

# SMPLECTY

**Ecological Civilisation and the Will to Art**



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**Essays on the Aesthetics of Existence**

*Giving Birth to Oneself: Ethics as an 'Aesthetics of Existence'*



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\* This is a provisional Table of Contents. The essays are being published individually as they are completed, meaning that this project is a work-in-progress which may evolve.

‘In our society art has become something which is related to objects, and not to individuals or to life. That art is something which is specialised or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?’

– *Michel Foucault*

# ***Giving Birth to Oneself: Ethics as an 'Aesthetics of Existence'***

Samuel Alexander

In the previous essay I considered the role of art and aesthetic sensibility in human evolutionary history, exploring the ways in which such behaviours and dispositions shaped the artful species we have become. It was seen that there have been practices of 'artification' – that is, making the ordinary extraordinary – that date back millions of years, including the beautification of handaxes. Other aesthetic behaviours in prehistory include body adornment, ritual, and the collection of artefacts with no apparent utilitarian function. Nevertheless, it is the cave art and figurines of the Upper Palaeolithic Era, dating from around 35-40,000 years ago, which are typically held up as the 'origin of art', on account of these being the earliest examples of hominins producing symbolic or figurative imagery and artefacts.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes referred to as the 'creative explosion',<sup>2</sup> this Upper Palaeolithic Era is often seen to signify a developmental leap in humankind, suggesting the emergence of a higher order of consciousness, the birth of the 'modern mind'.<sup>3</sup> Human beings had begun representing aspects of the world in aesthetic and abstract form, practices that were unique among the community of life and absent even from earlier hominin culture. These aesthetic representations of external reality are significant partly because they provide a stepping stone to broader, abstract conceptualisation. After painting a specific horse seen earlier in the day, it can be inferred that this led our distant ancestors to develop, over time, the abstract category of 'horses' as a general concept. This very distinction between concrete, physical entities in the 'real world' and the invisible classes of things in some abstract realm, is something that philosophers have been pondering ever since. As evolutionary theorist Robert Joyce suggested: 'Conceptual generalizations grew naturally out of the arts.'<sup>4</sup>

Many people would have seen pictures of the exquisite, prehistoric drawings of bulls and horses that appear on the walls of caves, such as those in the Lascaux cave in France. These drawings are astonishingly accurate and naturalistic depictions of the animals represented. As noted previously, when Picasso first saw early examples of cave art in Spain, he is reported to have declared: 'we have learned nothing!'<sup>5</sup> What is most striking about these drawings, however, is that sometimes, alongside the realistic depiction of animals, there are representations of human figures that are far from naturalistic or realistic.<sup>6</sup> Some of these figures have extremely exaggerated and distorted features or shapes, but this cannot have been due to lack of skill or artistic refinement. The artists were obviously more than capable of drawing humans naturalistically, as evidenced by the animal representations. So what was the significance of drawing the human form abstractly and with far greater creative licence? Sometimes the figures were faceless. Why?

In my view, the most plausible interpretation is that, even back in the Upper Palaeolithic Era, human beings had begun to see themselves not merely as something 'given' or 'predetermined' by nature, but in some sense an abstract and amorphous *idea*. Not only that, humanity was an

idea capable of being aesthetically shaped and reshaped, by humans themselves. It is as if these ancient artists had recognised that they may not have been able to change the nature of the buffalo or the bull, but that they could explore the possibility of fashioning their *own* nature as an indeterminate and imaginative creature.

How were they to do that? Through their art – for through art they could become something new. At this stage in human development, purely biological evolution began to cede more ground to creative evolution, in which human beings were co-producers of their evolutionary path, creators not merely creatures. Indeed, perhaps it was at this moment in the human story – the creative explosion – when *homo sapiens*, as such, disappeared, ‘like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea’,<sup>7</sup> never to reappear, leaving only *homo aestheticus* to walk the face of Earth as the art-created art creator. Henceforth our unique burden was to give birth to ourselves as aesthetic agents in an aesthetic universe.



One of the philosophical problems I am trying to resolve at this stage in my project concerns the apparent conflict between biology and philosophy when it comes to understanding human beings. On the one hand, there is the view widely held amongst evolutionary biologists and psychologists that humans have a ‘common nature’ by virtue of our long, shared species’ history. On the other hand, there is a philosophical view, widely held by post-Nietzscheans of various schools, that humans have no ‘given’ nature but are everyday tasked with creating it. In short, the first position holds that there is a common human nature; the second, anti-essentialist position holds that human nature, as such, does not exist. Can this conflict be resolved?

The anti-essentialist view arguably received its most extreme statement in the early work of Jean-Paul Sartre, who argued that human beings are ‘radically free’ and, as such, we will be what we make of ourselves and nothing else.<sup>8</sup> As the existentialist slogan states: our human existence precedes our essence. That extreme view, which largely dismisses the influence of both biological inheritances and other social or political structures, was later refined in the works of other so-called ‘postmodernists’ (and indeed in Sartre’s later work).<sup>9</sup> These postmodernists variously accept that there are structures that shape human existence (social, political, economic, linguistic, and so forth) but nevertheless maintain that, due to the linguistic or social construction of reality, human beings are nevertheless free to shape and reshape their worlds through creative redescription and reinterpretation of self and society. Evolutionary psychologists, on the other hand, as well certain ‘structuralist’ philosophers, tend to argue that there are limits to self-creation given that our natures have, for millions of years, been shaped by evolutionary processes. Human nature is a product of that history.

I will attempt to offer a synthesis of these conflicting literatures, a possibility which was opened to me by a reading of evolutionary biology through the lens of art and aesthetics. Through this reading, I argue we can resolve the apparent conflict between philosophical notions of self-creation and biological arguments for a pre-existing human nature. When we see, as I maintained in the last essay, that human nature is fundamentally *aesthetic*, it becomes clear that there is no longer any problematic conflict between these perspectives but in fact a

coherent harmony. Our inherited evolutionary nature is as an aesthetic animal, shaped by our artful and creative capacities and potentials. But this ‘nature’ should no longer be perceived as static or determinative, since the very nature of an artful species is to continuously reshape itself through its arts and aesthetic practices. Having offered that biological thesis in the last essay, I now explore the philosophical literature that arrives at similar conclusions albeit based on very different intellectual resources. In what follows I present a range of philosophical arguments that support the conception of human beings as ‘self-creators’, drawing primarily on Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty, both of whom build on the Nietzschean tradition.

