Davidson on Rorty's Postmetaphysical Critique of Intentionalism

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Abstract

In this article I shall address the standing of intentionalist theories of interpretation through Richard Rorty's critique. Rorty's criticism arises from the position literature holds in the postmetaphysical, liberal culture Rorty sketches As a counterbalance to Rorty's critique, I shall develop an intentionalist theory of interpretation drawing on Donald Davidson's late philosophy of language and his view of literary interpretation that have sadly not been taken into proper consideration in the on-going debate in analytic aesthetics on the role of authorial intentions in interpretation. The prospects of Davidson's intentionalism for meeting Rorty's criticism are related to the position of imagination in the Davidsonian approach. By indicating the connections between the position of imagination in Davidson's views and how it has in turn been approached in contemporary pragmatist-inspired moral philosophy, I shall argue that an intentionalist theory is, after all, able to meet those challenges that Rorty sees literature and literary theory facing in his postmetaphysical culture.

Key Words

aesthetic experience, Davidson, Dewey, imagination, intentionalism, interpretation, Rorty

1. Introduction

Although Donald Davidson's philosophical work did not have a substantial effect on the critical reading of modern philosophy that Richard Rorty presents in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), Rorty's most substantial analytic influences came from Davidson. In particular, the key ideas of Davidson's late philosophy of language, as well as the view of the relationship between mind and world in Davidson's work, signified for Rorty "the culmination of the holist and pragmatist strains in contemporary analytic philosophy."[1] Given the influence that these aspects of Davidson's philosophy had on Rorty, it is strange to observe their different approaches to the interpretation of literature and, furthermore, how seldom those differences have been extensively considered in the literature.[2] Davidson's texts explicitly dealing with literary language and interpretation support a view that ascribes a vital position for authorial intentions, and in some significant ways overlaps modest actual intentionalist accounts of interpretation currently popular in analytic philosophy of art. In Rorty's pragmatist approach to literature, however, the author's intentions have virtually no place at all. Instead, Rorty insists on a radical form of interpretive pluralism.

Noting the differences between Davidson's and Rorty's work on the interpretation of literature is not interesting for exegetical reasons alone. The disagreement apparent in them suggests a novel framework for considering some of the basic issues in philosophy of literature and interpretation, most importantly the role of the author's intentions in interpretation. The

skeptical attitude towards the position of authorial intentions involved in literary theory that draws on poststructuralist views of meaning has developed to such heights that the issue regarding their role in interpretation no longer seems worth inquiring about. In analytic aesthetics, however, that issue has in recent years seen a revival in the form of a dispute between two forms of intentionalism: hypothetical and modest actual intentionalism.[3] Given Davidson's importance for end-of-the-century analytic philosophy, it is odd that his views on the interpretation of literature have been left virtually unexamined in this discussion.[4] This omission is particularly unfortunate, for it is my belief that Davidson's views can make a substantial contribution to the modest intentionalist position on interpretation. The reinforcement Davidson's work provides for this approach suggests a response to Rorty's challenge to intentionalist accounts of interpretation.

The critical tone Rorty takes towards intentionalism is related to the position that is reserved for literature in the postmetaphysical, liberal culture Rorty sketches, and especially to the value that he attaches to solidarity.[5] Rorty does not believe that the cultural importance of solidarity follows from some kind of metaphysical ground but, rather, its centrality should be understood in different terms. That is, "the right way to take the slogan 'We have obligations to human beings simply as such' is as a means of reminding ourselves to keep trying to expand our sense of 'us' as far as we can…, to create a more expansive sense of solidarity than we presently have."[6]

The important role of literature in Rorty's postmetaphysical analysis of culture is explained by the position that redescriptions occupy in the enhancement of solidarity. For Rorty, solidarity is an inherently local phenomenon, which is to say that it must be constructed out of different elements in different contexts rather than explained in terms of a common human nature people share.[7] By providing their readers with descriptions of "strange people (Alcibiades, Julien Sorel), [and] strange families (the Karamazovs, the Casaubons)," literary works depict encounters between human beings that the reader may not previously have had to face. This enables him to reflect on the problems and challenges these unfamiliar situations pose for human beings, as well as the ways in which the different values and interests coming into conflict can be connected with one another.[8] These features, in turn, may give rise to more refined descriptions for people's conceptual armory with which they relate to other human beings and groups. This is the reason why Rorty finds literature an important mode of discourse in his postmetaphysical culture. Since for Rorty the enhancement of solidarity involves the creation of descriptions from which it is possible to discern salient features between human groups and to see certain differences as irrelevant when compared to these features, literature can ultimately help in increasing the presence of solidarity.[9]

