

Hanging by a Narrative Thread: Dewey and Rorty on Aesthetic Self-Creation

What exactly *self-creation* entails has been batted around by existentialists, poststructuralists, psychoanalysts, and thinkers from just about every other sub-discipline of philosophy since Nietzsche first proposed that one *becomes who one is* and does not unlock her destiny by simply tapping into some ahistorical essence underlying her existence. Fueled by questions such as how much artistic license we actually have in the process of constructing our life's narrative or what even constitutes a "beautiful" self, many auth

into what constitutes an aesthetically-pleasing self.³ In other words, Rorty never clearly elucidates how art might be of use for us in organizing our individual life-stories.⁴ Fortunately, one of Rorty's most admired intellectual influences, John Dewey, articulates a wonderfully rich aesthetic theory that actually supplements Rorty's account of self-creation nicely in showing how art can serve as a model for how we might unify our fragmented selves. Thus, in this paper, I will argue that in defending Rorty's account of self-creation, in particular his notion of the strong poet, the profound influence that Dewey has on his disciple will be further illuminated, as Rorty's aestheticized ethics proves to be incredibly enriched by his

against Shusterman's understanding of the strong poet that I wish to defend Rorty, although in articulating my interpretation of this figure's originality, we can see how Rorty's conception of self-creation is lacking a sort of aesthetic measure by which to judge whether one's personal narrative is closer to a "beautiful" life than any other, or to use Hume's well-known example, within the arena of self-creative poets, we seem to have no way of differentiating between the Miltons and the Ogilvys.⁶

Now, it is this hyperbolic claim that the strong poet uses a "new language" in her project of self-creation that is the lynchpin of Shusterman's disparaging reading of this version of the aestheticized life, for he charges that Rorty "confuses the aesthetic with the radically novel, just as he conflates artistic creation with unique originality" (*PA*, 253). If radical novelty is indeed the mark of Rorty's conception of an ideal aesthetic life, Shusterman is right to be wary of such counterexamples as "beautiful" works of art lacking in such originality or "good" lives that could be construed as aesthetically-simplified when viewed as a work of art. Looking at other passages where Rorty discusses such a "new language," however, somewhat dampens the charge that his model of self-creation hinges on the radically novel. In his essay "Feminism and Pragmatism," for instance, Rorty argues that social progress is rooted in altering people's intuitional responses, and one way he believes feminists could facilitate such a change is through employing a "new language." By "new language," though, Rorty qualifies that he means "not *just* new words, *but also* creative misuses of language"⁷ – familiar words used in unfamiliar, yet meaningful ways. Coupling this understanding of just what a "new language" entails with Rorty's theory of metaphor reveals a view of novelty that is not that extreme. Rorty writes:

⁶ Again, Rorty would more than likely be wary of establishing any *a priori* standards, no matter how generic they are, that could settle such a dispute. All that can be said in defense of this project, then, is that the basic framework for self-creation derived from Dewey's aesthetics is presented here merely as a hypothesis, as one possible set of considerations for one engaged in a process of constructing her narrative sense of selfhood.

⁷ Richard Rorty, "Feminism and Pragmatism," *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 204 (emphasis added).

Metaphors are unfamiliar uses of old words, but such uses are possible only against the background of other old words being used in old familiar ways. A language which was “all metaphor” would be a language which had no use, hence not a language but just babble. For even if we agree that languages are not media for representation or expression, they will remain a media of communication, tools for social interaction, ways of tying oneself up with other human beings. (*CIS*, 41)

Just as one cannot control the language-games one inhabits, but can, through metaphor, form meaningful new connections and relations within the already existing semantic catalogue, Rorty's conception of aesthetic novelty appears to have more to do with how creatively one weaves together all of the idiosyncratic contingencies making up her life, than simply inventing entirely new content for her self-narrative. In terms of artistic self-creation, then, the strong poet's skill really lies in how she forms connections in relating the various contingent pieces of her life with one another.⁸

We can, in fact, transpose onto his account of self-creation Rorty's prescription that the philosopher should humble herself to the task of simply describing “how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.”⁹ This normative view of philosophy is predicated on Rorty's denial that the true nature of reality could ever be captured in a philosopher's description, and in similar fashion his anti-essentialism in regards to selfhood rejects the idea that one could ever uncover (or even create) her “True” self. Thus, one can *become* who one is by artfully organizing the qualitative relations between the various elements making up the whole that is her existence. But if Rorty, the admitted syncretist, does see self-creation as a matter of constructing a narrative describing how the things in one's life are interrelated, the question then shifts to one of aesthetic value concerning better and worse ways of “hanging things together.”

