

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Redemption, transcendence, and spirituality, or ease, hope, and comfort? On Llanera's strong redescription of Rorty

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Abstract

In *Richard Rorty: Outgrowing Modern Nihilism*, Tracy Llanera places Richard Rorty in conversation with philosophers confronting nihilism as a “malaise of modernity.” She shows how Rortyan thought offers a horizontal and relational approach to “redemption,” as opposed to religious or philosophical paths to be saved by higher beings or ideas. This essay focuses on Llanera's redescription of Rorty and whether amplifying Rorty's use of “redemption” and “transcendence” is wise. Leaving behind this laden vocabulary might better serve Llanera's purpose of illuminating a path to outgrow, rather than overcome, the anxiety of nihilism. After exploring Llanera's redescription of Rorty, the essay suggests that a different vocabulary—composed of words such as ease, hope, and comfort, and potentially as capable of supporting Llanera's overarching aim—is available in Rorty's writings. Turning to this other vocabulary might strengthen Llanera's significant contribution to the nihilism debate and to Rortyan and pragmatist philosophy more generally.

KEYWORDS

existentialism, nihilism, pragmatism, redemption, religion, Richard Rorty, solidarity

1 | INTRODUCTION

Tracy Llanera's *Richard Rorty: Outgrowing Modern Nihilism* (Llanera 2020) is not only a deft analysis of Rorty's philosophy but also a work that aims to *do* something with Rortyan

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thought. While commentary on Rorty has reached the level where knee-jerk reactions are giving way to considered critical engagement, contributions of the kind Llanera provides are still often missing: contributions that demonstrate what adopting a Rortyan outlook is *good for*. I am thus immediately sympathetic to her project, and as the book unfolds, I find myself increasingly supportive of her aims. After persuasively establishing that Rorty can respond to philosophers grappling with the loss of meaning in modernity, such as Charles Taylor, Hubert Dreyfus, and Sean Kelly, Llanera charts a Rortyan approach to this struggle. Her answer goes beyond outlining tools to tackle nihilism. Instead, she attends to how we might prevent falling into this slough of despond in the first place by palliating *egotism*, self-satisfaction, as an individual and cultural problem. Llanera thus reframes the philosophical debate on nihilism, a move that, as she indicates, can alter what we attend to when we contend with, for instance, post-truth and democratic politics (for what is “our post-truth predicament” other than fear of nihilism, in its postmodernist iteration, on a societal scale?). I hope Llanera pursues this potential direction for her work. It is, then, not my wish to question Llanera's overall project, and if anything, I hope to make suggestions that might bolster her case. With that in mind, the query I wish to raise here revolves around her strong redescription of Rorty. I want to ask whether setting aside, rather than amplifying, Rorty's use of words such as “spirituality,” “redemption,” and “transcendence”—a vocabulary heavily laden with religious and metaphysical baggage—might better help us outgrow nihilism as a “malaise of modernity” (Llanera 2020, 88). I want to suggest that articulating a Rortyan response to nihilism in a vocabulary stripped of these terms but brimming with words such as ease, hope, inspiration, comfort, belonging, and kindness—words Rorty frequently used to elucidate our psychological needs and affective states in the face of meaninglessness or despair—would better showcase both Rorty's and Llanera's distinct contributions.

At the heart of Llanera's book is the dual conviction that, *pace* Rorty, nihilism as an experience of existential anxiety cannot simply be set aside and that Rorty, despite his own misgivings, can help us mitigate its impact. Appraising current coping strategies as inadequate and previous commentators as too quick to dismiss the possibility of a Rortyan approach, Llanera opts to “not tak[e] Rorty at his word” but subject his writings to “scrupulous interpretation” to formulate a post-religious response to nihilism (Llanera 2020, 47). The result is an impactful proposal: that at the root of nihilism sits *egotism* and that this is the difficulty to which we must attend. Rorty understands *egotism* as self-satisfaction (Rorty 2001, repr. as 2010b). The solidification (one might say petrification) of a self (of a point of view) is the root cause of nihilism because such a self is, I want to say, *brittle*. It is not malleable, amendable, and does not seek to ameliorate. Instead, it hypostasizes, holds on and holds tight—*egotism* closes in on itself and insists. Whereas the mindfully malleable self can accommodate change and even loss, the egotistical self risks crumbling in such crises—and it is when we lose our sense of who we are that meaning disintegrates and gives way to the spectre of nihilism. What we need, then, are not ways to banish this apparition on sight but to stop it from emerging. Preventing nihilism is best tackled, Llanera offers, by assuaging *egotism* and thus advancing a more robust process of self-making.