The fulfillment of those needs that Rorty's postmetaphysical culture sets for literature, however, requires a particular approach. That Rorty finds intentionalist theories of interpretation insufficient with regard to these challenges may be seen from the position Rorty assigns to the person he calls

"the liberal ironist" in his postmetaphysical culture. Since this sort of person holds an utterly skeptical attitude towards the existence of intrinsic natures, she believes that there is no privileged way in which objects should be approached. This depends, instead, on the changing desires of our culture, as well as on the specific needs a particular situation may call for. Redescriptions of objects and events serve as the primary tool with which the ironist pursues those transformations she finds her culture to be in need of. In Rorty's words, "ironists specialize in redescribing ranges of objects or events in partially neologistic jargon, in the hope of inciting people to adopt and extend that jargon."[10]

Since Rorty considers "literary criticism" a more up-to-date name with which to capture the characteristic features of the liberal ironist's activity, Rorty's views on interpretation become intimately connected with his account of this individual.[11] In particular, that Rorty draws this kind of connection between the two indicates that a theory guided by intentionalist principles is a long way from being able to provide those tools for the ironist required by the position sketched for her by Rorty. Rather, the liberal ironist takes her inspiration from such interpreters as Harold Bloom, that is, from a critic who asks "neither the author nor the text about their intentions but simply beats the text into a shape that will serve his own purpose. He does this by imposing a vocabulary… on the text that may have nothing to do with any vocabulary used in the text or by its author, and seeing what happens."[12]

In this essay, I approach the standing of intentionalist theories of interpretation through Rorty's postmetaphysical critique of this interpretive position. In the first section I raise an issue that I think forms an interesting framework for considering the strength of Rorty's critique of intentionalism, namely imagination, and the way this faculty has been approached in recent pragmatist-inspired moral philosophy. Section two focuses on Davidson's view of literary interpretation. In this section, I draw attention to the role that imagination acquires in Davidson's account. It is my belief that it is precisely the emphasis Davidson's views lay on imagination in literary interpretation that enables it to form a highly resourceful response to Rorty's postmetaphysical critique of intentionalism. This will be shown in section three.

The first parts of the article are not criticisms of Rorty's position on literary interpretation as such. They merely try to undermine the critical view of intentionalism contained in his views. However, the problems in Rorty's postmetaphysical critique of intentionalism indicated in the earlier parts of the article will not leave the positive sides of Rorty's pragmatist theory of literary interpretation unaffected. It is my belief that the failure of that criticism, in fact, provides a new basis for unpacking the problematic features of Rorty's own account of literary interpretation. This critical examination will be carried out in the concluding section of the article.

Reed Way Dasenbrock has perhaps devoted the most effort to showing the relevance of Davidson's work for literary theory. In his opinion, one of its major implications is that it gives a possibility for a substantial "rehabilitation of intentionalism."[13] I believe that the implications drawn from

Davidson's views in this essay make a substantial contribution to the rehabilitation that Davidson's views afford, in Dasenbrock's opinion.

2. Imagination in Pragmatist Ethics

The reason why imagination is an issue that provides an interesting outlook on Rorty's postmetaphysical critique is that it is a faculty tied in many ways to Rorty's cultural sketch and to its central liberal values, such as open-mindedness and the importance of looking at things from different angles. Both of these abilities involve the use of imagination at least to a certain degree. Imagination can also be seen to hold an important position in the liberal ironist's activity. Presumably, the more refined her imagination, the more productive and original redescriptions she is able to produce. Her activities thus become more valuable for Rorty's postmetaphysical ambitions as the amount of imagination involved in them increases.

