

Rorty's Aversion to Normative Violence: The Myth of the Given and the Death of God

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Abstract

Among the deeper strata of Rorty's philosophy is what I call his aversion to normative violence. Normative violence occurs when some specific group presents itself as having a privileged relation to reality. The alternative to normative violence is recognizing that cultural politics has priority over ontology. I trace this Rortyan idea to its origins in Nietzsche and Sellars. Rorty's contribution is to combine Nietzsche on the death of God and Sellars on the Myth of the Given. However, I conclude with a suggestion that Rorty ultimately goes too far in thinking that avoiding normative violence requires abstaining from metaphysics and epistemology as such.

Keywords

Nietzsche – Sellars – Rorty – cultural politics – the Myth of the Given

1 Introduction

For most of his intellectually productive years, Rorty was almost alone among American philosophers in rejecting “the analytic-Continental divide”. His texts are liberally sprinkled with allusions to Quine, Davidson, Dewey, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Sellars – many of whom he interprets in idiosyncratic ways (his “creative misreading”). For this reason, however, it can be difficult to identify Rorty's deeper philosophical convictions or his reasons for holding them. I shall argue that among the deeper strata of Rorty's philosophy lies what I shall call his *aversion to normative violence*. Though Rorty does not

offer us a fully articulated critique of normative violence, his aversion to it is a feature of his temperament that nevertheless radiates from his essays, books, and interviews. Indeed, I will argue that the aversion to normative violence animates *both* Rorty's cosmopolitan, humanistic liberalism *and* his reluctance to articulate the epistemological and metaphysical dimensions of that liberalism.

By 'normative violence' I mean the injury committed when someone attributes to him or herself the authority to speak on behalf of the normative as such. By 'the normative' I mean those ostensibly *sui generis* features of human life such as rationality or morality. Normative violence occurs when some specific group presents itself as having the only coherent conception of a normative phenomenon. Such claims are performatively enacted by invoking some special relation with Nature, Objective Reality, or God. Only members of the group that enjoys such a special relation are authorized (so they claim) to talk about what morality or rationality *really* consists of, or entails.

The self-authorizing gesture is to insist that their claims about reality are "self-evidently true". It is on these grounds that Rorty is as critical of the normative violence perpetuated by scientists who claim to speak on behalf of objective nature as he is of priests who claim to speak on behalf the divine. Likewise, he is as critical of the metaphysical naturalists who legitimize the former as he is of the theologians who legitimize the latter. And yet just here is a frequently remarked upon lacuna in Rorty's thought – for in his aversion to normative violence, Rorty abjures from doing any metaphysics or epistemology at all. Insofar as being a philosopher is being someone who is intellectually *obligated* to articulate one's metaphysical and epistemological commitments, then what we need, he thinks, is *to cease being philosophers altogether*. Whether we can cease being philosophers and still defend liberal democracy, however, remains an open question.¹

To get more intellectual traction on Rorty's critique of philosophy as itself motivated by the rejection of normative violence, I shall understand his implicit critique of normative violence by reflecting on two of the most important sources of his own thinking: Friedrich Nietzsche and Wilfrid Sellars. I shall argue that Nietzsche is important for Rorty – more important than would be guessed from the relative dearth of references – because Nietzsche synthesizes a compelling philosophical-poetic vision emphasizing naturalism,

1 Here I will use 'liberal democracy' to mean a society that is committed to ideals of equality and liberty; see Stanley (2015), esp. Chapter 1, for a concise characterization of liberal democratic states in the sense intended here.

historicism, perspectivism, secularism, and contingency.² Where Rorty departs from Nietzsche is their respective attitudes towards liberal democracy. Likewise, Sellars is a crucial figure for Rorty, especially prior to *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), both in terms of the rejection of epistemological and semantic foundationalism (“the Myth of the Given”), and the anti-foundationalist, moderately holistic alternative that Sellars promoted (“the logical space of reasons”).