We will soon discover, however, that this analysis draws us into the thorny terrain of ethics and morality. This is because grounding a moral code or ethical framework in human nature becomes problematic when one loses faith in a shared, stable, and rationalistic conception of human nature. In a postmodern age where the ‘self’ is considered fragmented and decentred, and where human nature is deemed a social construct, what becomes of traditional attempts to provide a moral code to guide human action? My purposes in this essay, therefore, are twofold: first, to explore the philosophical position that human beings must ‘create themselves’ rather than ‘discover themselves’, thus supplementing the analysis of last essay which defended an aesthetic conception of human nature; and second, to consider what becomes of ethics when the notion of a universal human nature grounded in reason is given up and ethics is necessarily ‘aestheticised’. After reviewing Foucault’s notion of ethics as an ‘aesthetics of existence’, I will conclude with a review and analysis of Rorty’s vision of a ‘poeticized culture’, which explores how a post-metaphysical or aestheticised liberalism might be structured in order to accommodate a culture of self-creators. This will raise some key social and political questions that will be given more attention in later essays.



Throughout the Western philosophical tradition, it has been asserted, or simply assumed, that beneath the various historical forms of human subjectivity there lies an ahistorical or transcendental ‘self’ or ‘nature’ that all human beings share. We human beings might look different from each other and find ourselves living in radically diverse cultures, giving the appearance of fundamental difference. But if we were to peel away all the contingencies of tradition and circumstance, the conventional philosophical view is that, at base, beneath all our various socialisations, we all share the same ‘human nature’. Again, to be clear, this is a distinctly *philosophical* conception of human nature (derived from reason and reflection), not one derived from evolutionary science (an empirical inquiry). It is worth considering the importance of this philosophical conception, specifically in the domains of moral theory, asking why it remains so entrenched. After doing so I will consider the counter-position and its implications.

The dominant perspective just outlined is epitomised by the work of rationalistic philosophers such as Plato, Rene Descartes, and Immanuel Kant. Such philosophers argue that human beings are endowed in common with rational faculties, and that by correctly employing those faculties we can determine, on rational grounds, eternal truths about the world, including universal moral rules that ought to govern human life. We just need to use the tool of reason correctly, and these philosophers were kind enough to tell us how to do that. Their ambitions

were to lead humanity out of the cave of illusion and ignorance, freeing us from erroneous thinking and showing us the True and the Good that lay hidden beneath appearances. In this light, ethics and morality have generally referred to the task of living in accordance with a body of objectively verifiable moral rules, of adhering to a moral code that is knowable through rational inquiry. Due to its rational basis, such a moral code would apply to all people in all places.

Of course, philosophers (and theologians) have always disagreed about which of the possible moral codes is the objectively true one. But there has been a widespread consensus that discovering such a code is the aim of moral thought and that living in accordance with such a code is the aim of moral behaviour. We can see this assumption underlying the work of almost all the great moral thinkers – from Plato, through Jesus, to Kant and Bentham, and beyond. Well into the twentieth century this assumption remained a largely unquestioned verity.

The logic beneath this assumption is understandable. If we are to live our lives according to the dictates of a moral code, even when it is not in our immediate self-interest to do so, then we should want the code to which we have subscribed to be somehow deserving of our obedience. Nobody would want to live according to moral rules if those rules were just the arbitrary assertions of some megalomaniac who simply wanted all humanity to abide by his or her personal standards of conduct. On the contrary, if anyone were to subscribe to a moral code, it would presumably always be on the condition that the code was an embodiment of some independent and verifiable moral truth, in the sense that the code reflected an objective and rational moral reality, not merely the idiosyncratic whim of some authoritarian personality.

Within this framework of understanding, the goal of moral philosophy is to base normative, value-laden conclusions upon secure, metaphysical foundations. These foundations would be external to the human mind, eternal, objective, universal, and unchanging, and which, for these reasons, transcend all personal or contextual perspectives. According to this view of moral philosophy, it is either right or wrong to act in this way or that, from which it would follow that the task of moral philosophers is to determine which acts are moral and which are not. Indeed, it could be said that using ‘reason’ to distinguish moral from immoral behaviour has been the defining goal of moral philosophers throughout history. This goal seems coherent, and in many ways it also seems quite commonsensical. It is understandable why human beings were drawn to reflect on questions of morality and attempt to develop answers to the questions: what is justice and why should we value it?

Needless to say, however, no consensus has been reached about which of the various moral codes proposed is, in fact, the objectively correct one. Christians, Kantians, Utilitarians, Marxists, and so on, are still debating each other over the truth of their respective moralities or conceptions of justice. Some might suggest that this lack of moral consensus must mean that there is no moral truth, as such; that morality has no rational foundation; or, perhaps, that human beings are fundamentally irrational and thus incapable of knowing moral truth when they see it. But this does not necessarily follow. In particular, a lack of moral consensus is not necessarily fatal to this universalist endeavour. After all, one might still believe that, *in the future*, human beings will finally uncover the moral reality that lies beneath the illusion of



appearances and thus gain moral enlightenment. It would be a discovery that was assisted, one might suppose, by some philosopher who devised a means of proving, by way of rational demonstration, that a particular moral code is the one and only one that is *really* real; the one and only one that deserves our obedience. Should this day arrive, the narrative might go, then, at last, people could finally stop debating which morality was the correct one and instead dedicate their time and energy to actually trying to live morally.

It may be that such a day will indeed arrive. Some critical philosophers, however, such as Nietzsche, Foucault, and Rorty, among many others, have argued that the very search for universal moral truth, like the search for the Holy Grail, is a dubious one – if, by universal moral truth, one means a set of objectively verifiable moral rules, grounded in metaphysical reality, that apply to all people, in all places, at all times. These ‘post-metaphysical’ theorists have called into question, not simply the moral codes that philosophers have proposed hitherto, but, more fundamentally, the very goal of seeking objective, universalisable moral codes.