2 | SACRED REDEMPTIONISTS VERSUS REDEMPTION AS A RESPONSIBLE EFFORT

In Llanera's estimation, other philosophers aiming to mitigate nihilism fail because they intervene at the wrong level. They grapple with the loss of meaning directly, forging weapons to fight the spectre of nihilism when we ought to work to outgrow the impulses that lead us to animate it in the first place. For face to face with nihilism, we want to be saved. Taylor tells us that nihilism results from being “spiritually out of joint” and means to exist “in an uneasy state”

(Llanera 2020, 13; Taylor 1988). Conquering it, overcoming it, requires some form of transformation capable of rendering one integrated, whole, justified, good (Llanera 2020, 13). We have, however, reached a new stage in the history of redemption: whereas we used to be able to turn to God, non-human forces, or eternal truths for answers to how we might set matters right, this is no longer an option. The postmodern iteration of the problem of nihilism poses a complex question that has no simple answers: how can we be saved from a “malaise of existential vacuity” brought on by the thought that “all truths, meanings, and values are humanly projected” (Llanera 2020, 14)? An obvious strategy is to somehow re-enchant a disenchanted world. Llanera discerns two forms this takes. We can reject the premise and double down on recovering a metaphysical/religious understanding of being. Alternatively, we can seek to connect with the ways meaning is manifested in human experience and thus imbue the world with meaning once more. Taylor's theism belongs in the former category, and Dreyfus and Kelly fall into the second. In Llanera's opinion, both lines of attack fall short.

What these approaches share, Llanera suggests, is the belief that an adequate response to nihilism requires the retrieval of “the non-anthropocentric locus of a manifestation of the extraordinary and holy in contradistinction to the ordinary and the profane” (Llanera 2020, 2). This applies to Dreyfus and Kelly, too, Llanera observes: while they seek to align with postmodernist perspectivism, they nevertheless cast us as passive receivers of saving grace, obtained through (Heideggerian) encounters with salvific works of art and transcendent experiences. These can save us from nihilism by allowing us to “relate to the world anew” (Llanera 2020, 31). Hence, Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly alike insist that we can only “quell the threat of nihilism by seeking the help of the non-human sacred” (Llanera 2020, 3). Dubbing them “the sacred redemptionists,” Llanera points out that they also all advance a strategy of *overcoming*. One of Llanera's key contributions is her novel characterisation of philosophy as a history of attempts at overcoming—as opposed to “outgrowing”—nihilism. In Rorty and Llanera, the history of religion and philosophy can be cast as a history of humans recognising their frailty and imperfection and then seeking to save themselves by aligning their selves with the perfect and ideal. In other words, our search for the True and the Good becomes a striving ultimately motivated by our desire for redemption. Truth becomes an artefact offering existential comfort.

Adopting this as our governing narrative places our fate outside our control or within it to the extent that we “get it right”—find the key to overcoming our shortcomings. A burden is simultaneously removed from our shoulders: we are relieved of the onus and responsibility of choice and the work of making and owning our fate. Rorty objects to this evasion of responsibility and thus rejects this governing narrative. He is comfortable with us being the sense makers of human experience and charges us with accepting the consequences of this insight. He does not allow us to take the passive role of receiving redemption through encounters with external sources or metaphysical relationships. Instead, he offers a path to mature beyond, transcend—outgrow—nihilism as a perceived problem. Departing from this point, Llanera places Rorty in conversation with “the sacred redemptionists” by formulating Rortyan accounts of spirituality, transcendence, and redemption.

3 | SALVIFIC SOLIDARITY

To set this up, Llanera posits Rorty as a philosopher committed to the idea that “human beings need *saving*” (Llanera 2020, 7). Not from the fires of hell but from their egotism (which will make them less inclined to lapse into nihilism) and from “various man-made problems” (Llanera 2020, 8). What we need is thus a fully secularised version of redemption—of what it is to be “made good” (Llanera 2020, 63; Smith 2005, 82). Rearranging and rearticulating Llanera's narrative somewhat, the story goes like this. Redemption is a movement from worse

to better, an ameliorative progression. While pragmatists do not believe anything to be inherently either good or bad, some “practical identities,” to use a Rortyan expression for the self we currently operate with (Rorty 2007a, 198–99), are worse than others: those that hold on to and act on beliefs that are harmful to others or limit other people's possibilities for self-creation and expression. Rorty dubs individuals of such makeup “egotists.” They are “self-satisfied,” resistant to other views, inflexible, and unwilling to amend their “final vocabulary.” They are characterised by knowingness and a sense of superiority (Rorty 2010b). Llanera helpfully stresses that this is not simply a matter of entitled individuals. We can construe religion and philosophy as traditions that have *systematised* self-satisfaction to the extent they assume to offer a superior set of beliefs (true knowledge)—and part of their legacy as an entrenchment of an egotistical mind-set in Western culture (Llanera 2020, 89). Llanera also notes that not all egotists are extremists, affiliated with a religion, or aware of a commitment to a metaphysical framework: egotism is “recognizable in different people, ranging from privileged WASPs to sexist and homophobic parents” (Llanera 2020, 90). Echoing Hannah Arendt, Llanera adds that “precisely egotism's ordinariness makes it threatening” (Llanera 2020, 90). What we need saving from, then, is twofold (albeit in a profoundly interrelated manner): egoistical self-making, which is not only detrimental to the freedom and well-being of others but also creates individuals more at risk of lapsing into nihilism, and a powerful cultural tradition of self-satisfaction and its varied manifestations.

