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Nietzsche, Pragmatism, and Progress

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I argue that in Richard Rorty's pragmatism we find a view of political progress at once at home in Nietzsche's thought and in the Enlightenment tradition. If we think of progress as indexed to some permanent standard, and then agree that it is Nietzsche who dispels the authority of any such standard, then we may perhaps conclude that after Nietzsche, progress is ruled out. I want to show, however, that we find in Nietzsche comfort for a continued vision of human progress through engaged political action. I suggest that we look to Jacques Derrida and Rorty as offering a vision of a post-Nietzschean democracy the engine of which is what I call a progress without end.

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

0. Nietzsche wrote himself into the role of vanguard for a generation of philosophers whose task it would be to come to terms with the human being as inhabitant of an indifferent universe of infinite possibility and infinite danger. He warned his new philosophers to be wary, vigilant: "by your side lies the ocean; true it does not always roar, and sometimes it lies there like silk and gold and daydreams of kindness. But the hours are coming when you will recognize that it is infinite, and that there is nothing more terrifying than infinity."[1] I want in this paper to place the pragmatism of Richard Rorty into conversation with the work of Jacques Derrida. I will suggest that we read both as responding to Nietzsche in a way that preserves the possibility of political progress central to our thinking about democracy. Nietzsche is of course an unlikely candidate for such a role, for if we think of progress as indexed to some permanent standard, and then agree that it is Nietzsche who dispels the authority of any such standard, then we may perhaps conclude that after Nietzsche, progress is ruled out. I want to show, however, that we find in Nietzsche

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* trans. Richard Polt (Hackett Publishing, 1995), aphorism 124.

comfort for a continued vision of human progress through engaged political action. I suggest that Derrida and Rorty can be viewed together as offering a vision of a post-Nietzschean democracy the engine of which is a view of ameliorative progress that lays claim to the best of progressive, Enlightenment thought while rightly abandoning the universalist overtones of the Enlightenment proper.

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

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

Nietzsche begins *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* with a sentence that might usefully establish the context of our conversation: "Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing."[2] It is difficult to agree and still see knowledge as something that puts us into contact with

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" in *The Nietzsche Reader*. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large, eds. Trans. Daniel Breazeale. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 114.

a world other than the merely human. Instead, knowledge is a human creation, the invention of a creature attempting to survive in an indifferent universe. One effect of so viewing knowledge is to see it as something we do rather than something we find, something that comes into its own through and by our own interventions, interventions conditioned by our needs as creatures of a particular sort.

Both Rorty and Derrida share this view of human knowledge as the creation of human actors, and so each approaches conversations about political concepts, traditions, and institutions accordingly. Both see our institutions as leaky vessels atop Nietzsche's infinite ocean, moving us along, yes, but in need of the constant work of inspection, repair, and imaginative rebuilding. We survive, and possibly thrive, through the constant weaving together of limited, provisional narratives about what the future might be like. Theirs is not an attempt to set things on the correct course, to find in Rorty's words "the correct track across an abyss" towards an already existing end, but instead to create those ends through the very act of envisioning them.[3] It is furthermore to recognize the contingency and fallibility of our aspirations, their status as manifestations of the hopes of particular communities, and most importantly to cease wishing that they might be something more. Both envision progress without end: without cessation and without telos. A progress without end would be one that retained what is the best about democratic thinking while cheerfully jettisoning the universalist underpinnings that democracy and its concomitant values have claimed thus far. Coming to terms with such a notion ultimately requires coming to terms with Nietzsche's ocean, and that is what is on offer in the political visions of Derrida and Rorty.