In what follows, I shall focus on two specific inheritances from Nietzsche and Sellars on Rorty's thought. From Nietzsche, Rorty inherits a wide-ranging diagnosis of “the death of God”. From Sellars, Rorty inherits a set of powerful arguments for rejecting the Myth of the Given. But it was Rorty's achievement to recognize that both the Given and God are species of normative violence. The key move here lies in appreciating the significance of Rorty's late remark that “cultural politics should replace ontology, and also that whether it should or not is *itself* a matter of cultural politics” (2007, 5). This rather cryptic remark, properly understood, illuminates much of Rorty's metaphilosophy. I shall argue that we can understand it better by considering the significance of Nietzsche and Sellars for Rorty. I shall argue that the first claim – that cultural politics should replace ontology – can be traced back to a certain reading of the death of God (§1). The second claim – that it is a question of cultural politics as to whether cultural politics should replace ontology – can be traced back to a certain reading of the Myth of the Given (§2). In effect, Rorty transforms the Myth of the Given from a criticism of epistemological positions into a more general and wide-ranging commitment to an ethics of discourse. Given that commitment, normative violence arises whenever the open-endedness of cultural politics is arbitrarily arrested by the mere stipulation of an ontological claim (§3).

2 Nietzsche on the Death of God

Since Rorty rarely engages in sustained readings of Nietzsche – and never uses the locution “we Nietzscheans”, perhaps due to Nietzsche's hostility towards liberal democracy – I shall begin with an independent reading of Nietzsche in order to establish a Nietzschean stratum to Rorty's thinking that focuses on

2 I recognize that Dewey also does so, and does so in a way that is congenial to liberal democracy. For this reason Rorty is closer to Dewey than to Nietzsche. However, Nietzsche also picks up on individual self-transformation that is important to Rorty and which is not a prominent Deweyan theme.

“the death of God”. For economy I shall restrict my attention to *The Gay Science* (1881). Though casual readers of Nietzsche are often familiar with the dramatic ‘parable of the madman’ (GS 125), it is easy to forget that this passage occurs well after the death of God has been announced as a *fait accompli* in GS 108 and 109. I will therefore turn to GS 108 and 109 to situate the reading of Nietzsche that is important for Rorty.

Nietzsche explains that our preeminent philosophical task – using ‘philosophical’ in the broadest sense that Nietzsche associated with antiquity and wished to revive – is to contend with “the shadows of God”: “God is dead; but given the way people are, there may still for millennia be caves in which they show his shadow – And we – we must still defeat his shadow as well!” (GS 108). By this, Nietzsche seems to mean that since millennia of Christian thought and practice have saturated Western culture, the foremost task is not to ‘kill God’ – *that* has already happened, Nietzsche thinks – but to defeat his ‘shadows’. But what are these ‘shadows of God’? And what is the difference that makes a difference between saying ‘God does not exist’ and ‘God is dead’?

Though Nietzsche is often circumspect about what he could mean by ‘the shadows of God’, we can understand what is indicated by this opaque phrase by reflecting on how the historically mediated self-understanding of Western culture has been influenced by concepts originating in Christian theology. One might think here of the mystification of the origins of property in Locke – a mystification with repercussions for treatment of non-White peoples (Mills 1997) – or the early modern conception of scientific explanations in terms of laws (for don’t laws require a lawgiver?).³ The very conception of liberal democracy that was taking shape in the 19th century was, Nietzsche thought, itself just another shadow of God since he understood it as an incoherent attempt to secularize Christian values by separating them from Christian metaphysics.

On Nietzsche’s view, what must be acknowledged is the *fact* that God is dead; put less metaphorically, Christian theological metaphysics is no longer the fundamental and unquestionable conceptual framework for Western science, morality, aesthetics, and politics. Even the fact of pluralism about comprehensive doctrines in a secular age is a tacit acknowledgement of the death of God. But the full explication of this acknowledgement requires the need to abolish ‘the shadows of God’: the ways in which our thinking (and even feeling) about both ourselves and the world is ‘haunted’ by theological residue.