On this picture, finding redemption translates to forging a “practical” self that is *not* an egotist. What would that entail? Contrary to egotists stand those individuals and cultures who are mindfully aware of the possibility that they might have made mistakes as they forged their sense of self or their culture. They worry they might have been misguided in choosing how to talk, what kind of story to tell about themselves and others, and what they have chosen to value as desirable, meaningful, and sound. This uncertainty leaves them open to change and curious about other options for how to talk and act. Acting in line with this worry, they approach self-making as a process of *enlarging* their understanding of the world and other people. They seek to extend the set of what they see as “possible and important” (to use a phrase Rorty often used). Thus, Llanera proposes that we view the parallel processes of expansive self-creation and enlarging societal solidarity as our “primary redemptive paths from egotism.” These ideals represent “our efforts toward becoming less self-satisfied and more other-orientated,” and each “exist[s] for the sake of each and buoy buoy[s] the strength of the other” (Llanera 2020, 96). Following Rorty, Llanera is thus suggesting we should moralise self-enlargement “to combat egotism” (Llanera 2020, 96). While egotists seek to “be redeemed from impiety (if religious) or irrationality (if philosophical),” we should instead seek redemption from “intolerance and insensitivity” (Llanera 2020, 91).

The necessary progress from an egotistical to an expansive approach to self-making and culture making can *exclusively*, Llanera stresses, take place within what Rorty calls a “literary culture” (Llanera 2020, 8). In this kind of culture, we have given up the “obsession” with “the really real” and abandoned “metaphysical aspirations” (Llanera 2020, 57–58). Its rise is as much caused by the abandonment of such aspirations as the rejection of such ambitions causes its rise. As Llanera notes, Rorty “treats the rise of redemptive possibilities in a literary culture as a product of a fortuitous historical contingency” (Llanera 2020, 72). Nevertheless, its development helped us “gradually acquiesce to the realities of contingency and secularism” and formulate “new aspirations” (Llanera 2020, 72). Its growth created a milieu where self-creation becomes a valid route to making existential meaning (Llanera 2020, 86). Simultaneously, creating a self in keeping with its ethos requires that we approach this task pluralistically, comparatively, and responsively. This is the pivotal point: the rise of literature has provided “increased access to a broader range of sources of moral and spiritual growth” (Llanera 2020, 86)—a development that might be harnessed to lessen egotism, in a manner that neither (axial) religions nor metaphysics could. While God can no longer redeem us, nor can

finding Truth by abiding with the edicts of epistemology, cultivating abilities of perspective taking through reading literature can soften the “cognitive and behavioural rigidity” characterising egotists, increase our tendencies towards human solidarity, and thus help us redeem ourselves (Llanera 2020, 7). Hence, Rorty's literary culture represents a new stage in the history of redemption, where we pursue it cognizant of “the realities of pluralism, contingency, and human finitude” (Llanera 2020, 63).

The redemptive process Llanera articulates, which the expansion of a “literary culture” opens a space for, is wholly relational and horizontal. Her approach stands in “contrast to the religious idea of edification as moral or spiritual upliftment”; she urges it as a “horizontal expansion of the self” that “embodies self-transformation” (Llanera 2020, 59). “Outgrowing” happens on the level, whereas the traditional “overcoming” strategies emerge from a hierarchical, objectivising, and subjugating mind-set that propels upward striving towards perfection. Cultivating a pluralistic, comparatively minded “literary culture” facilitates growth of a horizontal kind. It “encourages the expansion of our self-conceptions via different media and accommodates a more extensive range of moral references” (Llanera 2020, 69). In such a culture, religion, philosophy, and literature alike become “resources for imaginative recontextualization” (Llanera 2020, 69). They come to serve—alongside literature in a traditional sense—as invitations to care, permitting readers to engage justifications such as “because this is what it is like to be in her situation—to be far from home, among strangers” and “because she might become your daughter-in-law” and “because her mother would grieve for her” (Llanera 2020, 102, quoting Rorty in Voparil and Bernstein 2010, 365).

Importantly, however, literature is not merely vital because of how it invites us to care: Rorty lauds the novel as a vital resource for establishing relations with people and cultures deeply unlike ourselves, since it is “one of the elements of our culture that is *not* structured around transcultural notions of validity” (Llanera 2020, 87, quoting Rorty 1990, 638). Thus, this “literary framework” offers “a promising alternative to epistemic redemption,” as it can “charitably house multiple sources of redemptive power” (Llanera 2020, 69). Unlike those previous cultures, the literary culture does not privilege any one such source but evaluates them comparatively. Evaluation of beliefs, selves, and practices all occur as horizontally orientated, relational, comparative, and interpretive activities. The literary culture is, one might say, itself relational and horizontal.