This scepticism arose, in various ways, out of a loss of faith in the correspondence theory of truth, which, in turn, led to a loss of faith in all forms of Moral Realism (i.e., the view that true moral statements reflect objective moral facts that are independent of human thought). The critical reasoning here is that since truth must be expressed in language, and since language is a human creation, so must truth, ultimately, be a human creation.<sup>10</sup> In other words, it is argued that there is no knowable moral or metaphysical reality which language should be seeking to reflect. From this perspective, human perception and understanding is always and necessarily mediated by language – ‘there is nothing outside of the text’, to borrow Jacques Derrida’s phrase.<sup>11</sup> This means that knowledge, including moral knowledge, will always be a function of some conventional or ‘socially constructed’ linguistic framework or paradigm of understanding. It follows, therefore, that truth, knowledge, and meaning all lack the metaphysical foundations that philosophers throughout history had hoped to uncover for them. The metaphor of ‘philosophy as the mirror of nature’ thus loses its operational validity.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, since language is inherently unstable and always subject to various interpretive ambiguities, there will never be one and only one moral code that is true for all people, in all times and places. For even if we knew which moral code was the one and only one to obey – the Ten Commandments, for example, or Kant’s ‘categorical imperative’, or Bentham’s ‘greatest happiness principle’ – its context-dependent application would require interpretation, and interpretation is always a function of one or other ‘interpretive community’.<sup>13</sup> People may, of course, have the *experience* of moral certainty; but the ‘truth’ of such moral certainty will never be rationally demonstrable to all people.

What, then, becomes of moral and ethical discourse and practice if the search for a universal moral code is given up? I will explore this question by turning primarily to the later works of Michel Foucault – the texts of his so-called ‘ethical’ turn.<sup>14</sup> It is in these texts where Foucault develops his notion of ethics as ‘an aesthetics of existence’, which he presents as an alternative mode of ethical practice that can be taken up in the absence of a knowable and universalisable morality. I will show that this idea of ‘an aesthetics of existence’ sits well with the vision presented in the last chapter of humanity as *homo aestheticus*, the artful species.

Foucault's strategy is to problematise the notion of 'selfhood' by arguing that the 'self', far from being as independent and autonomous as philosophers have typically supposed, is in fact inextricably shaped by external linguistic and contextual forces. It follows that *who we are* as individuals is not the determinate product of free decisions made by some autonomous agent, but instead the product of social and linguistic forces that are largely beyond our control. Foucault does not deny or exclude the possibility of human freedom, however, as some might infer from his early work. He does insist that our identities are socially constructed entities, and that we lack a transcendental or purely rational 'self'. Nevertheless, he carves out a limited degree of space within which our socially constructed identities can *act upon themselves* for the purpose of 'self-fashioning'. We may not get to choose the raw material of which our identities are constituted, but it nevertheless lies within our power to shape that raw material in various ways, just as the sculptor may make various things from a given lump of clay. And we must not think of shaping purely in terms of 'subtraction' of what the self has been shaped into. Self-fashioning can just as coherently be about 'adding' what is not yet there.

According to Foucault, this relationship of the self to the self is the terrain of ethics, and when engaging the age-old ethical question, 'How am I to live?', Foucault suggests that we avoid the traditional search for a moral code and instead ask ourselves the further question, 'What type of person should I become?'. Using aesthetic metaphors to describe and develop this process of self-creation, Foucault summarises his ethical position with the pronouncement, 'Make life a work of art' – an intriguing, provocative, but ambiguous statement that we can now explore in more detail below.

### ***Foucauldian ethics as an 'Aesthetics of Existence'***

'Morality will gradually *perish* now',<sup>15</sup> asserted Nietzsche in 1887, with characteristic bluntness. '[T]his is the great spectacle in a hundred acts reserved for the next two centuries in Europe – the most terrible, most questionable, and perhaps also the most hopeful of all spectacles'.<sup>16</sup> The form of morality to which Nietzsche was referring, and to which he himself was instrumental in undermining, was the form, outlined above, of morality as obedience to a set of rules that are grounded in some knowable metaphysical reality. While previous philosophers had argued that human beings shared a common nature by virtue of being endowed with 'reason', Nietzsche claimed to have ended that particular myth and with it the myth of a morality knowable through an appeal to reason. Nietzsche predicted that as more people came to understand this – to experience this crisis of morality – morality itself would gradually 'perish'.

According to Foucault, Nietzsche's prediction has already come to pass: '[T]he idea of morality as obedience to a code of rules is now disappearing, has already disappeared. And to this absence of morality corresponds, must correspond, the search for an "aesthetics of existence"'.<sup>17</sup> Foucault was extremely sceptical of the claim, made throughout the Western philosophical tradition, that beneath the various manifestations of human subjectivity which have arisen throughout history there lies an ahistorical or transcendental subject that all human beings share. 'I do indeed believe', he once stated, 'that there is no sovereign, founding subject, a universal form of the subject to be found everywhere'.<sup>18</sup>

Emerging from the Nietzschean counter-tradition, Michel Foucault helped expose the many problems with the universalist conception of the human subject and the idea of a universal moral code that flowed from it. Just as Nietzsche had announced the 'Death of God' to signify the loss of faith in a transcendental basis for morality, Foucault announced the 'Death of Man' to signify the loss of faith in a basis for morality that was somehow objectively grounded in 'reason' or 'human nature'.<sup>19</sup> He predicted a time, which perhaps has already come to pass, when the invented idea of an ahistorical or transcendental conception of humanity would be erased, 'like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea.'<sup>20</sup> The argument I wish to advance is that Foucault's critique of the rationalist conception of 'human nature' is consistent with the argument of the last essay which concluded that humanity does share a nature of sorts – as the art-created art creator. Put otherwise, the idea of humanity as *homo aestheticus* is consistent with the Foucauldian conception of the fragmented and decentered self that is tasked with giving birth to itself.