In GS 109, the immediate lesson that Nietzsche draws from the death of God is the need to radically re-conceptualize what ‘nature’ means. Both the Romantic

3 See Funkenstein (1985); see also “No God, No Laws” by Nancy Cartwright, unpublished draft. www.isnature.org/Files/Cartwright_No_God_No_Laws_draft.pdf.

metaphor of nature as a sort of organism and the Enlightenment metaphor of nature as a machine are already implicitly among the shadows of God because – as with God himself – both metaphors are just anthropomorphic projections. The self-discipline necessary to refrain from projecting our “aesthetic anthropomorphisms” (GS 109) onto nature thereby creates a space in which we can also rethink what is to be human: “But when will we be done with our caution and care? When will all these shadows of God no longer darken us? When will we have completely de-deified nature? When may we begin to *naturalize* humanity with a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?” (ibid.). Naturalizing humanity requires at the same time a fundamental reconceptualization of what ‘nature’ is. Since the very idea of nature as a mechanism is itself among the anthropomorphic projections we are called upon to overcome, ‘naturalizing humanity’ is therefore *not* a matter of explaining constitutive features of human existence in terms of a putatively ‘mechanistic’ nature. Instead naturalizing humanity is precisely a question of overcoming all those anthropomorphic projections, which in turn have their cultural-political locus in a specific conception of what it is to be a human being. We should, in a certain sense, ‘de-anthropomorphize humanity’ – that is, liberate ourselves from a specific (and Christian) conception of what it is to be a human being.

The air of paradox can be dispelled by observing how Nietzsche relates the naturalization of humanity to the death of God:

Monotheism ... this rigid consequence of the teachings of a normal human type ... was perhaps the greatest threat to humanity so far. ... In polytheism the free-spiritedness and many-spiritedness of humanity received preliminary form – the power to create for ourselves our own new eyes and ever again new eyes that are ever more our own – so that for humans alone among the animals there are no eternal horizons and perspectives.

GS 143

In other words, to naturalize humanity is to liberate us from the idea that there is a single normal human type to which all must conform, or be judged as deficient for falling short. To naturalize humanity – to understand ourselves as a part of a world that does not conform to any of our aesthetic anthropomorphisms, *including* God – is to say that there is nothing to constrain an indefinitely proliferating and diverging plurality of perspectives.

Notice, however, that with this we have arrived at a key Rortyan theme: that there is no “permanent ahistorical matrix for inquiry”, as he frequently says (e.g. Rorty 1982, 80). Since the world has no preferred description of itself, no facts about the world, *including* facts about ‘human nature’, could determine

in advance of experimentation what new vocabularies we may create in order to talk about ourselves in ever-new ways.⁴ Crucially, Nietzsche does not even pretend to engage in any traditional ontological or epistemological debates about the existence of God.⁵ His project wholly concerns what “we” should do and become, or at least those of us who are among “the free spirits” – those Europeans or Euro-Americans for whom God is no longer believable.⁶

Once we understand that Nietzsche is not trying to do ontology as traditionally understood, we can understand ‘the death of God’ as a project of what Rorty calls ‘cultural politics’: arguments about what we should talk about. Though he does not cite Nietzsche, the parallels are, I submit, striking enough. Rorty claims both that “cultural politics should replace ontology and also that whether it should or not is *itself* a matter of cultural politics” (2007, 5). The first half of this claim – that cultural politics should replace ontology – is therefore exactly anticipated in Nietzsche’s reflections on how we should overcome the shadows of God in modern European self-consciousness. For the second half of this claim – that whether cultural politics should or should not replace ontology is *itself* a matter of cultural politics – we need to turn from Nietzsche to Sellars.

3 Sellars and the Myth of the Given

In turning to Sellars, we have an easier task of establishing the relation, since Rorty himself admits in his “Intellectual Autobiography” that upon discovering “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” (henceforth EPM), “Sellars became my new philosophical hero, and for the next twenty years most of what I published was an attempt to capitalize on his achievements” (Rorty 2010, 8).⁷ Since I want to capitalize on Rorty’s use of the Myth of the Given to undermine the idea that we have any access to ontological commitments independent of what is at stake in cultural politics, I shall first turn to what this opaque phrase – ‘the Myth of the Given’ – is intended to capture.

4 Rorty’s way of putting this Nietzschean thought is frequently conjoined with the Sellarsian thought that the world constrains our beliefs only *causally*, and not *rationally* (see Rorty 1989, 6).

5 Nietzsche seems to have thought that Kant’s critique of rational theology in the *Critique of Pure Reason* was already sufficient for undermining the conceptual coherence of religious discourse as metaphysics, as when he says “Yet it had been *his* [Kant’s] strength and cleverness that had *broken open* the cage!” (GS 335).