⁸ This is not to say that Rorty doesn't praise the invention of new words, but in order for metaphorical redescriptions to get any traction they must be communicable and, thus, involve the familiar.

⁹ Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), xiv. Rorty is quoting Wilfrid Sellars here to express his own view of how he thinks philosophers ought to approach their projects.

And it is indeed this very

contingency, how we deal with our past selves and the onus of regret, as well as the continuity we feel with our future self all can benefit from the insight aesthetic experience has to offer.

Recall that it is Rorty's "metaphysics" of contingency that gives rise to the need for artistic self-creation in the first place. Therefore, it is crucial for the strong poet to first of all recognize the aesthetic possibilities opened up by there not being any essence of her person for which to search. This is not supposed to be an effortless acceptance, though, as Rorty ascribes the popularity of grand, universalizing narratives such as religion, systematic "Philosophy," and scientific reductionism to the seemingly innate desire to somehow transcend the individual and particular. If one can admit to being an amalgam of historical, cultural, and radically idiosyncratic contingencies, however, one is thereby also granted the artistic license to then unite those elements together. On a generic level, the strong poet is she who gives *form* to the *matter* that is all of the contingent aspects of her life by describing and redescribing the relations between them into an organically-unified self-narrative.¹¹

Well, one of the features of art's brilliance, for Dewey, is how form and matter are coalesced within it to such an extent that the rigid distinction between the two dissolves. As Dewey puts it:

The *material*

The creation of a self involves just this assimilation of those elements of our life which are “given” to us by the “world.”¹³ This creative uptake of one’s contingent causes bears resemblance to certain existentialist ethics, whereby genuine existential freedom consists in the acceptance of one’s facticity in the attempt to transform it. Besides our historical, cultural, and familial circumstance, we can also include our entrenched habits and tendencies as part of the matter we imbue with form in the act of self-creation. This does not entail the dissolution of any conflicts that might arise between competing drives, however, as Dewey emphasizes that the artist actually cultivates certain tensions in enhancing the meaning of a work whose organic unity strives to redeem any superficial incompatibilities.

In embracing the contingencies making up her life as the matter with which she will create her intimate narrative self, the strong poet is also primed to overcome another type of self-disintegration that can occur on account of the “will’s ill will against the „it was. ”¹⁴ The onus of regret that can plague one’s interpretation of her past history is often a disruptive force within the organic unity of our lives. Consequently, a crucial step in recovering the discontinuities of one’s existence is the incorporation into the whole of her self-description those past “selves” that seem upon reflection as though they were completely different beings from the person one currently feels she is. Dewey’s aesthetic illustrates, though, how art’s consummatory nature discloses a way for us to transform the “it was” into a “thus I willed it” by emphasizing the temporal-unity essential to aesthetic experience.

There are actually two ways in which Dewey’s aesthetics offer us a model for how to incorporate our personal history into our current narrative in a manner that enriches the present

¹³ “World” here seems to connote simply that which we have to cope with in our experience (i.e. our environment and its plenitude of contingent factors).

¹⁴ Rorty is quite fond of quoting this Nietzschean phrase as a mantra for his “strong poet.” For Rorty’s use of it see the chapter “Contingency of Selfhood” in *CIS*. For Nietzsche’s discussion of this problem see such chapters as “On Redemption” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in Walter Kaufmann’s *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 139.

matter of the here and now, as it is ineluctably shaped by the accumulated meaning, habits, and tendencies stemming from past experience.

If we can treat our past not as the occurrence of some discontinuous “other selves” which have been overcome and bear no relation to the present, but rather as integral back

apprehensions of what the future may bring, and are divided within ourselves,” when instead the future should be intuited as consisting “of possibilities that are felt as a possession of what is now and here” (*AE*, 17).

In avoiding such a division between her present and future self, the strong poet cultivates

manifesting what actual existence actually becomes when its possibilities are fully expressed” (AE, 292).

Following a long line of thinkers who believed that art offers us a glimpse into the ineffable side of being, Dewey contends that aesthetic experience puts us in touch with the ideal as it is found in our material existence. Although Rorty would no doubt balk at any appeal to the “ineffable,” his admiration of Dewey seems primarily rooted in the latter’s appreciation of what art can do for lives. If we approach aesthetic experience from a Deweyan perspective, then, we can see how art serves as a wonderful guide for Rorty’s strong poet in disclosing how we might hang things together in our lives in the most beautiful way possible.

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