If indeed there is no universal *subject* but only historically specific and contingent forms of *subjectivity*, what are the implications of this on how we understand the human situation? It is in response to this type of question or self-questioning that Foucault began developing his notion of ethics as an 'aesthetics of existence.'<sup>21</sup> Rather than trying to determine the moral code that would always and everywhere demand human obedience, Foucault's approach was to ask instead: What sort of person should I become? 'From the idea that the self is not given to us,' Foucault pronounced, 'I think that there is only one consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art.'<sup>22</sup>

This aesthetic metaphor might strike some people as strange or grandiose, for we are not normally accustomed to talking about life as a work of art. We might want to say that life is one thing, art is another, and that these distinct categories should not be conflated. But the distinction between art and life was precisely what Foucault was trying to question. In fact, it can be argued that Foucault was not actually using art as a metaphor here at all. That is, he was not proposing that we are related to our own lives *like* the way the artist is related to their raw materials; instead, he was suggesting that we are related to our lives *as* artists, whose raw material is life itself. He once lamented in an interview:

[I]n our society art has become something which is related to objects, and not to individuals or to life. That art is something which is specialised or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?<sup>23</sup>

Foucault's reasoning here is unusually clear and straightforward: if the nature of the self is not given to us in advance – that is, if there is no 'true self' to which we should be trying to interpret correctly or *discover* – then it follows, by default, that we must *create* ourselves. We are not, however, given a blank canvas to work with, so to speak. We do not get to create ourselves out of nothing, since our identities are by and large a *product* of linguistic, social, and institutional forces beyond our control or choosing. Nobody, for example, gets to choose the categories which structure their perception or interpretation of the world. Rather, we are all educated into – or subjected to – a form of life as we grow up. Through that process of socialisation we find ourselves embedded within elaborate and culturally-specific structures of power/knowledge that both enable and constrict our thoughts, feelings, and actions. This

education and those power/knowledge structures shape who we are as individuals and they define the nature of our subjectivities.

Nevertheless, Foucault argued we can act upon ourselves – upon our socially constructed subjectivities – through processes that he variously called ‘self-fashioning’, ‘care of the self’, ‘techniques of the self’ and ‘arts of the self’. Foucault defined these ‘arts of existence’ as ‘those intentional and voluntary actions by which [people] not only set themselves rules for conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria.’<sup>24</sup>

Through these processes, in which the self engages the self, human beings have the potential to transform their subjectivities in much the same way a sculptor transforms a given lump of clay. The subject, Foucault insisted, ‘is not a substance... [i]t is a form.’<sup>25</sup> What form that subject takes is, at least in part, up to us as individual agents, suggesting that the human condition is more akin to boundless and indeterminate poetic production than something that can be sharply defined and enclosed with philosophical precision. This is the creative challenge – one might say the aesthetic challenge – with which we are all tasked. We must, as Foucault proposed, ‘create ourselves as a work of art.’<sup>26</sup>

To be clear, Foucault’s argument was not that we should try to make ourselves as beautiful as possible. Instead, *creativity* rather than *beauty* was the primary aesthetic value that defined his aesthetics of existence. He was not calling on us to be ‘dandies’ in the tradition of Oscar Wilde or Charles Baudelaire (a tradition critically examined in an earlier essay).<sup>27</sup> Rather, he was calling on us to avoid being merely *products* of our socialisation; to avoid being merely *creatures* and to instead be *creators* also, by exercising our imaginations in response to the question: what sort of person should I become?

This explains, in essence, why Foucault’s ‘aesthetics of existence’ is *aesthetic*. Life, he is suggesting, like art (or as art), is a fundamentally creative undertaking; a project that requires shaping, moulding, sculpting, and creating, in accordance with some (evolving) vision. But even if this aesthetic dimension of existence is accepted, on what basis could Foucault legitimately call his notion of an ‘aesthetics of existence’ an *ethics*? After all, if ethics concerns the question of ‘how one ought to live’, surely there is more to living ethically than merely being creative or stylistic? Undoubtedly there is, and Foucault never denied this. Occasionally Nietzsche seemed to conflate ethics and creativity, such as when he argued that what mattered when giving ‘style’ to one’s life was not whether it was good or bad but simply whether it represented ‘a single taste’.<sup>28</sup> Overall, however, I doubt whether that is a fair representation of Nietzsche’s more refined position,<sup>29</sup> and in any case, a simplistic conflation of ethics and creativity certainly does not represent Foucault’s position.

In developing his aesthetics of existence, Foucault drew upon the ancient Greeks, who regularly employed notions of moulding and sculpting when philosophising about the ‘art of living,’<sup>30</sup> and Foucault’s position must be understood in relation to that tradition. Indeed, with a nod to the Greeks, Foucault claimed that ‘the problem of an ethics as a *form* to be given to one’s conduct and to one’s life has again been raised’.<sup>31</sup> It has been raised again, we might infer,

due to the emergence of the postmodern condition in which human nature – the supposedly ‘universal form’ of the self – has been fragmented and is once again in need of being ‘shaped’ by self-engagement rather than merely ‘discovered’ by reason.

The ethical dimension of Foucault’s aesthetics of existence deserves further attention, however, because it remains unclear whether this approach can legitimately be called an ethics. The first point here is to reiterate the important distinction Foucault draws between morality – which, from his perspective, concerns living in accordance with an objective and universal moral code – and ethics – which concerns the self’s relationship with the self. Since the purpose of Foucault’s post-structuralist critique of metaphysics was to cast doubt on the possibility of objective and universal forms of knowledge, including moral knowledge, it follows that his ethics would never aspire to be a new morality. Indeed, Foucault declared that it would be ‘catastrophic’<sup>32</sup> if everyone submitted to a universal moral code. An inquiry into why he thought this would be so will illuminate the nature of his ethics as an aesthetics of existence.

Foucault thought that submission to a universal moral code would be ‘catastrophic’ because any code’s purported or perceived universality would really be nothing more than a naturalised prejudice. The danger here is that the particular moral perspective that has been placed under a veil of universality might blind people to relationships of domination that ought to be questioned and, if possible, opposed and transcended. Think, for example, of the colonial Americans who for centuries assumed that black slaves were not moral agents deserving of respect but merely animals that should be put to work. From their perspective, it was not immoral to have slaves, since slaves were not objects of moral concern. This, of course, raises the question: Might we, today, have our own moral prejudices to which we are similarly blind?

The point here is that knowledge, including moral knowledge, is always a function of a particular, socially constructed conceptual framework – one that necessarily lacks metaphysical foundations, and which is therefore liable to shift or even collapse. It follows that ‘ethical’ activity requires questioning the moral assumptions of dominant paradigms for the purpose of exposing their contingency; exposing the possibility of things being otherwise. The goal of this ethical activity is not to replace an existing moral code with the *real* moral code, but instead to bring to consciousness the suffering, pain, domination, or oppression that existing moralities repress or deflect attention away from.