1. I want to start with Richard Rorty's reading of Derrida before moving on to a discussion of Derrida's complication of justice. Rorty was a fan of Derrida's work and wrote affectionately about him for three decades. But for Rorty, Derrida is a figure of private self-perfection rather than a public intellectual who might have something to say about getting along with our fellow human beings. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty develops a political vision that hinges on a strict divide between the public and private spheres. For Rorty, we need to give up attempts to bring the private and public, sublime and beautiful, otherworldly and prosaic together. Philosophers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida are indeed brilliant, but useful only in our private lives; they offer suggestions for what we might do with our solitude rather than with our responsibilities to others. The

[3] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.146.

overarching compromise of Rorty's book is that we "*privatize* the Nietzschean-Sartrean-Foucaldian attempt at authenticity and purity, in order to prevent [ourselves] from slipping into a political attitude which will lead [us] to think that there is some social goal more important than avoiding cruelty."[4] For the day-to-day governance of our communities, we need banal, everyday, pragmatic reasoning and compromise rather than the revolutionary ushering in of a new world. Nietzsche does not help us extend the scope of welfare programs; Heidegger cannot help in our inner cities; Rorty sees Derrida as part of this class of writers, each brilliant but none suitable for political thought.

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

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

One way to think of Derrida is as an interrogator of what Heidegger called Words of Being, words the presence of which in our vocabularies makes us the people we are. Derrida seems to agree in part with Heidegger that language speaks man, but then tries to reverse that one-way conversation by problematizing words and concepts. He agrees that in some sense we are stuck in language, so that all there is to do, the only way to be difficult, is to act out against it, to show its shortcomings,

[4] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.65.

its inherent frustrations so as to flee "the prison of all languages."[5] So Derrida interrogates; he puts into question concepts like the gift, forgiveness, and law. This work of questioning is the work of deconstruction, and deconstruction takes place through and by a call for justice.

Derrida calls justice impossible. To say that justice is impossible is to say that it is not the type of thing which presents itself, which comes to characterize a concrete situation. Instead, it is what is glimpsed, what is called after, when we as humans try to interact with one another on an equitable basis. Justice is that for which laws are made, "it is just that there be law," but laws can never fully embody justice.[6] Whereas a law counts, puts into place individuals, sets the rules of a certain arithmetic, justice is a demand which belies concrete formalization. It refuses form, refuses to count, to put into units.

So Derrida pulls apart law from justice. Law is the attempt by humans to create stability atop chaos, to make cooperation possible. It is founded atop an abyss, Nietzsche's infinite ocean, and is therefore constitutively and forever without foundations: "The operation that amounts to founding, inaugurating, justifying law, to *making law*, would consist of a *coup de force*, of a performative and therefore interpretative violence that in itself is neither just nor unjust…"[7] With every law, every institution, we can trace backward to a moment of founding which creates, with the law, the very justification for its existence. And so, whenever we hear a claim to authority, to foundation, we can deconstruct that claim, and show what has been called stable and unchanging to be a precarious accomplishment, the founding of stability atop chaos. In following Derrida, then, we find ourselves in a precarious Nietzschean predicament, staring at an infinite ocean. And we are terrified, we suffer. "The suffering of deconstruction, what makes it suffer and what makes suffer those who suffer from it, is perhaps the absence of rules, of norms, and definitive criteria…"[8]

However, to quote Derrida, this is "not bad news."[9] If we can come to terms with our role in the creation of law and all those institutions that make community possible, we can begin to wield the power of that role for purposes of our own choosing. Rather than mourning the absence of absolutes, hoping for the security of

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[5] Jacques Derrida, "Circumfession" in Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington, eds. *Jacques Derrida*. Bennington, trans. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, p.289.

[6] Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law," in Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, Gil Anidjar, ed. p.244.

[7] Ibid, p.241.

[8] Ibid, p.231. Interesting for our purposes, William James describes his pragmatist as having "a certain willingness to live without assurances and guarantees."

[9] Ibid, p.242.

dry land, we can, with Nietzsche and Derrida, become navigators of this infinite ocean. Derrida writes both of this fear and of its overcoming in a contribution to *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* which merits a full hearing:

Now, this chaos and instability, which is fundamental, founding and irreducible, is at once naturally the worst against which we struggle with laws, rules, conventions, politics and provisional hegemony, but at the same time it is a chance, a chance to change, to destabilize. If there were continual stability, there would be no need for politics, and it is to the extent that stability is not natural, essential or substantial, that politics exists and ethics is possible. Chaos is at once a risk and a chance, and it is here that the possible and the impossible cross each other.[10]