6 On the idea of “the free spirit,” see Franco (2011) and Bamford (2015).

7 For Sellars’s influence on Rorty, see Miller (2011).

As Sellars understands it, the crux of the Myth of the Given is that our ability to classify items in our environment within an evolving conceptual framework cannot be explained in terms of our ability to merely *notice* those items, since our ability to notice is itself conceptually structured. To be able to classify an item as red, or as round, or as a ball – not to mention our ability to concatenate all things in terms of properties and objects, e.g. as a red round ball – involves the use of concepts in shaping perceptual consciousness. This is why Sellars says, “*For we now recognize that instead of coming to have a concept of a thing because we have noticed that sort of thing, to have the ability to notice a sort of thing is already to have the concept of that sort of thing, and cannot account for it.*” (EPM §45/Sellars 1963a, 176; emphasis original). Though there is indeed *non-inferential* knowledge – knowledge that is not the result of a deductive or inductive argument – there is no *presuppositionless* knowledge, just because even perceptual knowledge rests on a rich set of bodily know-how, *including* the bodily know-how of being a competent speaker of a natural language.

But the consequence of rejecting the Given means that “no giving of reasons for adopting a language game can appeal to premises outside all language games. The *data* of the positivist must join the *illuminatio* of Augustine” (SRLG §84/Sellars 1963b, 356; emphasis original). There is no foundation, neither epistemic *nor semantic*, to serve as a fixed point around which all other claims or frameworks must turn. Our problem is “that of deciding *which* conceptual meaning our observation framework is to have ... so as to achieve a world picture with a maximum of ‘explanatory coherence’. *In this reshuffle, no item is sacred*” (*ibid*; emphasis mine). The only constraint that the world imposes on our conceptual reshuffling is the brute causal constraint of novel sense-impressions; all of the *rational* constraints are internal to the evolving conceptual frameworks. Even what we decide to take as *a priori* truths are among the items being reshuffled; though there are *a priori* claims relative to some specific conceptual framework, there no universal and necessary *a priori* claims fixed once and for all in advance of all conceptual frameworks.⁸

According to deVries and Triplett (2000), the Given names an incoherent epistemological position, according to which some element in our epistemic framework is both epistemically efficacious and epistemically independent. No element cannot be both, DeVries and Triplett argue, because epistemic efficacy requires that it have propositional form, whereas epistemic independence requires that it have non-propositional form. On this interpretation, the Given is the attempt to deny the flux and contingency that all conceptual frameworks

8 On this point, Sellars can be seen as inheriting the pragmatic *a priori* developed by C.I. Lewis; see Lewis 1929.

necessarily have. It does so by attributing to them a semantic anchor, a *pou sto*, that is permanent and fixed simply by being (if you will) ‘meaning by acquaintance’. Thus, we run afoul of the Given when we commit ourselves to any claim that is held as *exempt* from the back-and-forth of the space of reasons, by virtue of our *holding* it as exempt. But if there are no such claims – if the very idea of ‘presuppositionless knowledge’ is a snare and delusion – then the Given is a myth. The Myth of the Given has profound implications not just for epistemology but for metaphysics, philosophy of language, and philosophy of mind generally.

One important consequence of Sellars’s criticism of the Given – that the Given is a Myth – is that experience itself has no independent cognitive authority for arbitrating between competing conceptual frameworks. We cannot appeal to experience as a framework-independent, epistemically efficacious tribunal that can be used to decide between competing conceptual frameworks. In order for any perceptual encounter with the world to have any epistemic status for us at all, some conceptual framework or other must be at work in co-constituting that perceptual encounter. Rorty applies this Sellarsian idea to cultural politics:

experience gives us no way to drive a wedge between the cultural-political question of what we should talk about and the question of what really exists. For what counts as a accurate report of experience is a matter of what a community will let you get away with. Empiricism’s appeal to experience is as inefficacious as appeals to the Word of God unless backed up with a predisposition on the part of a community to take such appeals seriously. So experience itself cannot, by itself, adjudicate disputes between warring cultural politicians.