However, the most important reason why I have decided to weigh Rorty's postmetaphysical critique to imagination is that a group of pragmatist philosophers have recently devoted attention to the role of imagination in people's moral lives, and they regard it as occupying a vital position in proper moral reflection. This forms an illuminating basis for assessing the ultimate standing of Rorty's criticism, for it is underlain by assumptions and motivations similar to those of the postmetaphysical view of ethics involved in Rorty's account of liberalism. For example, echoing Rorty's wish to construct moral theory on a more narrative foundation, Steven Fesmire argues that moral philosophy should no longer take as its goal a search for universal principles but instead should pay more attention to the situational exigencies moral situations involve and the way people are capable of making sense of them. For Fesmire, this development requires "a shift in the centre of gravity of ethics from foundational principles to imagination…."[14]

Moral situations may and often do involve different, possibly conflicting interests and ambiguities that cannot be resolved in a straightforward manner by relying on a rule whose force everybody of relevance acknowledges. Consequently, reflective moral deliberation must be accompanied by a faculty that manages to take hold of the complexities a particular situation may exhibit. Fesmire believes imagination is precisely such a capacity. Fesmire follows John Dewey in regarding imagination as a capacity that allows one to creatively "tap" on a situation's possibilities.[15] This aspect of the faculty explains the prospects it possesses for moral reflection. That is, imagination enables one to "engage the present" in a way that attention is expanded "beyond what is immediately experienced so that the lessons of the past, embodied in habits, and as-yet-unrealized potentialities 'come home to us and have the power to stir us.'"[16]

Fesmire's and Rorty's accounts of ethics do not merely share these assumptions with each other. Fesmire's approach is able to make a more detailed contribution to Rorty's goals and ambitions. In particular, the role Fesmire ascribes to imagination in moral reflection sheds light on the ways in which the values in Rorty's liberalism can be secured and

made more widespread. Imagination enlarges the resources from which to draw material for one's evaluation of the situation at hand. It develops the capacity to entertain the elements of a complex whole, as well as the capacity to see how they might be put together. Imagination is thus connected with those capacities the enhancement of solidarity requires. These include the capacity to provide adequate descriptions for the needs of a particular situation and to create novel ones once new, perhaps unforeseeable situations emerge. Consequently, one way in which the culture Rorty outlines may promote the realization of its central values is to find ways of developing and enlarging the imagination of its inhabitants. Rorty should thus find the same capacities desirable whose importance for moral reflection Fesmire emphasizes.

Given that Rorty's postmetaphysical view of ethical theory shares these underlying assumptions and goals with the tradition of pragmatist ethics that emphasizes the role of imagination in moral reflection, it is not surprising that in some of his later works Rorty emphasized the cultural and social importance of imagination more explicitly than before. For example, he claimed that one of the significant implications of the kind of pragmatism he advocated is that the progress that has occurred in various fields of human life in past centuries is a sign of peoples' capacity to expand their imaginations rather than of their "increased ability to represent reality accurately."[17]

3. Davidson, Imagination, and Interpretation

The connections between Fesmire's and Rorty's approaches to ethics specified in the previous section raise the possibility of reformulating Rorty's postmetaphysical critique of intentionalism in terms of the role Fesmire ascribes to imagination in moral reflection. The question that now becomes relevant is whether an intentionalist theory can embrace those factors that explain the importance Fesmire attaches to imagination, as well as the ways he believes that faculty can be refined. If this is the case, Rorty's postmetaphysical critique is undermined, for it shows that literature's capacity to play a role in promoting the central values of Rorty's postmetaphysical culture need not be supported by the kind of pragmatist account of interpretation Rorty himself endorses. In fact, Bryan Vescio, one of the few who have considered the relationship between Rorty's and Davidson's views of literary interpretation, resolves the disagreement apparent in them in favor of Rorty's position precisely because he believes it is better equipped to highlight those aspects of literature that make them important instruments for refining the kinds of capacities in question here. In Vescio's opinion, this results from Rorty's emphasis "that our interpretation of literature… [is] constrained only by our purposes and ingenuity, and not by entities called 'meanings' or 'intentions.'" This kind of view, thus, shows more tolerance towards "imaginative interpretations" than theories such as Davidson's that ask us to constrain our interpretations by the author's intentions.[18] However, the problem with Vescio's account is that it overlooks certain crucial aspects of Davidson's thinking on interpretation, such as the role imagination ultimately occupies in it. Once the full implications of these aspects have been drawn, Davidson's theory of

literary interpretation appears far more compelling than Vescio's assessment provides. At the same time this conclusion forms an illuminating basis for a more detailed critical examination of Rorty's critique of intentionalism.

