

## In Search of Perspective

### Notes on Freedom, Transcendence, and Finitude in Tartaglia's *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*

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#### Abstract

This paper suggests that a main concern of James Tartaglia's *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life* is human freedom, and the ways in which it may be served (and hampered) by philosophy. Initial remarks about freedom and nihilism are followed (in Section II) by brief methodological considerations. Section III offers a reading of the idea of transcendence as Tartaglia deploys it, while Section IV makes use of a comparison with Richard Rorty's understanding of the relation between philosophy and freedom in order to locate what is distinctive about Tartaglia's approach. Finally, in Section V, it is suggested that freedom, in Tartaglia's system of nihilism, is essentially a feature of finitude.

But she had known from the moment I appeared, and now, risking tensions with her workmates, and fines, she was explaining to me that I had won nothing, that in the world there is nothing to win, that her life was full of varied and foolish adventures as much as mine, and that time simply slipped away without any meaning, and it was good just to see each other every so often to hear the mad sound of the brain of one echo in the mad sound of the brain of the other.

Elena Greco<sup>1</sup>

**I. It cannot be helped;** human beings are free. We enjoy freedom of action in the moment, and we enjoy deliberative freedom—freedom in deciding whether to pursue this goal or that end. Moreover, we enjoy that peculiar freedom, of central importance to James Tartaglia in his challenging, inspiring, and courageous monograph,<sup>2</sup> to stand back from our life altogether, to disengage from it and to

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<sup>1</sup> Elena Ferrante, *The Story of a New Name* (New York: Europa Editions), 2013, Ch. 124. (Kindle edition)

<sup>2</sup> Tartaglia, James, 2016. *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality*. London: Bloomsbury. Henceforth cited as *Meaningless*. All bare page-references are to this

contemplate it—to question the value, the significance, of all the projects and plans and habits that make it up, and ask; are they worthwhile? Do I want to be doing the things I am doing, living the life I am living? Is this life of mine of value? We enjoy this peculiar, encompassing reflective freedom as—I am sure Tartaglia is right about this (cf., 24) —a consequence of those more constrained, more narrowly targeted exercises of choice the capacity for which have been bestowed on us by evolution, indeed, by the very same evolutionary processes that produced consciousness. For I think we can take it that freedom and consciousness go together. Not analytically, perhaps; but for embodied, temporal, self-moving organisms like us, they are inseparable. To be conscious of our surroundings is to be aware of the possibilities they afford us. Even if, in the limiting case, they should afford us none, the salience that fact would then have in our awareness serves to confirm the connection of awareness to freedom of action. And to be conscious of our life as such is to be aware of the contingency of its particular features and engagements; not just of the fact that they might have been other than what they are, but, importantly, of the fact that our attitude to them, our engagement, might have been—and indeed might at any moment come to be—different from what it is. So: No freedom without subjectivity. Let that be a first slogan.

Now, it may look as if, by describing our reflective freedom as an ability to disengage from life's projects and question their significance, I am about to take these preliminary remarks on freedom in a direction that would violate right at the outset a critical distinction that Tartaglia is at pains to make. This is the distinction between the value of my life and yours, of the various life-contents that make up those lives, on the one hand, and, on the other, the question of the meaning of life as such. Because Tartaglia, in *Meaningless*, is *not* concerned to argue that *disengagement from the framework*, as he calls what I have labelled the exercise of reflective freedom, will reveal that your life and mine has no value.<sup>3</sup> Quite to the contrary; Tartaglia emphatically makes the point that however we answer the complicated questions we raise in assessing the value of the life we each happen to live, there is no traction to be had by contemplating the meaning of life as such—for, as he says, life, as such, simply has none. This follows from the basic

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book.

<sup>3</sup> I will continue to call this standing-back-from-life *reflective freedom*, while recognizing a point that Tartaglia stresses, namely that most of our reflection is actually instrumental and engaged in character. Reflection of this commonplace sort directed to alternative means, ends, plans, and priorities I will call the exercise of *deliberative* freedom.

claim of nihilism: reality is meaningless. Reality is meaningless, and so is life, as a part of that reality. Note well, however, says Tartaglia, that that is not at all to deny that any particular existence can be meaningful in all sorts of ways—it typically will be, in so far as it is enmeshed in a web of purposes and intentions. So, for instance, all manner of desires, values and purposes may be at stake when a child is brought into the world. And whether or not I was begotten with the aim of securing an heir or a donor or a well-rounded family, or all or none of these, may matter significantly for the web of meanings that constitute the context of my life—that great latticework of meaning into which I find myself *geworfen*—but all this is neither here nor there when it comes to the question of whether there is a meaning to life as such.