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

So to say with Derrida that deconstruction is justice is to say that because we can no longer claim absolute authority for our institutions we can never be satisfied with them. Because justice remains to come, because it cannot be captured by our creations, we must ceaselessly seek out particular injustices to be remedied, ceaselessly interrogate the approximation of justice currently embodied in our laws. For Derrida we are to "never yield on this point, constantly to maintain a questioning of the origin, grounds and limits of our conceptual, theoretical or normative apparatus surrounding justice."[11]

Justice is a plea built into each invocation of the word, a call which envisions a future world in order to demand action in the current one. Because the demands of justice can never be satisfied, we are impelled into action, into the working out of solutions for particular problems as they arise. Derrida writes how justice, "*presses*

[10]Derrida, "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism" in Chantal Mouffe, ed. *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 84.
[11] Derrida, "Force," p.248.

urgently here and now, *singularly*. It does not wait. Imminence means that it presses in every instant: *this* is never present, but *this* will not be put off to tomorrow."[12] Elsewhere, Derrida is bothered by the call for total revolution in May 1968, for the destruction of institutions, and instead urges "a critique of institutions, but one that sets out not from the utopia of a wild and spontaneous pre- or non-institutional, but rather from counter-institutions…neither spontaneous, wild nor immediate."[13] If we want change we attain it through suggestion rather than destruction, through making changes here, now, rather than calling for an elsewhere. To be sure, an 'elsewhere' remains, but its very un-presentability is the source of the immediacy of a call to action *now*.

The call of justice delivers to us a dual allegiance that forces us to gesture in opposite directions. On the one hand, any intervention seems frustrated by its necessary inability to address, finally, the issue in question. Justice never *is*, so why seek it? On the other hand, there is nothing besides human actors, nothing besides particular responses to a call from the excluded, exiled or unarticulated stranger. So it is that deconstruction is a "vocation," a commitment to respond constitutive of who we seek to be.[14] Not an imperative binding simply because of the way we are (rational, children of god, et c.) but a call that is there, that we have the chance to answer while recognizing the risk of whatever solution we impose.

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

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[12] Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*. Translated by Giacomo Donis (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), p.23-24.
[13] Derrida, "Secret," p.50.
[14] Ibid, p. 210.
[15] Derrida, "Force,"p.245.

thought of progress which does not demand the making finite of the infinite, the making present of the un-presentable.[16]

Derrida's view of justice, we can see, compels us to act. If all we have are approximations of an ideal, then there is always work to do. Such a notion of justice enables communities to engage in constant and vigilant revising, to make themselves into newer, better versions of themselves. Derrida's justice, then, allows a certain Rortyan politics of imaginative and ameliorative intervention. So I disagree with Rorty's characterization of Derrida as a philosopher of our private lives. Derrida's thought of justice is the thought of infinite possibility, of communities of possibility always and necessarily working towards what, by their own lights, might be more just. Derrida shares with Rorty this sense of the necessary openness of our deliberations, an openness to a future we have not yet imagined. To say with Derrida that "incalculable justice *commands* calculation" is to say that we must act because satisfaction is ruled out; it is to say that justice is unachievable but makes possible and necessary constant and immediate intervention.[17] "Not only *must* one calculate, negotiate the relation between the calculable and the incalculable, and negotiate without a rule that would not have to be reinvented there where we are 'thrown', there where we find ourselves; but one *must* do so and take it as far as possible, beyond the place we find ourselves."[18] This is Derrida's imperative: we find ourselves always and already members of a community and a concomitant mess of values, norms, expectations, and hopes, all unsteady attempts at living atop an infinite ocean. Because *anything* is possible, because we might descend at any time into any manner of cruelty, ensuring that the change which will necessarily occur takes us closer to our own best versions of ourselves is our only responsible option. Justice is an insatiable imperative. It compels us to act, intervene, interrogate the status quo because we are always adrift, always heading somewhere. To accept the call of justice is to begin to steer our own course.