It might come as a surprise to someone with only a little knowledge of Davidson's writings that he has, in fact, claimed literary language to serve as "a prime test of the adequacy of any view on the nature of language."[19] It might be an equally surprising claim that imagination possesses an important position in Davidson's views of interpretation. That this indeed is the case, however, follows directly from the skepticism that Davidson's late philosophy of language evinced from the middle of the 1980s towards views which shared the belief that rule-governed conventions of language are the conditions of communication.[20] The particular transformation in Davidson's starting point explains the source of this skepticism. Martin Gustafsson, for example, claims that what separates "post 1984" Davidson from the earlier phases of his career is that he began to develop his philosophy of language on the "truly creative and unforeseeable elements" of language use more strongly than before.[21] This change in starting point is evident from the very first page of "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," a text that has been regarded as a decisive turning point in Davidson's thinking on language. There, Davidson referred to the linguistic behavior of the radio sitcom writer Goodman Ace to point out the ubiquity of cases where successful communication is achieved even though the linguistic acts performed conform in no way to the conventions of language.[22] For Davidson, the possibility of these kinds of cases calls for a re-evaluation of the position of conventions in philosophical accounts of communication. That is, "the theoretical possibility of communication without shared practices remains philosophically important because it shows that such sharing cannot be an essential constituent in meaning and communication."[23]

For Davidson, what the speaker's "words mean is (generally) what he intends them to."[24] The disclaimer "generally" is important, for despite the fact that Davidson does emphasize the role of the speaker's intentions, he acknowledges that the speaker is not able to mean whatever he wishes with his choice of words, as well as the possibility that the speaker may ultimately fail to mean what he intended. Davidson thus avoids his views from slipping into the so-called Humpty Dumpty view of meaning in which meaning is in every case seen as identical with the speaker's intention, a view philosophers have widely considered inadequate because, for example, it fails to account for the essential intersubjective character of meaning. Rather than referring to the constraints that the conventions of language impose on linguistic acts, Davidson overcomes the problem of Humpty Dumpty by referring to a principle he names "the requirement of interpretability," which explains the failure of the speaker's act of communication by referring to its unreasonableness. That is, the speaker's act of communication fails in cases where the speaker does not take the hearer's linguistic capacities and readiness to interpret into account in the approapriate way.[25] In Davidson's view, conventions and other inherited practices of language use do not impose a determinate limit on what can be meant; they just determine "the clues" the

speaker must provide for his interlocutor so that she has a reasonable possibility of grasping the meanings he intends his utterances to possess.[26] If the conditions expressed in the requirement of interpretability are met, there is, in fact, "no word or construction that cannot be converted to a new use…."[27]

The reason why imagination acquires an important role in Davidson's late philosophy of language is precisely its emphasis of the view that there are no general fixed list of factors that explains the success of communication across cases. There is, in other words, no "chance of regularizing or teaching"[28] all the factors involved in the process of communication. Instead, in many cases depending on highly unique and passing elements, such as "knowledge of the character, dress, role, sex"[29] and whose relevance may, moreover, vary from context to context, one capacity that acquires an important position in communication is "the exercise of imagination."[30] The importance of imagination for Davidson's philosophy of language comes from the specific sense it receives. Rather than considering imagination as a capacity of spontaneously creating novel images, it is more a capacity of forming a diversified picture of "human interests and attitudes" and of the constituents human situations may involve,[31] as well as the elements of the individual situation of the speaker and hearer at a particular time.