Actually, there is a double disconnect here. Individual human beings may, like tables, chairs, chickens and banana flies, be brought into existence in a deliberate, purposive manner with an eye to certain specific ends that this existence should serve, but unlike artefacts, farm animals, and laboratory organisms, human beings, once up and running, may come to stand at a reflective distance to such initiating purposes, and may or may not come to think of them as sources of significance for their life. That much is so obvious to most modern human beings that it seems hardly worth noting. The further disconnect, though, the one at issue in the context of *Meaningless*, is that however we as individuals comport ourselves with respect to sources of value, we must recognize that there is no general purpose for us as human beings to serve. We are not here *for* anything, for any reason, at all—notwithstanding the multifarious purposes that may be fuelling the coming into existence of concrete individuals or motivating each in the pursuit of the projects, pleasures, ends and plans that make up the particular action horizon of a particular life. It just happened that homo sapiens evolved and eventually—or perhaps rather quickly, in evolutionary terms—became the sole surviving species of the genus *homo*. Thus, whatever meaning I may find in the life-stuff that makes up my particular life, this cannot be due to a relation between the purposes that may have been involved in my conception, nor the goals and values that I commit to and navigate by, and the very point of life itself, since life in itself has no point. So, if my goals really are worthwhile goals, and my values really valuable, this must have some explanation other than my species membership. If my life is in some way meaningful, this cannot be due to the meaning of life. In slogan form: Homo has no purpose.

This seems to me to be a correct diagnosis. Reality *is* meaningless.

Accordingly, life, as such, has no meaning. I suppose this is common ground for a lot of people. There is nothing very startling, so far, philosophically. Where things may begin to get interesting, is in the assessment of the significance of what we may call bare philosophical nihilism. What is the importance of the nihilist observation—of this fact, to use Tartaglia’s idiom—for life, and for philosophy? The standard direction from here, for those who take philosophical nihilism as common ground and not a *reductio ad absurdum*, has been to ask; how then are we to account for the meaning that human lives may indeed have? What is it? How does one get it? Tartaglia has a fair bit to say about such efforts, and, in general about the presupposition that the meaninglessness of life is a *problem* (surmountable or not) for the meanings of lives. However, one very refreshing aspect of Tartaglia’s *Meaningless* is that he thinks of this entire discussion—which is to say most philosophical examinations of nihilism so far—as a philosophical dead-end. We must all make sense of our lives as we can, narrate them as we go to suit our various needs and ends. Let this be granted. Tartaglia has a grab-bag for all that stuff—*social meaning*—and once something has been tossed into that bag it is not likely to make any further appearance in *Meaningless*. His treatment of that issue is a mere prolegomenon; a diagnosis of a mistaken assumption and its consequences. Tartaglia’s positive concern is to show us what philosophy looks like once we take bare philosophical nihilism to be its main discovery, the answer to its central question. What must a discipline be like that is devoted to a question to which bare philosophical nihilism is the answer? That is the question *Meaningless* addresses. And the answer is that such a discipline would be an autonomous and potentially progressive endeavour, quite distinct from scientific inquiry into the objective world. Moreover, it would be rather a robust discipline, one that has a special—even central—significance for inquiring minds, and thus would tend to spring up in one recognizable form or other no matter what the conditions of thought or the particular cultural context of human existence might be—beyond, perhaps, conditions of bare subsistence. And it would be, finally, an endeavour with a kind of unity in all its diversity that is much stronger than whatever continuity might be wrung from a historical narrative of influence and textual interconnection. It is substantive.