RORTY 2007, 11

Put otherwise: how could we *recognize* a framework-independent experience as having epistemic status? For that to be the case, we would need to have the ability to transcend all language games and simply ‘behold’ or ‘see’ that aspect of reality which tells us which language games are the right ones to be playing. Yet doing so would require imputing to ourselves an exemption from having to play the game of giving and asking for reasons. Hence we cannot have an experience that has any cognitive authority without drawing upon some conceptual framework or other. An experience has cognitive authority for members of a discursive community only insofar as they collectively (though tacitly) agree to attribute cognitive authority to that experience; no experience is intrinsically epistemically authoritative.

In addition to what Rorty takes up from Nietzsche and from Sellars, I also think it is helpful to consider how much of Rorty's thought can be situated in terms of a conflict between Nietzsche and Sellars that plays out in Rorty's work. We can understand Rorty as performing both a Nietzschean critique of Sellars *and* a Sellarsian critique of Nietzsche, at once using Nietzsche to undermine the need for what Sellars calls 'picturing' and using Sellars to undermine Nietzsche's global noncognitivism.

Recall that experience itself is of no help in constraining which conceptual frameworks are best to use. This might seem to usher in a thoroughgoing conceptual relativism. To avoid this, Sellars invokes what he calls (inspired by the *Tractatus*) 'picturing'.⁹ Put schematically, 'picturing' is a non-semantic, non-epistemic, hence purely natural relation that obtains between the elements of a conceptual framework *conceived of strictly as natural events* (e.g. as noises, marks, neurophysiological states) and the elements of the natural order. Since picturing comes in degrees, some conceptual frameworks can picture better – more adequately – than others. As Sellars sees it, we need an account of picturing in order to avoid unconstrained relativism about the diachronic and synchronic plurality of conceptual frameworks.

To this Rorty objects that picturing could only work if we have the very kind of cognitive privilege that Sellars insists that we cannot have. All we can know from within the history of successive conceptual frameworks is that we are predicting better and better; we cannot peer around the edges of our language games to see how well they match up with the world. As he wryly notes, "Perhaps the gods see things otherwise. Perhaps they are amused by seeing us predicting better and better while picturing worse and worse" (Rorty 1991, 155). To make picturing work, as Sellars needs it to, there must be a limit to picturing – the idealized picture, absolute knowledge – which Sellars calls 'CSP' (for 'Conceptual Scheme Peirceish'). But such a concept, Rorty suggests, is itself a theological residue we are better off without: "Once God and his view goes, there is just us and our view. What Sartre calls 'a consistent atheism' would prevent us from inventing God surrogates like Reason, Nature, CSP, or a Matter of Fact about Warrant" (Rorty 1998, 54). This is just to say – switching from Sartre to Nietzsche – that CSP, and hence picturing itself, is nothing more than one of the shadows of God we must exorcise.

At the same time, Rorty covertly uses Sellars against Nietzsche. Nietzsche's hypernaturalism and the process ontology warranted on that basis undermines all putatively normative commitments. There is at least a strain within Nietzsche's texts holding that all cognitive activity – even the very use of

9 See Sellars 1963c, 1963d, and 1967, esp. Chapter 5.

concepts to interpret experience and the use of language in communicating concepts – is no more than the exercise of power. As Green (2002) persuasively argues, the difficulty here for Nietzsche is that he inherited a basically neo-Kantian conception of normativity. Lacking an alternative to the neo-Kantian conception of normative phenomena, Nietzsche saw naturalism as undermining normativity altogether. Sellars, by contrast, inherits a basically Hegelian conception of normativity, one which had no difficulty understanding reasons and norms as essentially social, linguistic, and historical. On that Hegelian conception, which Sellars transposes into a naturalistic (indeed, physicalistic) idiom, it is no objection to normativity as such to recognize normative phenomena as part of (to use Nietzsche's phrase) "life, history, and becoming". Rejecting the Myth of the Given means rejecting the *eidoi* of Plato, the *illuminatio* of Augustine, and the *data* of the positivists – but it does not imperil our ability to understand ourselves as playing the game of giving and asking for reasons, so long as that is understood as a *social* and *linguistic* process.