Given that Davidson's texts on the problems of literary interpretation appeared almost simultaneously with the transformation in his thinking, his interest in the philosophical issues related to literature can be seen as natural parts of this turn. Those texts provide a more detailed account of the factors that he thinks serve to make communication possible. Since "we cannot intend what we know to be impossible," authors cannot ignore how their readers are prepared to interpret their utterances, and these must be framed in a way that there is a reasonable possibility of interpreting the expression in the intended way.[32] Moreover, since the reasonableness of the intended meaning and its success involve a relationship to the reader's prospects of understanding, intending a specific, novel meaning for a familiar utterance or inventing a completely new one can be a fine-grained and delicate process. Its success requires that the author have the ability to create a stage setting by means of which the reader is able to recognize the intended meaning. The reader must, in turn, grasp why the stage setting has been provided by the author. His or her way of writing, cross-references, and the intertexts the author is drawing on serve as clues for a particular interpretation.

Davidson's discussion of the prose of James Joyce is especially illuminating. It indicates the way the success of communication may depend on highly unique and diverse elements, and this emphasizes the role of imagination. Davidson:

> Joyce draws on every resource his readers command (or that he hopes they command, or thinks they should command), every linguistic resource, knowledge of history, geography, past writers, and styles. He forces us both to look at

and listen to his words to find the puns and fathom the references.[33]

Davidson, in fact, draws a connection between Joyce and Humpty Dumpty, who famously declares in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* that his utterances mean whatever he intends them to. For Davidson, Joyce and Humpty Dumpty are connected in that they both sought to be innovators of language. However, in Davidson's opinion only Joyce was successful. This is precisely because Joyce succeeded where Humpty Dumpty failed by giving subtle, often hard to get clues on how his utterances should be interpreted. Humpty Dumpty was an unsuccessful innovator because he did not manage to create the kind of stage setting that would have given his interlocutor a reasonable opportunity of grasping the meaning he intended his utterance to convey. In Davidson's opinion the case is, different with Joyce's prose even though it seems dense and nonsensical at first. That is, "when Joyce was flying by the net of language, he did not intend to leave us entangled."[34]

Davidson's way of developing his response to the problem of Humpty Dumpty through a discussion of Joyce's prose points out a crucial difference between Davidson's intentionalism and some modest intentionalist views of interpretation that have appeared in analytic aesthetics. Modest intentionalists have attempted to salvage their position from falling into Humpty Dumpty-ism by claiming that, while intention is indeed the most important constituent of meaning, there nevertheless are factors that pose constraints on what can be intended. These factors include such things as the conventions of language and literature[35] and other kinds of "natural and logical limits."[36]

While Davidson does acknowledge the problem of Humpty Dumpty, he would arguably find these responses unsuccessful. The reason for this is the very same that explains the critical tone Davidson's late philosophy of language takes towards conventionalist accounts of meaning. The replies offered by modest intentionalists to the problem of Humpty Dumpty are plagued by troubles similar to those that make conventionalist accounts of meaning problematic in Davidson's eyes. That is, the responses found in analytic aesthetics too overlook the multifarious and unique character of those elements on which successful interaction between the author and reader may rest in many cases. This is precisely what Davidson's example of Joyce is intended to indicate. At the same time, that example further stresses the importance of imagination for Davidson's account of communication. In Davidson's view, the interpretation of Joyce not only requires a capacity to identify the resources Joyce is drawing on in his works, namely, history, geography, past writers, and styles, but also an ability to grasp the effect they are intended to have on the context where Joyce inserts them. This process requires drawing connections between different elements and understanding how they fuse together, a process that is similar to that involved in the use of imagination. However, since the clues that serve as a fuel for imagination are hard to dig up, "as much is demanded from the reader as of the author…." Davidson concludes, "By fragmenting familiar languages and recycling the raw material Joyce provokes the reader into

involuntary collaboration….The center of creative energy is thus moved from the artist to a point between the writer and his audience."[37]

4. The Imaginative and Aesthetic Experience

The specific role that Davidson's views attribute to imagination in interpretation implies that Vescio's assessment of the prospects of Davidson's intentionalism introduced earlier is overhasty. A more detailed investigation of the ways in which that account may be connected with the pragmatist view of ethics emphasizing the role of imagination in moral reflection is required for a final assessment of Rorty's postmetaphysical critique. The prospects of Davidsonian intentionalism for that challenge may be begun by observing a distinction between the two senses of imagination Fesmire draws from the work of John Dewey, as well as the way he appropriates Dewey's aesthetic writings.