2. I turn now to one of Derrida's most insightful and interesting commentators over the last decade. Simon Critchley has written extensively on Derrida, including contributions to the debate over the character and extent of any connections between deconstruction and pragmatism, Derrida and Rorty.[19] Critchley shares my dissatisfaction with Rorty's reading of Derrida, and to a lesser extent my contention

[16] Ibid, p.249.
[17] Ibid, p.257.
[18] Ibid.
[19] see especially Critchley's contributions to Chantal Mouffe, ed. *Decontsruction and Pragmatism*.

that there are important and pervasive similarities between the two men. He goes so far as to suggest that Derrida might be understood as amenable to the "Deweyan tradition that seeks to link pragmatism to radical democracy."[20] Yet while Critchley and I agree on certain conclusions, our reasons for doing so differ. Drawing out where and how Critchley and I differ will help bring out just where I see deep connections between Derrida and Rorty.

Critchley asks whether deconstruction is pragmatic, and whether pragmatism is deconstructive. His answer is that although we may discern superficial affinities between the two movements, mostly issuing from their shared suspicion of philosophical foundations, any rapprochement between the two lines of thought is ultimately frustrated by deconstruction's ultimate and unquestionable foundation in justice. Where pragmatism prides itself on lacking foundations, deconstruction announces and celebrates its own. Critchley reads the undeconstructability of justice as a suggestion that while deconstruction works against foundations, it does not target *all* foundations. Instead, deconstruction stops short and justice remains. "At the basis of deconstruction," Critchley writes, "is a non-pragmatist (or at least non-Rortian) foundational commitment to justice as something that cannot be relativized."[21] However, on the reading of justice offered above its value lies precisely in its non-foundational status: Derrida's thought is valuable insofar as it no longer seeks to ground, found, or guarantee. Deconstruction is a vocation rather than a categorical imperative precisely because our commitment to it is not foundational, not necessary. It is a call, a chance, and a risk. I share with Rorty the thought that paying Derrida the type of compliment offered by Critchley, congratulations for constructing a system on top of solid ground, is out of place. One should not "try to pay good old logocentric compliments to enemies of logocentrism."[22]

Critchley's claim is that there *is* for Derrida something outside the text, or at least almost so. Justice exceeds context so as to be a condition of its possibility: "Context is motivated by an unconditional appeal or affirmation – a Nietzschean 'yes, yes' or, better, 'a "yes" to emancipation'."[23] Justice, on Critchley's reading, is the bedrock of political thought, non-relativizable and undeconstructable; and it is only from the vantage point of such a perspective, one which looks down upon and

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[20] Simon Critchley, "Deconstruction and Pragmatism," in Critchley, *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas, and Contemporary French Thought*. (London: Verso, 1999), p.101.
[21] Ibid., p.102.
[22] Rorty, "Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?" in Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.121.
[23] Critchley, "Metaphysics in the Dark," in Critchley, *Ethics*, p.111.

motivates context, that criticism is possible. Without such a perspective built into one's theory, "one risks emptying the theory of any critical function, that is, of leaving open any space between things as they are and things as they might otherwise be."[24] For Critchley, then, criticism is a matter of adopting a viewpoint outside of current practices and judging those practices according to a sense of how things might otherwise be. Yet following Nietzsche it is just such a vantage point which is not available. To hope for the possibility of such a spectator's perch is to succumb to the terrifying infinity of Nietzsche's ocean and to the suffering of deconstruction. When Derrida writes that to experience deconstruction is to suffer "the absence of rules, of norms, and definitive criteria," he means it. Deconstruction moves against *all* claims to have discovered foundations outside of practice. We should avoid Critchley's move, a last second hail Mary pass to foundations, as we would an atheist's deathbed conversion. Both are last minute fears, yearnings for security, hopes for dry land.

This yearning for an eye turned in no particular direction, a view from nowhere, motivates Critchley's polemics against Rorty. Critchley is irritated chiefly by Rorty's insouciant recognition that his theory offers no such external perspective. He wonders whether Rorty's claim to a solidarity motivated by an aversion to cruelty can be anything other than a claim to foundation: "if cruelty is something about which liberals cannot be ironic, then the attempt to diminish suffering must have the status of a non-relativizable universal…"[25] Elsewhere: "is [an aversion to cruelty] a universal principle or foundation for moral obligation? If it is, then how would this be consistent with Rorty's anti-foundationalism, and if it is not then what sort of binding power is it meant to have on members of liberal societies?"[26] To ask such a question is to assume that 'binding power' means something non-contingent, something *there* whether we like it or not, something that stands outside of practice and so provides a perspective from which to judge any practice, any particular context. It is to assume that we need some absolute point of reference by which to determine our own position, to judge ourselves. On the reading of Derrida offered above, and on Rorty's characterization of his own views, it is precisely this yearning for such a point of reference which must be abandoned.