In Llanera's narrative, redemption is, then, also unavoidably *interpersonally* relational and emerges as we forge non-hierarchical, pluralistic, horizontal human relationships (Llanera 2020, 71). Rorty, Llanera observes, reminded us that the redemptive power of religion has always been in its capacity to make us feel in intimate relation to something larger than our private self (Llanera 2020, 66). The “something larger” used to be a deity or idea. Now, Llanera's argument goes, Rorty is telling us that we must create redemption through forging significant solidaric relationships with other human beings—by making communities. Nihilism is thus best averted by turning towards other people. The emptiness at the core of nihilism appears when we fail to see human happiness as a valid “moral source.” Failing to centre relationships—as egotists do—is the “human perdition” we need saving from (Llanera 2020, 15). “If we are to live in a better world,” Llanera concludes, “we should learn to treat egotism as a key fault in human culture and cultivate modern strategies of self-enlargement” (Llanera 2020, 148). Rather than God or Truth, other people hold the key to our salvation.

4 | PRAGMATIST TRANSCENDENCE AND SPIRITUAL ASPIRATIONS

The core idea of Llanera's book is this notion of “redemption” as an expansive, horizontal, relational, and solidaric shared effort. Centring “enlargement” immediately brings up

transcendence as a connotation. Rorty does ask us to develop beyond our current sense of self, our current understanding of what is good and right. We are to transgress the limits of our selves and, together, of our culture. To capture this nuance, Llanera launches the notion of “pragmatist transcendence”—an expression she “admittedly” must put “in Rorty’s mouth” (Llanera 2020, 18). Pragmatist transcendence can be “characterized as horizontal (rather than vertical) and weak (rather [than] strong)” (Llanera 2020, 18 and 124). By this, Llanera means that it is a “sideways” sort of transcendence, rather than a hierarchical sort (Llanera 2020, 131), and “pragmatist transcendence” emerges from an impulse to go beyond not in order to envelop or anchor but instead to suggest new possibilities (Llanera 2020, 135). Introducing this concept permits Llanera to more readily connect Rortyan self-enlargement to the “pre-philosophical impulse to stand in awe at something greater than oneself” (Llanera 2020, 131). What we stand in awe of here, however, is not Taylor’s “moral sources” or Dreyfus and Kelly’s experiences that let us see the world anew but our human connectedness and our capacity for transformation.

The idea of pragmatist transcendence thus serves an essential purpose for Llanera: that of providing a “secular visualization” that highlights “the awe-commanding character of this liberal utopia, by presenting it as just as worthy of edification as traditional ideas of God, Truth, Reason, and so forth” (Llanera 2020, 142). Self-creation and “enlarging our loyalties,” as processes unfolding through exercising the creative imagination, work to “enlarge our understanding of various kinds of people, people who otherwise might appear alien or inscrutable or inferior on account of caste or class” (Llanera 2020, 133). These kinds of practices, Llanera stresses, “suggest forms of human life that are not answerable to something divine and non-human, yet are not flattened in terms of spiritual and existential meaning” (Llanera 2020, 133). This kind of approach to life, she urges, is “in no way spiritually second class without the conceit of claiming privileged access to onto-theological Transcendence” (Llanera 2020, 133–34). To Llanera, Rorty shows us that, in our modern world, redemption “is about relationships with persons, ideas, events, and things that draw out powerful experiences such as overpowering hope, love, and happiness from us,” and that a redemptive relationship infuses “our lives with existential meaning and significance, inspires risk and sacrifice, and leads to the enlargement and transformation of our old selves” (Llanera 2020, 79). The idea of “pragmatist transcendence” thus lets Llanera reconstrue Rortyan solidarity as having *spiritual* dimension, and even as being *motivated* by a spiritual desire.

“Pragmatist transcendence” is given a broad reach in Llanera’s narrative. She sees its progress as “the defining spirit of a modern culture unshackled from onto-theological dreams of God, eternal truths, or magical powers” (Llanera 2020, 124). In Llanera’s view, our moments of “creative solidarity” are at heart animated by “spiritual power.” As we, in the literary culture, forge such solidarity by forging less egotistical selves and turn to literature to fulfil the “redemptive purposes previously ministered by religion and truth,” the “religious yearning for sublimity and the literary ambition for self-maturity” become pursuits “charged with a comparable level of spiritual aspiration” (Llanera 2020, 9). Assigning such a pivotal role to this idea leads Llanera to see Rorty as, *at his core*, a spiritual philosopher and to cast redemption as the central motivating force behind his project—specifically, the aspiration to find a pragmatist solution to the problem of nihilism. In Llanera’s interpretation, redemption becomes the motivating and organising principle of Rortyan pragmatism (Llanera 2020, 8). This motive is most discernible in Rorty’s emphasis on hope for a better self and future. To Rorty, Llanera suggests, “the future is an open-ended project and it matters that we are roused to imagine and build it with religious zeal” (Llanera 2020, 11). Rorty’s utopianism is recast as a spiritual aspiration.

5 | WHY NOT SET ASIDE RORTY'S INTERMITTENT USE OF RELIGIOUS NOMENCLATURE, RATHER THAN HIS CONSISTENT OBJECTIONS TO THIS TERMINOLOGY?

Does Llanera's pivot work? Does it work for the shift from “overcoming” to “outgrowing” she advances, and, most important, does it work to shift attention from combatting nihilism directly to pre-empting it by ameliorating egotism?