4 Cultural Politics and Its Perversions

Rorty's synthesis of Nietzsche and Sellars lies in rejecting all forms of 'cognitive privilege': there are no universal and necessary categories, structures, or frameworks, knowable by transcendental, dialectical, or phenomenological means, separable from the contingent historical evolution of our diverse ways of making sense of the world as we happen to experience it at a particular time and place.¹⁰ Rorty's insight here lies in recognizing that Nietzsche and Sellars each, in distinct but (perhaps) compatible ways, complete both the Hegelian critique of Kant and the Kantian critique of both dogmatic rationalism and skeptical empiricism. Nietzsche did so by arguing that Western cultural politics, being unable to sustain a privileged place for religious discourse ("God is dead"), must hence systematically re-examine all God-surrogates such as Reason, Nature, Absolute Spirit, or – as Rorty would have it – CSP. Sellars did so by urging that all epistemic or semantic access is socio-linguistically mediated and that all mediations are subject to revision ("in the shuffle, no item is

¹⁰ The phrase 'cognitive privilege' is borrowed from Margolis (2010), though he downplays Rorty's significance. Though I agree with much of Margolis's criticisms, Rorty nevertheless deserves credit for recognizing the importance of synthesizing Nietzsche's cultural politics of proliferating a plurality of perspectives with Sellars's epistemological-cum-semantic arguments against the possibility of establishing a cognitive reference-point independent of all conceptual frameworks.

sacred"). It is, so to speak, discourse all the way down, however endogenously (rationally) constrained by formal and material inference and exogenously (causally) constrained by sensations.

What we need to see now is simply this: every pretension to *cultural political* privilege depends for its own legitimacy on some supposed *cognitive* privilege. As Rorty puts it, appealing to Brandom:

the appeal to God, like the appeal to 'the law', is always superfluous, since, as long as there is disagreement about what the purported authority says, the idea of 'authority' is out of place. ... The so-called 'authority' of anything other than the community (or some person or thing or expert culture authorized by the community) to make decisions in its name can only be more table-thumping.

2007, 9

Here Rorty picks up on Brandom's Hegelian-Sellarsian thesis that all authority is constituted in being recognized as authority. Hence there is no cognitive privilege that can exempt anyone from the default and challenge the structure of the space of reasons. But for that very reason, there is also no legitimate cultural-political privilege, either. Lacking legitimacy, the declaration of cultural political privilege is violence – not physical violence but rather violence in the mode of normativity itself.

Notice, for example, the role of cognitive privilege in what Fricker (2010) calls 'epistemic injustice'. In 'testimonial injustice' – for example, when a male coworker refuses to accept an assertion as a possible knowledge-claim just because it was made by a woman – he is implicitly asserting that something is Given to him that is not Given to her. He positions himself *above* the other *within* the space of reasons, arrogating to himself an epistemic authority that is not recognized by the other but for which one demands recognition, and thereby harms her as a knower. Like epistemic injustice, normative violence generally involves positioning oneself as enjoying cognitively privileged access to ontology, hence as exempting oneself from the flux and contingency of cultural politics. But since all cognitive privilege is an illusion, then all cultural political privilege is illegitimate, and hence a kind of violence: the unjustifiable exercise of power over another.

Up to this point I have been arguing for the dual priority of cultural politics over ontology: that cultural politics is prior to ontology (the Nietzschean thesis) and that the question whether cultural politics should have priority over ontology is itself a question of cultural politics (the Sellarsian thesis). The first thesis is Nietzschean insofar as the death of God is configured in Nietzsche's texts

as the question of how to imagine a different self-understanding of Western culture at a point when Christian theological metaphysics has ceased to be the only cognitively coherent and affectively compelling vocabulary in which such self-understanding can be expressed. The second thesis is Sellarsian insofar as the Myth of the Given is configured in Sellars's texts as the impossibility of establishing any basis for how to arbitrate between competing language games independent of all of them. Taking the short distance from Sellars on language games to Rorty on cultural politics relies on the *prima facie* plausible thought that discursive practices cannot be neatly disentangled from other uses of language and non-linguistic, symbolically rich structures of interpretation.