Consider the logic of autoimmunity for Derrida. Democracy is distinct from other political systems insofar as it shelters within itself the risk of its own demise, the democratic creation of non-democracy. Derrida is concerned to show how democracy is built around recognition of the co-implication of what he calls risk and

[24] Ibid., p.112.
[25] Ibid., p.116.
[26] Critchley, "Deconstruction," p. 90.

chance, which is to say that one cannot hope to elude risk, to find an external standpoint which mitigates completely against it. Any critical stance must be well within context, within practice, and we ought not to hope for some other vantage point. For it is only by realizing that there will be no such point of reference, its actual and definite impossibility, that we can turn as individuals and communities to better fashioning the possible, to better addressing the problems encountered in the world before our eyes.

Yet Critchley persists in assuming that a critical stance towards politics requires a vantage point outside of the practices being considered. Finding no such point in Rorty's views, Critchley condemns him for enabling a political conservatism that frustrates meaningful change. Rorty admits his ethnocentrism and says 'so much the better', but for Critchley "when the infinitude of ethics contracts into the finite space of an *ethos* – a site, a plot, a place for the sacred, 'the country of Whitman's and Dewey's dreams' – then the very worst becomes possible."[27] So it is that "Rorty's demand for national pride is only a cigarette paper away from the rather unpalatable chauvinism of American exceptionalism."[28] If one is looking for a guarantee that Rorty's views will not lead to the 'very worst', to 'chauvinism' or to 'exceptionalism', then one will be justifiably disappointed. But one will only look for such reassurance if he fails to consider Derrida's pronouncement offered above: "Chaos is at once a risk and a chance." Philosophers ought not to try to be insurance salesmen, constructing systems which defend against risk so as to provide security and peace of mind. They ought to instead, with Derrida and Rorty, suffer the absence of such a guarantee so as to better cope with its consequences. Derrida himself responded to attempts to find in his thought words and concepts that can form the structure of a new system, concepts which form the "ground, foundation or origin." He asks: "how does one model oneself after what one deconstructs?...Have I not indefatigably repeated – and I would dare say demonstrated – that the trace is neither a ground…nor an origin, and that in no case can it provide for a manifest or disguised onto-theology?"[29] As with the trace, so with justice. Derrida is not in the business of system building, and so none of his concepts should be thought of as grounds for the beginnings of a new system. Instead, we suffer deconstruction so as to cope with our predicament as it is.

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[27] Critchley, "Metaphysics," p.113.

[28] Ibid., p. 109.

[29] Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, Trans. Bass. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p.52.

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

Rorty's Deweyan vision of politics is one in which we take seriously Nietzsche's aphorism that "we are experiments: let us also want to be them!"[30] Wanting to be an experiment means for Rorty wanting to engage in one's society, to see it as the work of human beings and so limited by no constraints outside of human practice. To be experimental is to be pragmatic, to judge the worth of a given idea about what to do next by the effect it will have on one's society, the difference it will make. Lacking a view from nowhere, political decisions are made with a view to and from our own situation: embedded, socialized, contingent all the way down. So when Rorty champions the cause of 'achieving our country' he is neither blithely claiming authority for America nor chauvinistically claiming its superiority. He is instead pointing to a tendency in American thought towards the adoption of a certain stance vis-a-vis politics, a stance which forever delivers the right of judgment to future generations. Just as, with Derrida, we can no longer say 'I am just', Rorty's America is one in which we can never say 'our country has been achieved'. For that decision is not up to us.

Rorty champions Walt Whitman's view that "America…counts, I reckon, for her justification and success (for who, as yet, dare claim success?) almost entirely on the future…For our new world I consider far less important for what it has done, or what it is, than for results to come."[31] As for Derrida, democracy names something we can never speak of as present or achieved. Instead, it is what remains just behind the horizon, not a ground but a posit, "a great word, whose history…remains unwritten because that history has yet to be enacted."[32] Democratic communities engage in conversation for its own sake rather than for the achievement of a certain state of affairs. The hope of such conversation is not that we will stumble across the

[30] Nietzsche, *Daybreak*. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 453.