Notice that this ‘bringing to consciousness’ is a change in the self brought about by engaging the self. This is what ethics means for Foucault. Philosopher Edward McGushin, in his seminal work on Foucault’s ethics, notes that Foucault, far from valorising narcissism, was suggesting that ‘when one takes care of oneself, an essential dimension of the self that requires attention is the relationship one maintains with others’.<sup>33</sup> We can see similarities here between Foucault’s aesthetics of existence and Derrida’s ethics of deconstruction. As Derrida once explained: ‘Deconstruction is not an enclosure in nothingness, but an openness to the other’.<sup>34</sup> This attempt to be ‘open to the other’ – not just to other people but also other perspectives – is also an essential aspect to Foucauldian ethics.

This is a process that has no end, because the underlying point is that *every* perspective has blind spots. Accordingly, ethical activity aims to constantly renew the self for the purposes of bringing those blind spots to one’s attention, knowing, all the while, that a complete and



undistorted perspective – the ‘view from nowhere’ – is always and necessarily inaccessible to us. ‘I am an experimenter’, Foucault once explained, ‘in the sense that I write in order to change myself and in order not to think the same thing as before’.<sup>35</sup> The purpose of his work was to transform himself and thus his life, a process which he noted was ‘rather close to the aesthetic experience’.<sup>36</sup> Why else, he asked, should a painter paint ‘if he is not transformed by his own painting?’.<sup>37</sup> It is on this basis that Rorty (considered further below) highlighted the ethical importance of reading widely – especially novels – because by reading as many different types of ‘narratives’ as possible, we are less likely to become entrenched in any single narrative.<sup>38</sup>

An aesthetics of existence includes what Foucault called ‘the practice of freedom’.<sup>39</sup> By this Foucault meant that transforming the self by the self is not an undertaking that is intended simply to benefit *others* but to benefit *oneself* too, by exposing the ways in which we are freer than we realise. Think, for example, of anorexics whose lives are destroyed by a warped understanding of ‘beauty’; or the status seekers whose lives are wasted by defining ‘success’ in relation to the number of rich and famous people they can impress. By engaging the self by the self and questioning our own assumptions – assumptions, say, about the meaning of ‘beauty’, ‘success’, ‘wealth’, or whatever – then we may be able to free ourselves from assumptions that are locking us into lives of self-imposed servitude. While we may not suffer anorexia or chronic status anxiety, Foucault suggested that we will all have our own prejudices, and thus ‘the practice of freedom’ means constantly aiming to ‘free thought from what it silently thinks’.<sup>40</sup> Again, this is not a process that has a destination. It is an ongoing, evolving process of creative self-renewal – a process of ethico-aesthetic engagement that Foucault called an ‘aesthetics of existence’.

Like Nietzsche before him, Foucault did not want us to live our lives reading out a pre-written script given to us in advance. We need not be who society tells us that we are. No, Foucault and Nietzsche insisted that we owe it to ourselves to write our own story – to give birth to ourselves – by practising an aesthetics of existence. Nietzsche affirms our capacity for self-creation in stirring terms: ‘One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star. I say unto you: you still have chaos in yourselves.’<sup>41</sup> Nietzsche’s call was to ‘be the poet of your life,’<sup>42</sup> which philosopher Alexander Nehamas summarises as the view that ‘life is literature’.<sup>43</sup> This perspective follows naturally from Nietzsche’s literary model of existence. Here human beings find themselves related to the world and their own subjectivities in a way that is not dissimilar from the relation of the poet or novelist to their own texts – a task both of creation and interpretation.

### ***Richard Rorty on ‘poeticized culture’***

In later essays I will explore in more detail the social and political implications of conceiving of human beings as aesthetic agents in an aesthetic universe. Presently, however, I will begin developing this aesthetic conception of humankind in terms relevant to society, not merely the self. The socio-political problem that arises is: how should we structure society if people are, in their own ways, self-creating. The concern is that if there is no human nature that lies beneath our diverse subjectivities, then there is nothing upon which to ground a sense of human solidarity. This risks giving rise to an anti-social elitism that cares little for community or social welfare beyond one’s inner circle of initiates. This is how aestheticism is understood when the term is used in the pejorative sense – implying an indulgence of personal aesthetic

value at the expense of moral and political concern. As I have said, the central project of this collection of essays is to propose and defend a new aestheticism, one that embraces the anti-foundationalist and anti-essentialist philosophical perspectives that underpin aestheticism, while showing that the celebration of beauty and aesthetic value is not just consistent with moral and political progress but, in many ways, necessary to it. That defence, however, will take the remaining essays to establish.

Throughout the history of philosophy – since Plato, at least – the problem of how to unify private interest and public good is resolved by attempting to show, based on a shared human nature, that acting in one’s self-interest can be shown to be in society’s interest too. Christianity deals with the matter by suggesting that a life of private fulfilment can be found in service to God, and that this personal devotion accords with the common good. In rationalistic philosophy we find various secularised forms of this general position. Socrates was fond of arguing that acting morally is good for one’s soul, and conversely, that acting immorally is bad for one’s soul. It follows that it is rational to be virtuous, since virtue is the only path to genuine happiness.

But what if people were to lose faith in these rationalistic or theological projects and conclude that there is no way of making self-creation always mesh smoothly with social justice? What if there are no demonstrable philosophical foundations that we can rely on to show that rational self-interest is necessarily consistent with the public good (and vice versa)? To grapple with this perennial issue, I will turn to the work of neo-pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, even if there are places when Rorty’s political vision needs refining.

In what follows I provide an overview of Rorty’s vision of a ‘poeticised’ or ‘literary’ culture. This vision is his attempt to explore what might become of a free and democratic society if its members give up hope of grounding their politics on rational or scientific foundations and instead were content with fostering solidarity through a shared vision based on metaphysically ungroundable assumptions. Rorty sees human beings, first and foremost, as language users, and through our use of language we are engaged in the process of playing with and deploying signs in ways that have personal, social, and political effects, and thus he invites us to ‘view matters aesthetically’.<sup>44</sup>

Rorty maintained that there is no way to provide a metaphysical or foundationalist answer to someone who asks: why is cruelty wrong? Rather, we all subscribe, consciously or unconsciously, to what he calls a ‘final vocabulary’,<sup>45</sup> which he defines as a set of words we employ to justify ourselves and our actions, to formulate our ‘long-term projects’,<sup>46</sup> our ‘highest hopes’,<sup>47</sup> and ‘the story of our lives’.<sup>48</sup> Rorty calls such vocabularies ‘final’ because if people question them one has no non-circular argumentative recourse to fall back on: ‘Those words are as far as one can go with language.’<sup>49</sup> I believe that a poeticised culture – itself a ‘final vocabulary’ that has no non-circular theoretical backup – is the most coherent formulation of an aestheticised society which consists of self-creating human beings who are situated in an aesthetic universe.