As is well known, the central aim of Dewey's writings on aesthetics is to provide a detailed characterization of aesthetic experience and to uncover the social and political factors connected to this form of experience. For Dewey, aesthetic experience is characterized by a structured unity proceeding from "suspense" to "fulfillment" marked by such qualities as intensity, complexity, and absorption between the subject and object of experience.[38] Pragmatist ethics does not see an experience of this form as alien to the field of ethics, but rather maintains that "moral conduct is helpfully conceived on the model of aesthetic perception."[39] This assumption, in fact, recalls the view of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics involved in Rorty's approach to literature that, in his opinion, calls the distinction between "the moral and the 'merely' aesthetic" into question.[40]

Dewey makes a distinction between two forms of imagination. These are the imaginative and the imaginary. What distinguishes these two forms from each other is that they involve different constraints. While in the imaginary sense, imagination is allowed to play as freely as possible with the material serving as its basis, imaginative uses of imagination always spring from a foundation involving various kinds of constraints, that create boundaries for the course it can ultimately take. In this respect, in the imaginative case there is a more determinate connection between where imagination starts and what it ends up producing than is the case with the imaginary.[41]

This particular difference between the two senses of imagination brings out the reasons why Fesmire stresses only the importance of the form of imagination Dewey denotes with the term "imaginative." This is precisely because it involves the kinds of constraints the imaginary sense lacks, moral reflection guided by the imaginative sense thus being more rigorous by nature than a discourse where the imaginary sense would occupy an essential position. If anything, the imaginary sense becomes an unwanted component in moral reflection, for by being allowed to fly as freely as possible, moral deliberation guided by the imaginary sense of imagination is, in Fesmire's opinion, in danger of transforming this mode of discourse into mere "moral fantasy," thus possibly removing reflection from everyday, social concerns to a level where a

firm enough connection to them is no longer sustained. The imaginative, on the other hand, is "imbued with sociocultural meanings and rooted in the problematic conditions."[42]

Fesmire's approach to Dewey's writings draws attention to the position of imagination in Dewey's account of aesthetic experience. What is important to note is that it is precisely the imaginative sense of imagination Dewey thinks underpins aesthetic experience, Dewey, in fact, explicitly stating that "esthetic experience is imaginative."[43] The claim that in Dewey's conception of aesthetic experience the imaginative has an important role does not merely rest on this quotation. Observing the characteristic features Dewey believes this form of experience possesses also serves to show why imagination holds this kind of position in Dewey's account, that is, a kind of structured intensity that extends for a certain period of time and is demarcated from the stream of experiences surrounding it. It seems that for an experience to acquire these qualities requires an active contribution from the subject of experience who holds the different parts of the experience together and molds them into a structured unity. Given that Dewey at one point describes imagination to consist in the making of "old and familiar things… new in experience,"[44] it is arguable that, for Dewey, imagination is precisely this capacity. Moreover, it seems that there must be specific limits to how this underlying activity may function in aesthetic experience, for without some sort of boundaries, the experience could not acquire the character that, in Dewey's opinion, is typical of aesthetic experience. That is, were the use of imagination not to involve "elements of resistance," as Dewey himself puts it, aesthetic experience could not possess the kind of distinctive, developmental structure that Dewey regards it as possessing.[45]

Elaborating on this investigation of the two forms of imagination found in Dewey's work and the way they are connected to aesthetic experience shows problems in Rorty's postmetaphysical critique of intentionalism. This is because the investigation brings out factors showing that intentionalist theories of interpretation are able to embrace those features of literary works that explain their value for the social and political issues central to Rorty's liberalism. I argued earlier that one way in which those issues may be endorsed is to find ways of refining peoples' imagination as well as to extend its presence in peoples' lives. As Fesmire explains, "the more refined one's imagination (a function of relevant habits), the richer the fund of germane possibilities and the more reliable one's valuations."[46] Given the connection Dewey draws between the imaginative sense of imagination and aesthetic experience, engaging with one's environment and artworks in a way that Dewey would regard as aesthetic becomes an important source of developing those capacities for proper moral reflection, in Fesmire's opinion. This is because the realization of aesthetic experience requires an active contribution from the imagination of the subject of experience. Since the activity involved in the use of imagination for tying different elements into new unities is an important element in molding the structure of aesthetic experience into the kind of structured, unified complexity Dewey thinks it possesses, environments that afford aesthetic experiences, as well as engagements with artworks that are marked by the

characteristic features of Dewey's concept of aesthetic experience, are important means of triggering, sustaining, and ultimately refining our imaginative capacities.