[31] quoted in Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), p.26

[32] quoted in Ibid, p.19.

right system, the one system, foundations on which to build a society, but the simple wish that our vocabulary will be supplanted by a new, better one we cannot at present even imagine. Giving oneself over to social hope, to a groundless unachievable posit, means substituting for the Platonic urge for transcendence, for timeless respite in a changeless elsewhere, an openness to democratic conversation able to foster ameliorative progress that will, with luck, replace our present vocabulary. Such a community would admit that "the terms in which we state our communal convictions and hopes are doomed to obsolescence, that we shall *always* need new metaphors, new logical spaces, new jargons, that there will never be a final resting place for thought."[33] This is Nietzsche's "so much the better," and his "and this too is an interpretation"; it is the joyful affirmation of life as interpretation and the joining together of risk and chance.[34]

So Critchley is wrong to contrast the "closure or achievement imagined by Rorty" with the "ever incomplete, undecidable structure" of a deconstructive politics.[35] For Rorty's hope is that we will cease looking for a view external to human communities and instead devote our efforts to the ongoing conversations of those communities, conversations which are their own end. Social hope is the desire for a citizenry ravenous for intervention which will, through the accumulation of piecemeal reforms, finite responses to the particular, bring about future generations who will barely recognize us. As with Derrida, we can discern the derivation of a call to action from the very finitude of our hopes and ideals. It is because justice never *is* that we must act in its name; it is because social hope can never be sated that we take part in the working through of the issues facing the societies of which we are part. The urge for our own obsolescence is the urge for a progress and democracy indexed only to the hopes, plans, and priorities of specific communities, communities for which the hope of a view from nowhere is viewed with the same pedantic mirth with which we currently view former societies' objects of worship, so that satisfying the demands of non-human Reality is taken as seriously as satisfying the demands of Zeus.

4. I began by suggesting that both Rorty and Derrida make possible a vision of progress without end, without cessation or telos. I would like to finish by saying more about this notion as an attempt to clarify and consolidate the connections between the two lines of thought. Hope and justice both name the thought that

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[33] Rorty. *Essays on Heidegger and Others*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.19.
[34] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale. (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), 22.
[35] Critchley, "Metaphysics," p. 110.

because things can never be settled, never be final, they can always be better. Both Rorty and Derrida are philosophers of a certain abyss, a space between the present and future, between the possible and impossible. It is a gap some theorists aiming for certainty try to bridge, but after Nietzsche the job of the philosopher is no longer to bridge this gap with one scheme rather than another, but to face it, to face up to it. Rorty and Derrida agree with Nietzsche that we are standing on the edge of infinity; both offer a vision of politics that, rather than mitigates or overcomes, speaks to Nietzsche's new infinite.

In neither set of ideas can we make out any room for an end to this process, for a culmination. The achievement of justice is conceptually impossible. Built into the very idea is its ultimate impossibility. Likewise, the point of hope is hope, the point of conversation is conversation. Without a non-human authority to appease, there is no standard by which we could safely end innovation, change, or progress. Nietzsche's ocean, we might remind ourselves, is infinite. The point of positing a class of ideals such as hope and justice is to deal with that infinity, to think about what politics can mean after Nietzsche. I have suggested that what politics means, what progress can be, is this mix of infinitude and finitude, the derivation of an appeal for immediate, finite action from the very infinitude of possibility. If Nietzsche's new infinite is not to be terrifying it has to be because we have built a politics around it.

Both Rorty and Derrida carve out such a space in their thought. Both envision a politics structured around a space left open, for Derridean hospitality and for Rorty's victim of as yet unarticulated suffering, "for him to come if he comes."[36] It is because we no longer seek universality that we recognize the limits of our concepts and institutions, and so view and build them in such a way that their revision is always called for and made possible. Both visions consist in what Derrida calls "doing everything for the future to remain open,"[37] what Rorty calls cultivating a "romantic hope for another world which is yet to come."[38] Both are ways of saying that solutions to present problems will create new ones, and so on without end, and so much the better. The struggle of politics becomes a struggle for the recognition of the provisional status of our work, for its incompleteness, the impossibility of cessation, and for our recognition that "this is not bad news."