This is an assertive stance on behalf of philosophy, and a very attractive one, not least because it is assumed in full awareness of all the reasons that have been amassed for philosophy scepticism over the course of the most recent centuries (cf., 74-78). In what follows quite soon below, I would like to consider this

particular feat a little further. Specifically, I want to try to get clearer on the innovative move that makes this stance possible; the separation of the question of the meaning of life and the possibility of transcendence. Then there are two further aspects of *Meaningless* I should like to touch on. I would like, first, to venture the hypothesis that a deep concern of *Meaningless* is with human freedom, in particular that a significant feature of the nihilist hypothesis, in Tartaglia's hands, is that it serves human freedom in a particularly philosophical way. In aid of this exegetical-hermeneutical endeavour, I will bring in some themes from Richard Rorty, who, as I take him, is committed above all to the idea of philosophy as an engagement for human freedom. These themes will then lead us to my final topic—finitude. Here, in the brief concluding section, I will be reaching back to transcendence, once again, and simply wonder whether finitude and transcendence are a package deal, so that emphasizing one may be a way to illuminate the other. If Tartaglia were to agree, that, yes, indeed, expanding in this general direction on finitude may be one way of approaching the point that the transcendence hypothesis makes, then that would be an encouragement. If not, I will learn something from the explanation.

**II. A brief interjection on philosophical aim and method** may, however, be useful at this point, before further talk of transcendence, if only to ensure that expectations are appropriately tweaked. Tartaglia is (in *Meaningless* at least) a systematic philosopher. He marks his ground, sets up his claim, and then drives the transcendent hypothesis through three central problems of metaphysics (consciousness, time, universals). Thereby, he both recasts these problems and also constructs a multifaceted argument for their interconnection as concerns that spring naturally from a philosophical engagement (*pro et con*) with the transcendent hypothesis, an intellectual product—a deliverable, we might say, in the parlance of current grant application lingo—which, in turn, receives substantiation and clarification in the process of the systematic elaboration and development of the three metaphysical themes. Now, a natural form of response to this sort of systematic philosophy is dissection; extracting the arguments on offer, locally and globally, assessing them for soundness, seeking out qualification and amendment as necessary, or even providing, perhaps, the occasional refutation (if, unlike Nietzsche, one has something to do with refutation). From my point of view, there are two difficulties with this approach. The first is a matter of personal limitation; argumentative analysis is something I do at most tolerably

well and then only in cases where I am not particularly taken with the process of thought under scrutiny, something which, given the constraints we generally operate under, seems a misplaced use of intellectual effort. The second reason—quite likely a rationalization of the first seeking to make virtue of necessity—is this: good systematic thought produces synergy; the whole is more than the sum of the parts, there is systemic enrichment. My interest in systematic philosophy is in this enrichment—less in how it is achieved, more in what it illuminates. Dissection and disassembly threaten to drive away exactly what it is I want to get a hold of. So it is incumbent on me to address interesting systematic philosophy in a different, non-dissecting way. I think of it as a form of active reception, or listening. Listening is not a contribution to systematic thinking, but for us non-systematic philosophers it is a way, possibly, of getting something out of systematic philosophy, by ferreting out instances of it that seem fuelled by the right sorts of sensibilities, and then trying carefully to speak along with it, alongside it, and then seeing how it responds.

But, it is entirely fair to ask, what might such metaphors really come to? What might “listening” mean here that could not be just as fairly put by saying “trying to understand,” “seeking to interpret” or even “offering an analysis of”?

Well, let’s see. “Please listen to me!” I might occasionally find myself saying (or wishing). What might I thereby be asking for? “Please,” I would probably be intending, “try to be guided, as you construe me, by what is my central concern. And please don’t impose on my words your semantic ready-mades, your fast-thoughts, your blocking responses. Wait, please—hold your inferences. Don’t be modus-tollensing me. Give me space to find my descriptive way. Give me some conceptual latitude. Yield a little—be generous, be flexible. Walk along with me for a bit, and let me language-lead, as I try to find a new way.” Of course, systematic philosophers rarely plead. But even so, one has the option of trying to listen, and of allowing oneself to be moved.

