NeoP as a solely metaphilosophical exercise that
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42 renders its own position ineffectual assumes a rather traditional—indeed, ‘intellectualist’—
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44 model of what it is to take philosophy seriously. As an essentially experimental attitude
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46 towards inquiry there is no role in pragmatism for a theoretical separation of ‘philosophy’
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48 from ‘metaphilosophy’. As Williamson rightly notes, the philosophy of philosophy is part of
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50 philosophy, and Rorty’s recommendations for how philosophy might be pursued are likewise
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52 part of philosophy itself. Our second defence was more diagnostic in character, the
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54 contention being that philosophers feel themselves answerable to some ‘transcendent’ urge,
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56 and to the conviction that to reject that urge is to reject the calling of philosophy itself. More
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3 specifically, the suggestion was that that urge has become attached to the concept of truth,
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5 thereby dictating what philosophical seriousness consists in; namely, making truth
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7 transcendent. Indeed, in honour of Talisse and Aiken we might designate the movement
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9 towards this account of philosophical seriousness ‘transcendent creep’. Nagel, as we saw,
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11 gives full expression to this movement; but his sense of wonderment is similarly expressive
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13 in revealing the limits *not of the urge itself* but of its *cognitive* import. We noted above
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15 Nagel’s claim that while we may be after ‘eternal truths’, ‘we know that is not what we are
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17 going to get’. If we do indeed cognise this fact, perhaps it is because what the urge reveals to
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19 us is not a dimension of our *epistemic* lives but of our *practical* lives⁹.
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26 And here we end with a tentative suggestion that links up that diagnostic response with
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28 the concluding discussion of the role of truth-talk. Consider:
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33 a. In the pursuit of particular truths we can only imagine ourselves justifying our beliefs
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35 through social activities;
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40 b. Truth is not the same as justification (and ‘ideal’ justification is meaningless, because of
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42 (a))
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48 ⁹ In the sense that, as Wiggins reads Aristotle’s *Ethics*, ‘the subject matter of action (the
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50 province where it operates and the field of things it is concerned with) is inexhaustibly
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52 indefinite’ (2004, 480—1). The ‘intellectualist’, on the other hand, holds that ‘the matter of
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54 the practical can [...] be treated with, handled, mastered or managed by means of principles
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56 or precepts that are at once general and unrestrictedly correct’ (op. cit.).
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5 One way to bring (a) and (b) into alignment is through the notion that truth is a distinct norm.
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8 On the face of it at least, that appears to be the motivation for submitting to ‘transcendent
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10 creep’. Rorty, as we’ve seen, offers a cautionary ‘use’ in the place of that temptation to ‘go
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12 normative’. So one way to buttress our claim that a non-normative use is not prima facie in
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14 tension with the normative use would be to offer an account of how these distinct uses of
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16 ‘true’ could constellate and yet not indicate the need for a univocal concept: one which, by
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18 hypothesis, would incorporate the desire for transcendence.
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24 In his at-the-time neglected but more recently feted book *Knowledge and the State of*
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26 *Nature*, Edward Craig (1991) opposes to the sterility as he sees it of the analytic approach to
27
28 ‘understanding’ knowledge a genealogical method. To that end he proposes that we imagine
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30 what sort of concept people in an ‘epistemic’ state of nature with basic human needs and the
31
32 social means to coordinate them might develop. His proposal is that the pressing need is not
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34 the acquisition of knowledge but the need to identify a ‘good informant’; that is to say,
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36 someone who ‘can tell us the truth about p , is prepared to do so, and has some property which
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38 reliably indicates it’ (159)¹⁰. Since by hypothesis the ‘signposts’ to the good informant can
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51 ¹⁰ See, for example, Dewey 1930: ‘But after all, this practical work done by habit and instinct
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53 in securing prompt and exact adjustment to the environment is not knowledge, except by
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55 courtesy. Or, if we choose to call it knowledge... then... knowledge *that* things are thus and
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57 so... remains of a different sort, unaccounted for and undescribed’ (178).