By the end of Llanera's book, I am convinced her work merits significant and broad debate. Her mobilisation of Rorty to move philosophical attention from nihilism and loss of meaning to egotism as a problem, and connectedness as its antidote, is an original and powerful suggestion. I remain, however, uneasy about recasting Rorty from romantic-pragmatist of the bluff-yet-responsive-to-existentialist-worries kind to a philosopher *intrinsically* motivated by spiritual aims. That depends, of course, on how one defines “spiritual,” and if we accept Llanera's definitions of “redemption,” “transcendence,” and “spiritual,” her strong redescription of Rorty is not profoundly problematic. Nevertheless, these ideas are not readily interpreted in Llanera's preferred manner, certainly not within the wider public sphere or even the broader philosophical community. Each term comes with its own weighty metaphysical and religious baggage. I thus wonder whether amplifying these strands in Rorty best serves Llanera's larger purpose. Might it be that if Llanera's Rortyan strategy could be articulated in a vocabulary stripped of words like saving, redemption, spirituality, transcendence, and sublimity, we might hone an approach to outgrowing nihilism that better showcases both Rorty's and Llanera's important contributions? For there is, I want to suggest, an alternative vocabulary readily available in Rorty's writings that might do the job.

Llanera does recognize that deploying religiously laden terms to articulate a Rortyan position is potentially problematic. She acknowledges Rorty's objections to theism and the vocabulary of sin and redemption. She cites his Turin lectures in which he grounds this distaste by urging we “are not degraded beings, not immaterial souls imprisoned in material bodies, not innocent souls corrupted by original sin” (Llanera 2020, 5, quoting Rorty 2010a, 13). Rorty did elaborate on this point more extensively than Llanera's book reflects. He repeatedly detailed why he rejects these notions: because they spring from an essentialist conception of human nature, a dualistic one at that, and because he takes the idea of “human nature” as a critical piece of the representationalist picture qua systemically oppressive (authoritarian) mind-set.¹ His dismissal of the idea of a “human nature” is a pivotal part of his anti-essentialist argument and his case for a “literary culture” in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989). Rorty instead speaks of us as “bundles” or “webs” or “networks” of beliefs and desires.² He furthermore sees our selves as parts of a larger causal network. We are in processes, or we *are* processes, so to speak, and there is not some ideal state of being we must strive towards to be made good or whole. The choice of “redemption” as the word that captures the motivating drive of Rorty's pursuit seems, against this background, perhaps to not be the most gainful choice, as it unavoidably throws a host of religious connotations—precisely those of sin, soul, mind/body, forgiveness, perfection—into the mix. It seems to delimit, rather than dissolve, and thus retain boundaries Rorty wanted to do without, such as that between subject and object. It is difficult, for instance, to make the idea of redemption fit within Rorty's narrative of pan-relationalism (see Rorty 2021, chap. 5, first given as a lecture in 1996).

Llanera tries to pre-empt this concern by urging us to understand that “redemption for Rorty is to be understood primarily as a non-traditionalist (and hence, non-essentialist) desire

¹See, e.g., Rorty 2010a, 13; 1999b, 7–8, 15; 2007b; 2012 (1991b); 2010 (1991), 155–57.

²Rorty 1983, 583; 1989; 1998c, 107, 171; 2012 (1991a), 208; 1994, 201; 2007a, 188.

for the edification and self-enlargement of human beings” (Llanera 2020, 63). At the same time, however, she adds that Smith captures Rorty's idea of redemption when Smith describes it as “a longing for one's life to be ‘made good’ by virtue of some kind of participation in the life of this larger, awe-inspiring thing,” that is, it hopes for “a self-developing, self-transforming, and in a manner of speaking ‘self-completing’ encounter with something larger than oneself” (Llanera 2020, 63, quoting Smith 2005, 82). While I am convinced Llanera means this wholly pragmatically, I worry it risks not-so-Rortyan readers missing the salient point. It might encourage readers less well versed in Rorty's oeuvre than Llanera to ascribe to Rorty a (quasi-)essentialist view of human nature, which in turn might lead to further misreadings of Rorty on topics such as human nature and selfhood. Moreover, I worry that retaining this vocabulary is counterproductive to the aim of shifting our culture beyond the mind-set that drives egotism. Longing for one's life to be “made good” is distinct from desiring to be able to tell—and re-tell when needed or prodded—a narrative about one's life that makes sense. Learning the value of the latter—and to hold such re-weavings “lightly,” as Rorty puts it (Rorty 1989, 39), to see it as a poetic, literary practice—is likely to be hampered by wrapping this activity in the heavy vocabulary of “good,” “complete,” and “redemption.”