The best way to introduce Rorty’s vision of a poeticised culture is to see how it flows from taking an anti-foundationalist stance with respect to epistemology and metaphysics, which

leads into his anti-foundationalist or 'ironist' position on politics. Drawing from and synthesising a vast body of philosophical literature, Rorty spent decades offering a critique of the so-called 'correspondence theory of truth', which can be understood as Enlightenment's attempt to derive absolute or metaphysical truths from the correct application of reason. This is the view that the world 'out there' is cut up into bite sized chunks called 'facts' and that the goal of analytic philosophy is to discover sentences that correspond or truly reflect to the external world. He advanced an alternative view of philosophy, his anti-foundationalist position, through analyses of the notion of 'contingency', which were applied to language, selfhood, and conceptions of community.

With respect to language, Rorty recognised that only sentences or descriptions of the world can be true or false (truth propositions). He highlighted, however, how sentences are a part of language and that humans invented language. From this it follows that, fundamentally, our truth propositions are also human creations. Those propositions are dependent on the contingent linguistic frameworks that happen to be in place but could have been otherwise (i.e., they are historically contingent). The world is 'out there', in the sense of existing in space and time independently of human mental states, but the truth is not 'out there'.<sup>50</sup>

Throughout history philosophers and poets have invented all sorts of vocabularies for all sorts of reasons, and Rorty's pragmatist view of truth derives from his view that it's best to assess these vocabularies not in terms of whether they correspond with an independent, external reality but whether they 'work' for the purposes they were designed for. Rorty argued that scientists invent descriptions which are designed to help us achieve the goals of prediction and control, just as poets and political thinkers invent other descriptions for other purposes.<sup>51</sup> But there is no chance of ever seeing the world without *any* interpretive 'lens' – no chance, that is, of shedding our conceptual schemes entirely in order to perceive reality as it *really is*.<sup>52</sup> Rorty maintained, for example, that the French Revolution showed that 'the whole vocabulary of social relations, and the whole spectrum of social institutions, could be replaced almost overnight.'<sup>53</sup> Thus utopian politics sets about creating 'hitherto unknown forms of society.'<sup>54</sup>

This type of paradigm shift is not so much about discovery as creation. Occasionally brilliant thinkers emerge that induce revolutions in human thought and practice, but Rorty argued that this should not be considered a linear progression toward Truth or Reality, or as polishing the mirror of nature so that it better reflects the real world. Instead, as a pragmatist, he argued that such perspectival change is a contingent and creative redescription of reality that solves problems or achieves goals better than previous paradigms. Indeed, '[p]ost-Nietzschean philosophers ... write philosophy in order to exhibit the universality and necessity of the individual and contingent' and thereby try to 'to work out honorable terms on which philosophy might surrender to poetry.'<sup>55</sup> If there is objectivity in Rorty's worldview, it is redefined as intersubjective agreement not something that needs to be or can be rationally demonstrable to all people at all times.

With respect to selfhood, Rorty presents a similar anti-foundationalist view, perhaps better described as anti-essentialist. Like Nietzsche and Foucault, he highlighted the contingency of our subjectivities in order to highlight why it is implausible to think there is a universal 'human nature', grounded in reason, that persists across generations and cultures. Rather than trying

to 'discover' our true selves or natures as a practice of authenticity, Rorty insisted that we are charged with 'creating' the self by describing ourselves in our own words, words which are not given to us in advance. What is more, we have a responsibility to ourselves to find our own words, invent our own self-descriptions, like the poet. Self-knowledge, therefore, becomes self-creation. Human nature, such that it is, is aestheticised.

Rorty's invitation was to broaden our conception of poetry to include more than just written or spoken verse. He proposed that we define it (as did the romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley) as 'the expression of the imagination'.<sup>56</sup> On that basis, to say 'be the poet of your life',<sup>57</sup> as Nietzsche implored, begins to make more sense. Blurring the distinction between art and life, it suggests that we should take hold of life, as the poet takes hold of language, and shape it into something new, something worthy. It is to imagine the best life we can and then set about creating such a life, through creative redescription of self and society.

Rorty maintained that to fail as a poet, in his broad sense, is to accept someone else's description of oneself. Success as a poet involves achieving what Harold Bloom calls 'giving birth to oneself'.<sup>58</sup> Although Rorty risked affirming Nietzsche's elitism by celebrating the 'strong poet' who is capable of spectacular originality (in contrast with the uncreative herd), Rorty nevertheless came down on the side of egalitarianism, partly via the discipline of psychoanalysis: 'Freud's account of unconscious fantasy shows us how to see every human life as a poem.... [and capable of] generating a self-description.'<sup>59</sup> As Philip Rieff puts it, 'Freud democratized genius by giving everyone a creative unconscious.'<sup>60</sup>

Rorty acknowledged that the same point is made by Lionel Trilling, who said Freud 'showed us that poetry is indigenous to the very constitution of the mind; he saw the mind as being, in the greater part of its tendency, exactly a poetry-making faculty.'<sup>61</sup> Further support for this reading is found in Leo Bersani's claim that 'Psychoanalytic theory has made the notion of fantasy so richly problematic that we should no longer be able to take for granted the distinction between art and life.'<sup>62</sup> Given the contingent, anti-essentialist nature of the self, are we not each related to our own lives in a way comparable to how the artist is related to his or her own materials? Are we not each charged with the task of creating as an aesthetic project the meaning of our own lives? Rorty, like Foucault and Nietzsche before him, answered in the affirmative.