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3 only be social in nature we can appropriate¹¹ Craig's proposal and suggest that 'true' here is
4 being used in the 'endorsing' sense. As Craig readily acknowledges (11, 41, 63 and *passim*),
5 the search for 'good informants' is an expression of the need (urge) to *inquire*¹². And an ever-
6 present aspect of inquiry is the possibility of encountering new points of view: proposals that
7 might reconfigure the epistemic routes to good informants (and who occupy those functional
8 roles). From this perspective we can conceive of a 'cautionary' expression being used to flag
9 the awareness of fallibility, of the possibility that S might not *always* prove to be the better
10 informant.
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24 2. Turning now to how we might end up using the same word, the story we can adapt from
25 Craig is much more familiar. As he notes in his discussion of Nagel's *View from Nowhere*
26 and Bernard Williams's (1978) 'absolute' conception of truth, any move towards the
27 objectivization of a concept involves the growing awareness of cognitively different vantage
28 points (cf. 128). But rather than just serve to 'sharpen our consciousness of the claims of
29 fallibilism, and make us more alive to just how many of our present beliefs might have to go
30 by the board', the highly 'objectivized' concepts of truth and reality that Nagel and Williams
31 trade in 'push[ing] our conception of the world out of reach, always one step beyond the
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46 ¹¹ It should be noted that this is an adaptation of Craig's approach. He would not 'endorse'
47 this pragmatist use of truth.
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50 ¹² '[W]e are in the position of inquirers, not of examiners (to borrow Bernard Williams's way
51 of putting it)' (ibid., 18). There are interesting parallels between Craig's genealogical
52 approach and Dewey's naturalism (cf. 1930), and this section—and indeed, Craig's
53 analysis—could be greatly enriched by drawing on Dewey's (1938) conception of inquiry.
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3 latest advance of our inquiry' (129). As traditional pragmatist critiques of the quest for
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5 certainty would have it, the failure to see that the movement towards objectification discovers
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7 its limits *in practice* is what drives epistemology into scepticism and the real into the domain
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9 of the transcendent. The 'cautionary' use of truth is an assembled reminder of the fallibility
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11 of inquiry and the consequent *methodological* imperative to keep the conversation open.
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17 One conception of the state of nature that Craig (1991, 2007) doesn't mention is Rousseau's
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19 in his *Discourse on Inequality*. Central to Rousseau's genealogical strategy is the conviction
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21 that society is incapable of answering the question posed (is inequality authorized by natural
22
23 law?) directly because it is irredeemably corrupted. We can extend that to Craig's analysis of
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25 knowledge: it's impossible to 'analyse' the concept because it is an unstable 'objectification'
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27 of something rooted in human needs and practices and analysis is itself a 'corrupt' method.
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29 And likewise we can extend it to our discussion of truth: The drive towards the
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31 objectification of 'truth' became a fallibilism-denying pursuit of certainty that put
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33 'transcendence' at the heart of the univocal concept. And just as analysis fails to make
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35 knowledge determinate, the quote from Nagel gives expression to the failure of a certain
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37 approach to make truth determinate. Rather than take truth—as opposed to *truths*—seriously,
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39 the lesson that pragmatism teaches is that it is taking it seriously that leads to transcendent
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41 creep and prevents us from making philosophy of use. Since no pragmatist has done more to
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43 bring this into focus, taking Rorty seriously is taking philosophy seriously¹³.
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50 ¹³ Versions of this paper were presented at the second meeting of the Richard Rorty
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52 Society at Penn State University and at the conference *Philosophy, Poetry, and Utopian*
53
54 *Politics: The Relevance of Richard Rorty* at the University of Cambridge. We are grateful to
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56 the organisers of those events, and to participants both for helpful responses to our paper and
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