The same unsettling sense of “there is something to complete” and that what is at stake is “getting it right” comes subtextually across when Llanera says that “[r]edemption as a religious trope reminds us that our modern sources of existential significance are at stake should our literary culture fail. Thus, we must fight for this democratic vision with religious zeal” (Llanera 2020, 80). The scenario constructed is one where something can *fail* (as opposed to change, regress, or progress): there is something to get right, and the envisioned path forward is not so much a possibility as the only way. In practice, I largely agree: we must fight for a better future, and our current best option is to facilitate a culture where we engage in comparative, interpretive practices to determine what is desirable, possible, and important within attentive, open human conversations. Nevertheless, “religious zeal” is a dangerous attitude to emulate. It sets us up to fall into a trap different from nihilism, namely, that of teleological thinking or anti-pluralistic imagining. It seems to premise a governing narrative for human activity *and* to imbue the pursuit of realising this narrative arc with *more* than pragmatic primacy. I have similar worries about taking up the idea of “pragmatist transcendence”—which sounds, as Llanera recognises, like an oxymoron. She notes, “Rorty thinks we can discard visions of the transcendent and the metaphors of ascent and descent that undergird the concept of the non-human sacred” (Llanera 2020, 86). Indeed, moving away from these ideas is “necessary for reconciling our hope for a better world to modernity's secular turn” (Llanera 2020, 86). Nevertheless, she stays with this idea, which—in a manner parallel to “redemption”—pulls in a host of religious and metaphysical connotations. In a recent book, Stéphane Madelrieux details the usefulness of pragmatism for debunking the idea of “radical experiences”: those that are sublime, transcend the ordinary (Madelrieux 2022). Llanera's rhetoric retains the idea of striving for the sublime. It could instead bolster the importance of being “inspired” (Rorty 1998b) or being “stimulated” to act (Rorty 1989, 143–44). We should, Rorty says as he denounces the ambitions of “ironist theorists” to create something sublime, be content with making something “just” beautiful (Rorty 1989, 105),

So while I agree with Llanera that Rorty entertains a “conception of spiritual life in a secular world,” I am still sceptical about adopting this term to describe the organising and motivating drive impelling his philosophy (Llanera 2020, 7). It stands to reason that if “the spiritual” is *defined* as having “something to do with our encounters with *self-transcending* sources, objects, experiences, or communities of existential meaning and self-transformation” (Llanera 2020, 8–9), “the spiritual” will be placed as the opposing pole relative to an egotistical mind-set. This could, however, be construed differently: kindness and curiosity oppose single-mindedness in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (particularly in Rorty's readings of Nabokov and Orwell). Intensifying the rhetoric of spirituality risks emphasizing the wrong side of the spiritual-material divide from a pragmatist point of view. Wrapping Rorty in these words distances us

from the mundanity of his work, the naturalism it demands, the pan-relationalism. It is a move that might hinder rather than help us, fully accept our specific, material, bodily, worldly responsibilities—as individuals and as cultures. Precisely the dimension that sets Rorty apart from the “sacred redemptionists,” who outsource the burden of choice and responsibility, is obscured.

The objection might be raised that a vital part of Llanera's contribution is that she shows that Rortyan thought can and even perhaps ought to be glossed in the vocabulary of redemption. I agree that her exploration bears fruit by recasting the history of philosophy as a history of seeking redemption in ways contiguous with the history of religion. It also produces Llanera's pivotal proposal of attending to egotism before nihilism. A case can be made, however, for reading “Philosophy as Transitional Genre,” a key source for Llanera, in a manner that gives little weight to the idea of “redemption” beyond as a rhetorical device for recasting the history of philosophy. One could argue that Rorty's use of “redemption” is simply motivated by a desire to make a point about religion and (scientific) philosophy, and the futile representationalist quest, more than by a desire to redescribe *his* philosophy or what the population of a “literary culture” seeks. Arguably, the golden thread in this text is the importance of “reducing science from a possible source of redemptive truth to a model of rational cooperation” (Rorty 2004, 23).³ Rorty does indeed say that the *intellectuals* of a literary culture will understand the search for novelty as motivated by a private desire to make a more authentic and autonomous self. His use of “redemptive” to characterise a process of self-making that contemporary intellectuals engage in appears as a narrative device fashioned to fit what intellectuals do now into a historical narrative highlighting the problems with intellectual cultures of the past, specifically with *philosophy* taking on the self-image of being able to provide the kind of redemptive truth religion previously provided. I am not persuaded that Rorty means for us to take away from “Philosophy as Transitional Genre” that we should all seek redemption. On the contrary, Rorty says that in his utopia most people will view intellectuals' pursuit of such a self-understanding as a private pastime, as a matter of “taste,” as akin to “bird watching”—a hobby, which others will look at in a “relaxed, tolerant, and uncomprehending way.” They will do so, Rorty concludes, because citizens of a literary culture will *not* strive for redemption but will have “taken fully to heart the maxim that it is the journey that matters” (Rorty 2004, 27).

That Llanera and I produce differing readings of this essay and give different weight to Rorty's intermittent uses of the redemption vocabulary in his work is, however, *an aside to the point I wish to make*, for I wish that *Rorty* had entirely avoided using this vocabulary. He ought to have made it even more evident than he did that pragmatists are better served by explicitly distancing themselves from entrenched, metaphysically laden vocabularies. The reasons are pragmatic: it is difficult to imbue such words with new meanings on a societal scale. My wish becomes especially poignant when observing that Rorty provides us with a fully functional alternative that facilitates the kind of conversation Llanera wants to set Rorty up to have with Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly. I can only sketch this other vocabulary here and hope to persuade Llanera that elaborating on it might be beneficial.