Rorty proceeded to explore the contingency of 'community', which developed the social and political implications of his analyses of language and selfhood. His main conclusion was that we should give up the hope of trying to unify the public and private, and instead treat 'the demands of self-creation and human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable.'<sup>63</sup> For anti-foundationalists like Rorty, there is no way in which philosophy, or any other theoretical discipline, will ever resolve this socio-philosophical problem. 'The closest we will come to joining these two quests is to see the aim of a just and free society as letting its citizens be as privatistic, "irrationalist," and aestheticist as they please so long as they do it on their own time – causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by those less advantaged.'<sup>64</sup>

The project of balancing private and public does not imply a particular, determinate, set of institutions or practices, but it is a vision that can guide public discourse, even if there is no hope of that discourse ever coming to an end. The great American philosopher John Dewey once wrote: ‘Every generation has to accomplish democracy over again for itself.’<sup>65</sup> His point was that, at each moment in history, citizens and nations inevitably face unique challenges and problems. Consequently, we should not assume the democratic institutions and practices inherited from the past will be adequate for the conditions of today. Our continuous political challenge, therefore, is to ‘accomplish’ democracy anew, every generation. This is especially so when politics is viewed aesthetically, as something to be created rather than discovered.

Rorty argued that ‘[w]e need a redescription of liberalism as the hope that culture as a whole can be “poeticized” rather than the Enlightenment hope that it can be “rationalized” or “scientized.”’<sup>66</sup> He adds: ‘To see one’s language, one’s conscience, one’s morality, and one’s highest hopes as contingent products, as literalizations of what once were accidentally produced metaphors, is to adopt a self-identity which suits one for citizenship in such an ideally liberal state.’<sup>67</sup> In advancing this social vision, Rorty sketched a figure which he called a ‘liberal ironist’, which is presented as the paradigmatic citizen in a poeticized culture.

This person, as a liberal, hopes for a society in which everyone is as free as everyone else to live the life they choose. This type of liberal also thinks that ‘cruelty is the worst thing that we can do,’<sup>68</sup> a slogan Rorty borrowed from philosopher Judith Shklar. However, as an ‘ironist’ (in Rorty’s sense), this citizen ‘faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires.’<sup>69</sup> For an ironist, ‘there is no answer to the question “Why not be cruel?” – no noncircular theoretical back up for the belief that cruelty is horrible.’<sup>70</sup> This ironic stance flows necessarily from the earlier post-metaphysical arguments about the contingency of language and selfhood. We may *want* philosophical foundations, but the evolution of philosophy has shown that such a hope cannot be realised.

Instead of advancing solidarity by grounding theories of justice on rational or philosophical foundations, Rorty contended that justice is something to be achieved rather than demonstrated:

It is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers.... It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of the other, unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves...<sup>71</sup>

According to Rorty’s vision, social solidarity is not something that can be demonstrated by ‘theory’ and is better achieved by aesthetic means – a topic to be explored more in the essays to follow. Through art and storytelling that has an emotional and affective impact on people, the goal of the liberal ironist is to expand what Wilfred Sellars called ‘we-intentions’ and ‘we-consciousness’.<sup>72</sup> This is a process of coming to see other human beings, who live in different societies or inhabit different social circles, as ‘one of us’. It can also imply the expansion of moral concern beyond humanity itself, to become inclusive of all sentient beings and even ecosystems. This type of moral progress is best achieved, Rorty argued, through ‘detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like.’<sup>73</sup> And Rorty argued that novels and other artistic means can do this far better than books



of moral philosophy. ‘That is why the novel, the movie, and the TV program [for better or for worse] have, gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress.’<sup>74</sup> Indeed, he proposed that we should look to the novelist, the artist, the story-teller, and even the literary critic, for guidance on how to live, rather than to the moral philosopher or theologian,.

For all his insight as a philosopher, Rorty was at best a good political thinker. His primary failing, in my view, was that he did not seem to fully appreciate that the private/public distinction, upon which his poeticised culture relied, has been subjected to sustained critique almost as long as liberalism had been around. This is not fatal to his view, but it does complicate it. There is simply no way, based on Rorty’s own anti-foundationalist and anti-essentialist philosophical outlook, to draw an analytically sharp line between private and public. For example, Rorty states we should be able to be as aestheticist as we like in our private lives, provided we don’t harm others and don’t take resources needed by others less advantaged. But what level of private wealth becomes unjust in a world where such extreme poverty exists amidst plenty? When does a person’s right to free speech interfere unfairly with social needs? When human rights conflict, how should political society resolve such conflicts? Many such questions could be asked which cannot be answered with an appeal to reason. The private/public distinction is intrinsically fuzzy, unable to answer such conflicts through conceptual analysis.

Presumably Rorty knew this very well, but he did not seem to realise that it problematised his clean distinction between the private and public realms. In the private realm he believed we should be free to be as aestheticist or eccentric as we wish, provided we don’t harm others. The public realm is where the goals of social solidarity, welfare, and freedom were to be achieved.<sup>75</sup> The reason I say that this political naivety does not undermine his politics is because the only way to resolve or answer questions about the private-public distinction is through social and political discourse not conceptual analysis. That is certainly a political ethic to which Rorty subscribed. Accordingly, perhaps he merely focussed on philosophical exposition and left the political complexity of the issues he raised to political theorists and to public discourse.

I believe that we can and should subscribe to the private-public distinction inherent to his view of a poeticised culture – to recognise that there are parts of our lives where the state and society have no right to interfere with or regulate. At the same time, we should recognise that where that line resides is ambiguous and shifting, and that it is a key task of social and political discourse to draw that line. This is part of why I believe democratic politics is necessarily aesthetic, in the sense that politics requires citizens to creatively engage each other with the unstable and indeterminate tool of language. And it is why one could talk of an aesthetic state in ways that denote, not fascism, but rather a free and egalitarian social order of self-creators. I am not arguing that politics *should* be aestheticised; I am just acknowledging that politics is aesthetic. As Jacques Rancière states: ‘Politics is aesthetic in principle.’<sup>76</sup>

When there is social and political discourse about matters of highest importance, we human beings are doing the best we can, even if the conversation will never end. When we are left resorting to physical force – which may at times be justified (only context can tell) – our democratic processes have broken down.