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[36] Jacques Derrida. *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 27.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Rorty, 'On Moral Obligation, Truth, and Common Sense', in Josef Nizik and John T. Sanders eds. *Debating the State of Philosophy* (London: Praeger, 1996), p.50

Neither can we find a guide for this progress, a telos. The hope for a vantage point outside of practice, is given up. Instead, progress comes to mean grappling with heritage, accepting it as our own, and acting from within it. Just as Nietzsche's preferred actor fashions herself according to a single taste by imposing a novel design on given material, such communities exchange self-chosen contingencies for given ones. To agree with Derrida that contra Heidegger, "there will be no unique name, even if it were the name of Being. And we must think this without nostalgia," is to agree that we will never be so lucky as to stumble into contact with something other than ourselves, something that might give us direction.[39] Without such an aid, without a telos handed over to us, we must rely on our own hopes and thoughts about the future, about what we should do next. So it is that deconstruction entails and presupposes a "moment of affirmation" without which radical critique is impossible.[40] There is no politics except from within, because there is no 'outside' to belong to. In whatever tradition we find ourselves, in whatever language we must articulate or claims, it is this that is to be affirmed before changed, recognized before surpassed.

In support of my characterization of Derrida as urging a working through of problems from within, I point to a tendency in his writings to warn against attempts to make deconstruction into a destructive, revolutionary force. Instead, Derrida often insists he thinks of its work as the work of the Enlightenment. He states not only that "nothing is less outdated than the classical emancipatory ideal,"[41] but that he has supported throughout his career the "Enlightenment of tomorrow."[42] Such an Enlightenment would share with today's the commitment to progress, to making the world better by providing greater happiness for greater numbers of people. It would accept our place in a history, in a tradition of ideas, but in pointing towards the future would seek to re-appropriate and reinvigorate what is of use in the tradition while jettisoning the appeal to epistemic and moral foundations with which the Enlightenment began. Motivating this position is a basic commitment shared by Rorty: We heirs of the Enlightenment cannot do away with who we are or how we find ourselves. The only option is intervention, suggestion, imagination. The hope for a progress *with* end, one which is guided and could be achieved, is the hope for what Rorty calls non-human constraint, what for Derrida would be something

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[39] Jacques Derrida. *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p.27.

[40] Jacques Derrida in Richard Kearney. *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) p.118.

[41] Derrida, "Force," p. 251.

[42] Derrida, *Secret*, p. 54.

beyond the reach of play, a perspective which after Nietzsche is no longer available. And so a progress without end begins to come into view.

I will end by restating that both Derrida and Rorty are philosophers deeply committed to the Enlightenment project of remaking the world according to criteria acceptable to all. There are of course important divisions between the two men. Just as one would be hard-pressed to find in Rorty's work friendly mention of singularity or the Other, it is unlikely that Derrida ever countenanced Whitman's suggestion that the United States is the greatest poem. Indeed, both men have expressed reservations about the other's work and its proximity to his own.[43] Yet I have tried to show that whatever differences exist, the similarities between the two figures can be forged into a vision of political progress structured around a space left open for the future, and so both are what Nietzsche called "philosophers of the dangerous perhaps."[44] To fuse the pragmatism of Rorty with the deconstruction of Derrida would be to bring together the pragmatic reduction of decision-making to a weighing of human interests with the deconstructive imperative to question so as to correct the logic of our scales. It would be to say with Derrida that there is nothing outside the text and with Rorty that there is no answer to a redescription save a re-redescription, that human interaction is not about negotiating with a world external to us but is instead a way of bringing a common world into existence. It would be to agree with Nietzsche that humans invented knowing, and then to hope that we might yield our ponderous possession in the service of those goals which, by our own lights, seem to represent what is best about us.

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[43] For Rorty on Derrida's 'justice' see especially "A Spectre is Haunting the Intellectuals: Derrida on Marx" in *Philosophy and Social Hope* pp.210-222. For Derrida on Rorty, see especially "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism" in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* pp. 77-88.
[44] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 2.

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