Slightly more philosophically, we might say that listening is a hermeneutic notion, embodying the idea central to the thinking of Hans-Georg Gadamer, that trying to understand is to stand prepared to be told something new (cf., Gadamer, 271).<sup>4</sup> And this, in turn, is to be guided by what Gadamer calls “the fore-conception of completeness” (Gadamer, 294). That means, as I read Gadamer, to be willing to undergo a change through an intellectual experience of encountering

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<sup>4</sup> Gadamer, Hans-Georg, 1991. *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised edition, trans. J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall, New York: Continuum.

new truths, of seeing what is the case in a new light. Now, *experience* is a central hermeneutical notion. The main point is that it always essentially involves a negative element. In genuine experience, some part of you is risked and lost, and that very process is enriching; you come to see the limitedness of a horizon that was yours. That is why it makes sense to think of experience as something that requires a certain openness. One need not be open to experience, of course—one can simply have things happen to one, and refuse to allow one's horizon of understanding to be challenged by them. In slogan form: Nothing ventured, nothing lost—nothing lost, nothing (re)generated. Listening, then, is the effort to be ready to be changed and enriched by venturing something in the encounter with an intellectual presentation. Its contrastive force derives from the kind of philosophical polemic that is a struggle for conceptual turf—for the right to decide the terms in which an issue is put and an investigation is framed. Listening aims not at a psychological understanding, but is rather an effort to comport oneself in a dialogue such that one's perspective may be changed through another's presentation of a common concern. That, more or less, is my agenda here, and with this in mind, I turn to the transcendent hypothesis.<sup>5</sup>

**III. Transcendence** is the central concept of *Meaningless*, and to make a case for “the transcendent hypothesis” is its explicit aim. What does this hypothesis amount to?

This is the transcendent hypothesis—that the objective, physical world is transcended—and it provides the basis for a metaphysical description of the

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<sup>5</sup> Gadamer elaborates by way of a discussion of Heidegger's “disclosure of the forestructure of the understanding” (Gadamer, 268):

The process that Heidegger describes is that every revision of the fore-projection is capable of projecting before itself a new projection of meaning; rival projects can emerge side by side until it becomes clearer what the unity of meaning is; interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones.” [Gadamer, 269]

What is risked are the very expectations by which we are able to perceive something as meaningful at all. In one sense, this goes on in all linguistic interaction, as we accommodate mutually to secure fluency of communication. Listening is simply being deliberate about it, and halting, as best one can, the process of solidification of one's anticipatory prejudices of truth and meaning. Put crudely; instead of determining meaning and then assessing for validity, it is a matter of assuming validity and then determining for meaning. And, not least, of allowing the determination of one's own beliefs and semantics to be placed in motion by that process. This is the point that Gadamer makes in the reference to Heidegger just quoted. Perhaps surprisingly, then, to really listen to someone “means, primarily, to understand the content of what is said, and only secondarily to isolate and understand another's meaning as such.” (Gadamer, 269)

world which leaves objective thought and thus the brain alone; while relating to transcendence and incorporating the existence of experience. [105]

Objective thought, being centreless (84) has no room for exactly what is distinctive about experience, namely that in being aware of experience we are conscious of ourselves as beings with a perspective on the world and thus as *centres* of experience. To accommodate—that is to *locate*—experience within objective thought (science), entails an act of conceptual destruction because, “if experiences are brain states, our conception of either experiences or brain states must be more or less completely wrong.” (100)

Tartaglia’s discussion of Daniel Dennett makes the point. Dennett famously attempts to dissolve the problem of consciousness by revealing the reification of phenomenology that our talk of experience seems to commit us to as an illusion. But when we are dealing with phenomenology, with appearance, the difficulty of capturing the illusion without undermining the claim that it is illusory seems insurmountable. Tartaglia observes:

And this gets to the heart of the difficulty with the revisionist position, which is that no matter how well-supported its rejection of consciousness as ordinarily conceived might be, such rejections will inevitably be made in the apparent presence of consciousness. Our most sincere denials that ‘that’ exists will not make ‘that’ go away. [92]