6 | RORTY'S ALTERNATIVE: EASE, COMFORT, HOPE

I can best draw my sketch by starting from the observation that what we are after when we seek “redemption” is to obtain an affective and psychological state. If we return, for a moment, to Taylor's definition of nihilism, which serves as a cornerstone for Llanera's account too, he suggests nihilism results from being “spiritually out of joint” and means to exist “in an

³Redemptive truth from science: because it is envisaged as the mode of discovery that might eventually permit us to “get it right,” overcome our faults.

uneasy state” (Llanera 2020, 13, quoting Taylor 1988). Taylor's definition of nihilism also aptly describes the state of Llanera's egotists: they are out of joint with their fellow human beings and exist in an uneasy state because they depend entirely on getting it right, lest they fall into nihilism. For Llanera, the solution is to engage in expansive self-making and future-making projects that connect us with something larger than our frail and limited selves. She asks us to engage in a project of *becoming* through expanding, a process she sees as what private self-making and public solidarity making share (echoing Christian tropes of transforming to be made good). But what if what we need is simply to *feel* more *at ease* with how things are? Become comfortable with, as Rorty famously says, “incommensurability” (Rorty 1989, 15)? What if we need to learn to see it as “mere difference” (Rorty 1989, 101)? Perhaps we need to work to feel O.K. about contingency, frailty, and imperfection—less perturbed admitting that we are muddling on the best we can. At ease with seeing ourselves as “tinkering,” as Rorty puts it at one point (Rorty 2010 [1991]), yet hopeful that we can make things better—more efficient, perhaps, or perhaps, instead, more beautiful, or fun?

Llanera does indeed observe that this is at the heart of what sets Rorty apart from the “sacred redemptionists”: he “entertains the question of what it is like to make peace with the notion that we are magnificently alone in the world” (Llanera 2020, 87). And she does distinguish that what Rorty offers is not a redemptive *truth* but a redemptive *feeling* (Llanera 2020, 66–67; see also Rorty in Voparil and Bernstein 2010, 391). I want to drop talk of “redemption” but keep talk about ease—and unease.

For we will feel uneasy, too. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, that feeling of unease is a driving force for change (Huckerby 2021). We forge practical identities, *moral loci* or sites of agency if you will, standpoints that feel solid enough to kick off from as we move to act. As circumstances change, as we learn and grow—and if we are curious and kind rather than egotistical—we might begin to see problems with our current practical self and perceive a need to change our self-conception and our (shared) practices: we become uneasy, or unsettled. To avoid getting stuck, settled, and rigid (egotistical), we need exposure to novel ways of being and talking that might have this effect. And the *activity* of exploring resources that might transport us thus has an expansive *direction of travel* (I am not so sure our selves “expand”; rather, what expands is the stock of phrases, framings, and linguistic and other forms of behaviour our current practical self is aware of). Only some of these resources will be capable of (potentially) driving change. Rorty emphasises what he calls “stimulating” books capable of making us *want* to change (Rorty 1989, 143–44). These are resources able to unsettle our settled sense of self. He stresses that shudders of shame and indignation, as well as awe or even “tingles” of aesthetic bliss, are responses to encounters with such “stimulating” or “inspiring” works that might make us more likely to take action in the world (Rorty 1989). Self-making of this kind is an affectively driven, artistic (poetic) process, where we move from one self-expression (our current practical self) to the next as our needs, feelings, circumstances, and beliefs change over a lifetime or across history. If we are curious *and* kind, we move back and forth from ease to unease. Such self-making makes a big ask: that we remain willing to, at least at times, risk our selves. But while it starts as we turn outwards and is perpetuated as we increase our set of materials for “making it new,” self-making does not necessarily constitute or require “transcendence.”

Our desire for ease can also be expressed as a need for comfort. What pragmatism denies us, as Rorty points out on several occasions, is “metaphysical comfort”: the comfort we could have sought if we believed in God or Truth, in the existence of final answers.⁴ For, he says, if we give up hope of indubitable foundations “we shall lose what Nietzsche called ‘metaphysical comfort’, but we may gain a renewed sense of community. Our identification with our community—our society, our political tradition, our intellectual heritage—is heightened when we see this community as

⁴Rorty 1981, 572; 1980b, 715–27; 2012 (1991b), 31; 1999b, 17.

ours rather than nature's, shaped rather than found, one among many which men have made. In the end, the pragmatists tell us, what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope getting things right" (Rorty 1980b, 727). What (Rortyan) pragmatism urges us to see is that comfort should be sought in human solidarity rather than through uncovering Truth as a comforting artefact. Llanera notes the connection between solidarity and belonging: "Solidarity, meanwhile, is about being inspired by the ideal of humanistic belongingness" (Llanera 2020, 105). "Belonging" is key: we yearn for belonging, and when we fail to provide that to others—or to find it—we turn to intimate relationships with higher beings or ideas. To paraphrase Rorty on freedom and truth: if we take care of belonging, moral progress—and making meaning—might take care of itself. Llanera and I thus agree that such other-orientation and engaging in making communities can help us stave off nihilism as a sense of "unease." The shift I encourage is simply to speak of seeking comfort in companionship and shared efforts, rather than of realising redemption through pragmatist transcendence.