## ***Conclusion: Transcending homo economicus***

Foucault argued that, under modernity, human subjectivities have been fixed in an extremely effective and thoroughly ‘naturalised’ way. Our subjectivities, that is, may have become a ‘second nature’ from which it will require a massive labour to free ourselves. ‘Maybe,’ Foucault suggested, ‘the task nowadays is not to *discover* what we are, but to *refuse* what we are.... We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries’.<sup>77</sup>

The Greek and Roman Stoics were keen advocates of this form of self-cultivation and the inspiration for Foucault’s ‘aesthetics of existence’. As discussed, this approach to existence is to conceive of life as ‘raw material’ which individuals are responsible for sculpting. From this perspective, we are condemned to be artists of life, with the world as our shared canvas. This essay has proposed that giving birth to oneself requires nothing less than the passionate exercise of our creative imaginations, which, fortunately, is a capacity that has been instilled into our nature as *homo aestheticus* through our long evolutionary history. But the imagination does not exercise itself; it is a tool that needs an artisan.

Of course, Foucault insisted that we do not get to *choose* the raw material we work with, in the sense that the form one’s life takes is inevitably shaped, at least in part, by the world around us and our circumstances at birth. To enlist Marx, we make our own history, but we do not make it as we please. We exist, that is, both as creatures and creators. But insofar as we retain some space for freedom within which we can make our own decisions, then we are responsible for creating our own lives in much the same way as the sculptor is responsible for the statue; the painter for the canvas; the poet, the poem.

Could it be that the ‘Death of Man’, to restate Foucault’s phrase, was actually the first (and a necessary) phase in the demise of what has been called *homo economicus*? What forms of life, what modes of being, would or could materialise with the reclaiming of our indeterminate natures as *homo aestheticus*? These are large questions and in the following essays I grapple with them further. The aim, however, is not to legitimate ‘what is already known’.<sup>78</sup> Rather, the aim, as Foucault would have advised, is to explore whether or to what extent it is possible to think differently, by ‘free[ing] thought from what it silently thinks’.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, John Pfeiffer, *The Creative Explosion: An Inquiry into the Origins of Art and Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory Currie, ‘The Master of the Masek Beds: Handaxes, Art, and the Minds of Early Humans’ in Elisabeth Schellekens and Peter Goldie (eds.) *The Aesthetic Mind: Philosophy and Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 9-31.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Joyce, *The Esthetic Animal: Man, the Art-Created Art Creator* (New York: Exposition Press, 1975)

<sup>5</sup> Currie, ‘The Master of the Masek Beds’, note 3, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Joyce, *Esthetic Animal*, note 4, p. 38-9.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 422.

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- <sup>8</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism* (London: Methuen and Co, 1970).
- <sup>9</sup> Toward the end of his life Sartre would qualify his notions of radical freedom with the claim that: 'You can always make something out of what you have been made into.' See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 101.
- <sup>10</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 5.
- <sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 158
- <sup>12</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).
- <sup>13</sup> See generally, Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory on Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989).
- <sup>14</sup> See especially, Michael Foucault, *Ethics: Essential Works Vol. I*, edited by Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 2000).
- <sup>15</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), Essay III, 27.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid
- <sup>17</sup> See Michel Foucault, 'An Aesthetics of Existence' in Lawrence Kritzman (ed.) *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 49.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid, pp. 50-1.
- <sup>19</sup> Foucault, *Order of Things*, note 7, p. 373.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 422.
- <sup>21</sup> Foucault, 'An Aesthetics of Existence', note 17.
- <sup>22</sup> Michael Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics' in Foucault, *Ethics*, note 14, p. 262.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 261.
- <sup>24</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Uses of Pleasure: Vol. II of the History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage, 1984), p. 10.
- <sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The Ethics of Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom' in Foucault, *Ethics*, note 14, p. 290.
- <sup>26</sup> Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics', note 22, p. 262.
- <sup>27</sup> See Samuel Alexander, 'Rescuing Aestheticism from the Dandies: Critical Distinctions', in this collection of essays. The full set will be available here: <http://samuelalexander.info/s-m-p-l-c-t-y-ecological-civilisation-and-the-will-to-art/> (accessed 10 May 2023).
- <sup>28</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, note 15, p. 2.
- <sup>29</sup> Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).
- <sup>30</sup> See generally, Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
- <sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Concern for the Truth' in Lawrence Kritzman (ed.) *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 263.
- <sup>32</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Return of Morality' in Lawrence Kritzman (ed.) *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 253-4.
- <sup>33</sup> Edward McGushin, *Foucault's Askesis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), p. 115.
- <sup>34</sup> Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) p. 124.
- <sup>35</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power: The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, edited by J. Faubion (New York: New Press, 2000) p. 240.
- <sup>36</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The Minimal Self' in Lawrence Kritzman (ed.) *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 14.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, note 10.
- <sup>39</sup> Foucault, 'The Ethics of Concern', note 25.
- <sup>40</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Uses of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality Vol II*. (New York: Random House, 1985) p. 9.
- <sup>41</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in Walter Kaufmann (ed.), *The Portable Nietzsche* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 129.
- <sup>42</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, edited by Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 170.
- <sup>43</sup> Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, note 29.
- <sup>44</sup> Richard Rorty, 'The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy' in Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) p. 194.
- <sup>45</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, note 10, p. 73
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid.

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- <sup>47</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid, pp. 4-5.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 4.
- <sup>52</sup> See Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 185.
- <sup>53</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, note 10, p. 3.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 26.
- <sup>56</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry* (Boston: Ginn and Co, 1890) p. 2.
- <sup>57</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974). p. 240.
- <sup>58</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, note 10, p. 29.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid, pp. 35-6.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 36.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. xv.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. xiv.
- <sup>65</sup> John Dewey, *The Later Works: Volume 13*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981-90), p. 299.
- <sup>66</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, note 10, p. 53.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. 61.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. xv.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>70</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. xvi.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid, p. 190.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid, p. xvi.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>75</sup> See, e.g. Jennifer Herdt, 'Cruelty, Liberalism, and the Quarantine of Irony' *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* (1992) 75(1): pp. 79-95; and Gregory Reece, 'Religious Faith and Intellectual Responsibility: Richard Rorty and the Public/Private Distinction' *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* (2001) 22(3): pp. 206-220.
- <sup>76</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dis-Agreement* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 58.
- <sup>77</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The subject and power', in H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow (eds). *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 785 (emphasis added).
- <sup>78</sup> Foucault, *The Uses of Pleasure*, above note 40, p. 9.
- <sup>79</sup> Ibid.