The direction of Tartaglia’s argument here is not to mount a challenge to scientific understanding. Science—objective thought—is the best guide to the nature of things that we have got. We must stand by science in its fundamentals, including its scope; to fully illuminate the objective world without remainder. And from Tartaglia’s point of view, Dennett is correct to be sceptical of the efforts in naturalist philosophy of mind to reify appearance; to reify phenomenology, to *locate it* in the spatio-temporal order, is, as Dennett rightly argues, to impute magical properties to material stuff, or, alternatively, simply to lose sight of appearance altogether. Moreover, Tartaglia agrees with Dennett (and any naturalist) that to try to save the objective reality of consciousness by imagining an objective order beyond the physical, in the manner of ontological dualism, is just to push back the problem. And yet, to deny the subjective aspect of experience,

awareness, seems impossible; the very protest against it seems to bring it back around. That is the critical juncture where Tartaglia and Dennett part ways; Dennett, presumably, sees no alternative but those just adumbrated. Tartaglia does; it is the transcendent hypothesis.

We have a model for the relation that Tartaglia wants; that between the experiences we undergo when dreaming and the reality that is our dreaming brain. He writes:

The equivalent conclusion would be that conscious experience must be identified with something within a wider context of existence than the world it presents: it must be identified with something transcendent to the objective world. If this is right, it would explain why consciousness apparently has no place within the objective world. The reason would be that it does not exist there, any more than dream experiences exist in the world of the dream. It could also explain why experiences exist in a context transcendent to the objective world in which brain states belong, making such an identity out of the question; just as an identity between a dream experience and a state of a dream-brain would be out of the question. [105]

I quote at length, because this is a highly significant passage. The line of thought may remind us of arguments intended to show that the world of objective science is not all there is—that the cold, meaningless, atoms-and-the-void reality revealed by science cannot be the ultimate ontological story, and that *therefore* the conclusion that existence is meaningless—as per the picture of the cold, meaningless, etc.—is unwarranted. That we are so reminded, supports one of the main contentions of *Meaningless*, namely that the ontological question of transcendence has been obscured by the presupposition that it concerns at its core the question of the meaning of life. And the question has indeed very naturally been raised and pursued largely in this context; it is another contention of *Meaningless* that a meaning of life, as opposed to social meaning, indeed requires a transcendental context. But, argues Tartaglia, that consciousness does require us to entertain the transcendent hypothesis has no tendency to show that bare philosophical nihilism is false. Nor, as I read *Meaningless*, is the point here simply that to establish transcendence is not yet to show that life as such has a meaning.

Rather, it seems to me, the very nature of the transcendent hypothesis tends to undercut philosophical and religious efforts to *establish* the meaningfulness of life.

The transcendent hypothesis, as I understand it, entails that as soon as we try to say something of specific substance about a context transcending the context of objective knowledge, a context indicated by the fact of conscious awareness, we are, at best, out of warrant, and at worst incoherent. As conscious beings, we come, through experience, to know the world objectively. *That* we do, points beyond what we objectively know. Our attempt as conscious beings to thematise—or locate—that which the fact of our awareness points toward, has no independent base, no experiential fund, no autonomous presence for us. Our grasp of it is parasitic on objective knowledge—amounting to what Tartaglia calls “*a shadow of objective thought.*” (108)

If this is so, then *only* what amounts to religious faith could ever provide a view of life as such as meaningful. And neither objective knowledge—*nor an elaboration of subjectivity*—could ever be invoked in support of such faith in an ultimate context of meaning; it would be *mere* faith. A concomitant lesson, made explicit by Tartaglia, is that denying transcendence by insisting that objective thought describes—in principle at least—an ontologically ultimate context, and so committing to the naturalist effort to reduce the subjective to the objective, is not required, neither in order to respect the claims of science nor to defend a humanistic view of the world.

If I have got things more or less right so far, then not only bare philosophical nihilism, but also the transcendent hypothesis, serve principally to dispel illusions and undercut a certain kind of futile intellectual ambition. As Tartaglia observes: “Nihilism’s consequences outside of philosophy are all negative; in that it only has practical potential because of its ability to relieve us of false beliefs:” (172) Within philosophy, though, these negatives may have positive consequences—in particular, there is the possibility of the kind of affirmative view of philosophy as an autonomous and substantive intellectual practice.