And lastly, hope. What does it take to become more willing to put our selves on the line—to explore our unease and engage in change making? Do we need a vision or practice that has a spiritual quality? We need a reasonably stable practical identity from which to act, and a community that might catch or comfort us if our efforts backfire. We also, however, need a vision of what is worth striving for, and a reasonable hope for realising this vision. More plainly, we need a sense of being able to cope and reasons for thinking that keeping on is worth it. Llanera ties Rorty's talk of "hope" directly to the idea of "spirituality"—the hope of making us and the future better is to her not merely romantic but spiritual. Rorty can, I agree, be construed in such terms on occasion: for instance, when he turns to the idea of "inspiration" (Rorty 1998b). I would prefer not to. For "spiritual" so quickly loses sight of the necessarily material and political work of change. Llanera tells us that "Peter Dews's observation hits the nail on the head: despite Rorty's numerous misgivings against religion, his later works display 'a conception of human emancipation able to house aspirations formerly nurtured by religion,' one in which our metaphysical convictions are 'converted into moral-political aspirations for humanity at large'" (Llanera 2020, 65, quoting Dews in Auxier and Hahn 2010, 646). We agree that Rorty calls us to attend to the moral-political realm. I would prefer that we left it at that, for the pragmatic reason that talk of the political preserves a stronger sense of worldly agency, and that, in turn, bolsters the chances of us affecting material change. It bolsters reasonable, believable hope, of a potentially stimulating kind. From this point of view, talk of hope, as Rorty stresses in, for instance, *Achieving Our Country* (Rorty 1998a) and *Philosophy and Social Hope* (Rorty 1999a)—serves us better than recasting the activity of articulating reasons to believe as a spiritual quest.

I could expand on these points but will not do so here. We could discuss how Rorty does indeed frame feeling as though we are part of something larger than ourselves as an important affective response, potentially capable of triggering change. Alternatively, we could talk about the distinctions and overlaps between hope, inspiration, and spirituality. We could explore if it makes a difference that some of us, as Rorty points out, are "bluff" pragmatists who do not feel existential angst in the first place (see his "Reply" to J. B. Schneewind in Auxier and Hahn 2010, 506). We could discuss the possibility of a subtle prescriptiveness in Llanera's narrative of becoming (perhaps I do not want to transform but do what good I can, with what I now have, and that might be my private privilege). These points of (possible) contention, however, are all inessential to my case.

In his reply to Dreyfus and Taylor, Rorty tells us that as a "good pragmatist" he wants "to replace the notion of 'discovery of essence' with that of 'appropriateness of a vocabulary for a purpose'. This will enable us to do everything we could do before, *except* continue the Western metaphysical tradition" (Rorty 1980a, 46). Rorty reaffirmed this stance in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. He chose to simply deploy a novel, literary vocabulary to articulate his constructive project in order to move beyond the vocabulary bequeathed to him by the philosophical canon. He urged us to avoid entering into debates we want to leave behind and instead attempt to create a new "pattern of linguistic behavior which will

tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate new forms of nonlinguistic behavior.” And he continued: “This sort of philosophy does not work piece by piece, analyzing concept after concept, or testing thesis after thesis. Rather, it works holistically and pragmatically. It says things like ‘try thinking of it this way’—or more specifically, ‘try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possibly interesting questions’” (Rorty 1989, 9). Llanera is decidedly asking new, interesting questions. But she stops short of leveraging the potential of the alternative vocabulary available to her—composed of words such as ease, hope, and comfort—to further her aim of helping us “outgrow” the construct of nihilism. This latter rhetoric seems more capable of supporting Llanera's overarching aims than her use of the traditional redemption vocabulary, because outgrowing nihilism also appears to call for outgrowing traditional ideas such as redemption, transcendence, and even spirituality. In addition, going down this route aligns with Rorty's recommendation that we turn to new ways to talk that help us move on from the old.

Rorty makes my point in “Religion in the Public Square”: “The social ideals we secular humanists champion are often cast in religious terms,” he admits, but

we hope that they will eventually cease to be so stated. This is not because we think that there is something intrinsically wrong with religious language. Religious belief, according to the “ethics of belief” that I share with William James, is not irrational, or intrinsically wrong-headed. But, in the first place, putting political convictions in religious terms gives aid and comfort to ecclesiastical organizations, and thus to religious exclusivism, contempt for people who should be accorded the same respect as the rest of their fellow-citizens. In the second place, leftist politics—the sort whose sacred texts are *On Liberty* and *Utilitarianism*—is strengthened just insofar as belief in a providential deity who will provide pie in the sky is weakened. (Rorty 2010c, 457).

I am suggesting that Llanera's powerful and original contribution to the nihilism debate is strengthened to the extent it succeeds in moving beyond the religious-metaphysical vocabulary in which it is currently stated.

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