However, there is room for doubt about whether the dual priority thesis can be fully defended, or whether it is the best way of synthesizing the remarkable achievements of Nietzsche and Sellars. The dual priority thesis requires that cultural politics itself is independent of ontology, since otherwise it cannot be prior to ontology. But is there not also an ontology to cultural politics itself? If there is an account of what it is to be the kind of being that can engage in cultural politics at all, then the answer would seem to be 'yes'. To be able to play the game of giving and asking for reasons is to be an embodied/embedded cognitive agent, sensitive to regularities and irregularities in its environment, and constantly adjusting its conceptual framework in light of those perceptible regularities for the sake of mostly successful cooperation with others, in a form of life that is constituted by the necessity of cooperation. There is, in short, an *anthropology* implicit in the very fact of our ability to engage in discursive practices at all. In that sense, metaphysics and epistemology can be understood as social practices whereby we endeavor to make explicit features of our cognitive activity that we cannot fail to be exhibiting if we are counting as players of the game of giving and asking for reasons in the first place.

Thus, while there is a fully legitimate concern here about moral or epistemic authoritarianism, that concern is *not* (pace Rorty) the mere having of, or articulating, a metaphysical-cum-epistemological position. Rather, it lies in not recognizing one's own position to be but one option among others in the marketplace of experience, in which no position is exempt from having to compete with alternatives. The correct lesson to learn from Nietzsche and Sellars is therefore not *quite* the Rortyan lesson about the priority of cultural politics over ontology. It is rather that cultural politics and ontology are *inseparable*: one cannot advance any ontology without also advancing a cultural-political position, and it is indeed a paradigm of normative violence to arrogate to oneself the position of having an ontology that is exempt from the give-and-take of discursively articulated cultural politics. At the same time, however, it is also the case that no articulation of any cultural political position is wholly independent of metaphysical and epistemological commitments.

If we accept the inseparability of ontology from cultural politics, we can better understand how Nietzsche and Sellars both contribute to (and go beyond) Hegel's critique of Kant. Insofar as Kant's critique of rational theology involved establishing the priority of epistemology over metaphysics, Hegel's critique of Kant involved the impossibility of privileging epistemology over metaphysics *or conversely* (Margolis 2012, 7–49). To this Nietzsche contributes an emphasis on contingent plurality of multiplying perspectives that cannot be caught up in any higher synthesis or convergence towards the Absolute, and Sellars contributes a painstakingly exact explication, using the tools of analytic philosophy, of the epistemic and semantic conditions of discursive activity.¹¹

The overarching trajectory of Rorty's work is to bring together the deepest lessons of the death of God and the Myth of the Given as making impossible any of the demands for transcendence from life, history, and becoming that have animated the entire arc of Western philosophy from Parmenides to Hegel. The fundamental *illegitimacy* of all cultural political privilege, hence that all cultural political privilege is a kind of *violence*, because all cognitive privilege is incoherent, is therefore perhaps one of the most important features of Rorty's philosophical legacy. And yet for all that, Sellars never thought that epistemology and metaphysics were themselves to be cast into the dustbin of history, nor did Nietzsche abstain from advancing, with his characteristic guile, substantive metaphysical and epistemological commitments of his own.

The difficulty one faces in reading Rorty is that he *disavows* the intellectual project of articulating epistemological and metaphysical commitments in the defense of the priority of cultural politics. But while Rorty is surely right that one is committing a kind of normative violence in the act of asserting an ontological position that is exempt from cross-examination in the space of reasons, that is not to say that one must (or even can) abstain from articulating any epistemological and metaphysical commitments at all. What must be avoided is the cognitive *privilege* that in turn legitimizes all pretensions to cultural-political privilege. The death of God and the Myth of the Given establish, in quite different but compatible ways, the incoherence of cognitive privilege and therefore the illegitimacy of all cultural-political privilege, but that does not mean that one can or should thereby cease to do epistemology and metaphysics, *if* there is a way of doing philosophy without committing normative violence.

11 This is not to undermine the significance of many other philosophers – Dewey, Wittgenstein, Adorno, and Merleau-Ponty, for example – who also contributed to the historical trajectory being lightly sketched here; see Margolis (2010; 2012).

Perhaps it is a mark of Rorty's time that he did not see the necessity of epistemology and metaphysics for the defense of liberal democracy in the public sphere; now, some ten years after his death, liberal democracy is threatened as much by neoliberal capitalism as by xenophobic ethno-nationalism both within and across his beloved rich North Atlantic democracies. If liberal democracy still deserves our cognitive commitment and affective allegiance, and if it must become radical in the dark times ahead, we could do worse than to find in Rorty's aversion of normative violence an inspiration for the rejection of cultural-political privilege that radical liberalism must embrace.

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