Consider the philosophical ambition of *closure*. This is the idea that there may be—perhaps only ideally and in principle, but nevertheless conceivably—a way to conceptualize explicitly a definitive metaphysical context, one that assigns to all that there is and all the ways of being there are their proper ontological place. Now one way to take bare philosophical nihilism is to say that there is no teleological closure—no ultimate *point* to what is. And one way to take the transcendent hypothesis is to say that there is no descriptive closure, either—no ultimate *conceptualization* of what there is. Well, how might these negative thoughts support a robust conception of philosophy? They might do that, it seems

to me, if we think of philosophy as a concern exactly with the openness that *closure* struggles against; articulating our experience of it and responding to those articulations. This is what I take Tartaglia to be suggesting. He argues for nihilism and transcendence, and he shows us what philosophy looks like if we think of it as a concern with a response to these facts.

What I would like to do now, however, is to try to make something out of the qualification that I have so far respected, the one that Tartaglia relies on as he constrains the significance of nihilism. It has only negative consequences, we are told, “outside philosophy.” However, perhaps what we do in philosophy may permeate conscious life in such a way that more practical applications of intellect are also shaped by it, and not just in an entirely contingent manner.

There are intellectual ambitions that are both philosophical and practical—*closure* is one such. And in undercutting the ambition of metaphysical closure, philosophy also pertains to human freedom. Admittedly, the connection is ambiguous, as we shall see. Moreover, freedom is not a topic that receives a great deal of explicit attention in *Meaningless*. Still the connection between philosophy and freedom is nevertheless strongly present in the book. It contributes to its force, it is of practical significance, and it isn’t captured simply in terms of correcting false beliefs or dispelling illusions. I will now try to indicate why I think this is so.

**IV. Articulating freedom,** elaborating its conditions and limitations metaphysically and politically, has been one preoccupation of philosophy from its inception. Though the connection between philosophy and freedom isn’t simply, from the perspective I should like to take, a matter of some philosophers’ concern with the nature and conditions of various forms of freedom. Rather, for sematic historicists—that is, people who think that meaning emerges in time and that conceptual resources are developed through intellectual communicative interaction; concepts are made, not discovered, in slightly misleading slogan form—philosophy has a more direct connection with the freedom characteristic of reflective human agency. That is because philosophy—as the invention, modification and elaboration of concepts—contributes resources serving the intellect’s ability to articulate, in more refined and fine-grained terms, such possibilities of deliberate agency as may be available to us. Philosophy, we might say, thereby *potentiates reflective agency*. We might note that this connection between philosophy and freedom is one reason why philosophy is different from

straightforwardly cumulative disciplines of knowledge. For this potentiation cannot be passed on the way information can be passed on. To be sure, we benefit from the philosophical struggles of past generations, but only, at least as far as the potentiation of reflective agency is concerned, by making their struggles our own, and then, perhaps, taking them further. Certain moves come easier to us, no doubt, because others have made them—in a manner akin to Hebbian long-term potentiation of synaptic networks—but even so, the firing needs to happen. As Tartaglia says, making what I take to be just this point, “every new generation needs to make philosophical ideas their own.” (181) They need to do that, because the particular connection between philosophy and agential power that I am homing in on here is available only as philosophy is performed, and not as its results are noted and filed.

This agential potentiation, though, is a contribution to freedom only at a highly abstract level. Agential potentiation through conceptual innovation may just as easily equip human beings to act against freedom more concretely conceived, as happens when sophisticated theoretical endeavours of human intellect call forth systems of political oppression. There is no intrinsic connection between philosophical thought and concrete political freedom of the sort that democracies are designed to protect. However, a philosopher may *commit* to democratic freedom, and deploy philosophy in the service of that end. This is the explicit agenda of Richard Rorty.<sup>6</sup> For Rorty, placing himself in the tradition of John Dewey, the point of philosophy should be to serve the human good, and that means, for a Deweyan pragmatist, contributing to our conception of and prospects for attaining a society of justice, equality and individual freedom.

This is a broad and sweeping agenda, and I shall confine myself to one point in connection with it that I think is pertinent to *Meaningless*. We might give it this heading: Philosophy of freedom as anti-authoritarianism. Both Rorty and Tartaglia are anti-authoritarians, in a manner that comes to expression in how they philosophize. For that reason, it is instructive to consider some of the differences between them.

For Rorty, a particular responsibility of philosophers in the struggle for democracy is to combat intellectual authoritarianism. Rorty’s denial of the idea of human nature, his scepticism toward the idea of truth as representation, toward

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Richard Rorty, 1990. “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth. Philosophical Papers Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 175-196.

foundationalist epistemological aspirations, and toward the rhetoric of objectivity, his hostility toward metaphysics, his Darwinian-constructivist view of linguistic meaning, his instrumentalist philosophy of science, as well as his anti-essentialist view of philosophy—these are, I think, all best understood as results of Rorty’s efforts to follow through on the commitment to anti-authoritarian pragmatism, which is essentially a political interpretation of the ancient view of philosophy as *ameliorative*.

For Rorty, intellectual authoritarianism is the impulse to short-circuit the effort to seek a communicative resolution of differences of views and interests, by invoking a justification to act on, or against, or in spite of, others, without conversing with them. His counter-position is to advance a view of democracy centred on the idea that our most important obligation is to ensure the widest possible effective access to deliberative political conversation. One important aspect of that effort was to counteract theoretical impulses that threaten to reduce our willingness or ability to listen to others, to listen in that hermeneutical sense of which I attempted to give a flavour a few paragraphs ago.

Now, this anti-authoritarian commitment in Rorty, which I interpret as an effort to philosophically strengthen our capacity and willingness to listen to those who think and speak differently from ourselves, led Rorty to be critical of some of the characteristically modernist, humanist commitments deeply embedded in the discourse of mainstream 20th century analytic philosophy. He noted the historical transformations of originally liberating notions like reason, truth, method, representation, and objectivity into scaffoldings for hierarchies and authority structures, and called them out. The result, when interpreted as philosophical doctrine, seemed to fit right into the interconnected set of constructivist ideas that make up what we call post-modernism. And this is where it may be useful to contrast Rorty with the form of anti-authoritarianism that shapes *Meaningless*. For Tartaglia is in several places quite critical of Rorty, and he is throughout the book clear on his dim view of what he takes to be the excesses of postmodernism.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, I contend, *Meaningless* shares the anti-

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, Tartaglia describes a “natural next step” upon the loss of God as a transcendent source of meaning:

This was to deny that there is any objective truth whatsoever, such that nothing holds true independently of human opinion, and everything is endlessly open to interpretation and reinterpretation. This extreme relativism, which is sometimes called postmodernism, is the most recent stage in the intellectual flight from nihilism. [59]

Rorty is taken to task for failing to acknowledge the difference between evaluations and facts, and for thinking that nihilism requires an ironic stance toward life (176). I think much could be said on Rorty’s

authoritarian thrust that was the explicit guiding thought in much of Rorty's philosophy.

The point here is not to defend Rorty against Tartaglia's criticisms—rather it is to consider whether the differences between Rorty and Tartaglia may tell us something about the connection between philosophy and anti-authoritarianism.

For Rorty, anti-authoritarianism is an end to which philosophical reflection may be put. Its special pertinence lies in the fact that philosophy itself may so easily be brought in to bolster an authoritarian impulse, to serve it and disguise it at the same time. Thus, for Rorty, it is a moral imperative, not a philosophical one, to engage in anti-authoritarian metaphilosophical criticism, and to provide ways of describing human practice that foster democratic attitudes, the art of listening. The challenge that this pragmatic stance faces, however, is that once we are persuaded that philosophy is only a tool, that it has no constraining project of its own, no purpose or unity intrinsic to it, we discover that we are already losing our grip on that tool, and we find that it becomes almost impossible to do anything with it. I think of this predicament as the pragmatic collapse of philosophy.

Now, what about *Meaningless*? In a section of the book entitled, "Living with nihilism," Tartaglia points out us that, "[...]the truth of nihilism provides no platform for bossiness." (172) "Bossiness" in this context is exactly the sort of intellectual authoritarianism that also is Rorty's target.<sup>8</sup> But what is the significance of Tartaglia's remark? Is it a by-the-way observation? Is it an aside, meant to assure those who may be concerned about the potential of philosophical theory to support bossiness that in this case they need not worry, that their concern should not keep them from considering nihilism more closely?

The significance, I think, lies in the fact that anti-authoritarianism is not a contingent, optional add-on to the *Meaningless* system. The reason is that a philosophical truth that provides no platform for bossiness in fact undermines it. For *without* a philosophical platform, intellectual bossiness collapses. Intellectual bossiness, in the requisite sense, just is to provide justification for authoritarian, non-listening attitudes. And as a philosophical truth nihilism occupies exactly the place where such justification would be located. Its negative force has the positive

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behalf on both these points, but that is not an important matter in the present context.

<sup>8</sup> As I alluded to earlier, philosophical accounts of human nature have served horrific instances of bossiness, both intellectual and practical. But the tendency is quite ubiquitous. To take but one example; physicalist metaphysics (not neuroscience) provides intellectual support for bossy dismissiveness of various forms of non-biological strategies for coping with mental health issues.

consequence that authoritarians will find it harder to use philosophy to disguise the fact that they really are bullies and thugs.

The transcendent hypothesis provides not just a way of reading the various dialectical struggles of philosophy, but it tilts the reading toward finding an essential philosophical concern with openness. Where Rorty's anti-authoritarianism is a chosen stance, the transcendent hypothesis expresses a different relation between philosophy and human freedom. For a pragmatist like Rorty, the power of philosophy to serve the moral ends of the philosopher is weakened by the fact that philosophy is not acknowledged as a substantive project—reducing philosophy to a toolbox handed down to us as a rag-tag product of contingent cultural evolution is also pretty much to empty out the box. On the transcendent hypothesis, by contrast, the concern with openness goes beyond the instrumental and the political, it is an inherently philosophical concern. There is no guarantee that philosophy will serve openness. But when it does, it does so on terms that are genuinely its own. And that serves, not entirely paradoxically, to increase its potential for instrumental and political effect.

I'd like, in conclusion, to venture some bald, brief, and sketchy assertions about this openness to which the transcendent hypothesis points, as a dynamic and ineliminable incompleteness.

**V. Finitude** is a characteristic of human life in a number of ways, and Tartaglia recognizes it as a proper entry point into philosophy:

Let us say, then, that questions concerning human finitude and the meaning of life are paradigmatically philosophical questions, to which religions have provided the best-known and most widely-believed answers. These questions have persisted since the dawn of civilization, and are renewed within each new generation by those that feel the need to answer them. [63]

Typically, in these contexts, our finitude is construed in terms of limitation; how little we know, how limited our powers are, how woefully temporary are our lives. However this may be, though, I think that things we cherish and deeply identify with—freedom, agency, and thought—even consciousness, these are all aspects and attributes of human finitude. All these are features of beings that are centres of experience, beings that embody and enjoy perspective. Articulation, action, awareness—these are all matters of navigating limits, of detecting or determining

form in contexts where many forms are possible. Such determinations invariably point beyond themselves. Revealing, by selecting, is also always concealing, as we know, but it is equally a matter of bringing forth new possibilities for revelation.

It is a hermeneutic insight that no interpretation is ever final, that there is always more to be said. But when Gadamer makes this essentially Heideggerian point, he is not simply drawing attention in a defeatist way to the fact that we, limited creatures, cannot ever hope to enumerate all the true descriptions there may be of even some insignificant little point of joint concern, some small piece of common reality. Rather the point is that every saying, every articulation, brings with it—brings into being—new possibilities for response and reaction. Finitude, in the form of perspective, of awareness, of conceptualization, is always in the process of going beyond what it brings forth. Human finitude is essentially creative, because to be human is to be essentially unfinished.

Have I veered away from *Meaningless*? Tartaglia, towards the end of the book, contemplates the possible fate of the transcendent hypothesis in a world where philosophical nihilism had been accepted: “Before long, the hypothesis might become barely recognizable, with new forms of opposition springing up to replace the old stand-off between denying and affirming transcendence.” (181-182) The “system of nihilism, consciousness and reality” is not, then, built to last. It sets up a perspective that immediately raises the prospect of its own transformation. As far as I can tell, this is part of the central message of *Meaningless* about what it is to *be* a perspective—to always point beyond that which can be articulated and illuminated by virtue of it, toward what it *is*—from some other perspective. Ah—if only I could clearly see what it is I am trying to think now...