At this point, it is important to observe that there are distinctive similarities between Dewey's description of the imaginative sense of imagination and the role imagination occupies in the Davidsonian intentionalism outlined above. In both cases, the core of imagination is understood in a similar way, that is, as a capacity to collect and compose individual things into a complex whole, and to build different relationships between the individual parts that make up the whole. In the Davidsonian intentionalism outlined above, imagination is, in other words, intended to aid interpretation in tying different elements into complex unities in a sense similar to the way imagination in its imaginative sense is meant to enlarge one's perception in the case of moral reflection. Given this structural overlap between these domains, Davidsonian intentionalism proves to be a fruitful approach to those factors that make engagements with literary works important ways of developing imagination precisely in the imaginative sense. One can easily find Dewey a description of an experience that corresponds to the structure that Davidson sees the interpretation of Joyce's works to involve, as well as the experience that this sort of engagement gives rise to. For instance, Dewey maintains that "the spontaneity of art is not one of opposition to anything but marks the complete absorption in an *orderly* development. This absorption is characteristic of aesthetic experience but it is an ideal for all experience…."[47] Dewey considers that the experience he describes in this quotation possesses an orderly developing character. The form of imagination holding the elements of the experience together that makes the absorption possible is imaginative in character. In this respect, Davidson's example of Joyce indicates that to follow intentionalist principles in interpretation does not inevitably minimize the role of the interpreter's imagination in interpretation. It also suggests that if it is indeed possible to cultivate one's imaginative capacities by engaging with one's environment and with artworks in a way regarded as aesthetic by Dewey, as Fesmire assumes, then intentionalist theories are even better equipped to embrace those features in our interactions with artworks. This makes these encounters an important source in cultivating our capacity for moral reflection more than the approach Rorty favors. This is because by eliminating all definitive boundaries from interpretation, the form of imagination involved in this activity runs the risk of becoming no different from the sense of imagination Dewey denotes with the term "imaginary," that is, the very form of imagination Fesmire refuses to grant any role in moral reflection.

Furthermore, Davidson's example of Joyce suggests that, in many cases, an approach to the artwork guided by an understanding of what the author meant serves as a precondition for the experience of the work to acquire the unity and orderly developing character Dewey thinks aesthetic experience possesses. Only in that kind of case does "the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment," and only then "is it [aesthetic experience] integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences."[48] Without the elements of resistance following

from the author's intentions, which determine the arena for imagination's functioning, the experience resulting from the engagement could lack unity and order and would thus not be an aesthetic one as Dewey defines it. To be sure, Dewey would likely be willing to hold a more flexible view of interpretation from the one I support here. Nevertheless, Dewey's work on imagination and aesthetic experience provides ample resources for a defense of intentionalism. It shows that in many cases a lack of understanding the author's intentions may even hinder our imaginative engagement with an artwork and consequently the possible valuable outcomes of that engagement in the development of imagination.

This investigation of the connections between Davidsonian intentionalism and the role of imagination in pragmatist approaches to ethics illuminates the problems involved in Rorty's postmetaphysical critique of intentionalism. The fundamental point of Rorty's critique is that intentionalist theories of interpretation should be discarded because they are incapable of accounting for those features of literary works that make them important for the social goals and values central to the postmetaphysical, liberal society Rorty outlines. A central element of my argument against Rorty's critique is that realizating those values Rorty's culture is founded on requires refining the same human capacities whose role in proper moral reflection Fesmire highlights. Now, if engagements with artworks are important means of developing the capacities that both Rorty and Fesmire value, and if the Davidsonian intentionalism formulated in this essay is able to give imagination a role in interpretation which ultimately proves profitable for its refinement, then intentionalist theories are not as impoverished as Rorty's postmetaphysical critique assumes. The theory of literary interpretation drawn on Davidson's views shows that an intentionalist approach to interpretation can embrace those factors of literary works that make them important for Rorty's liberal culture. Rorty's liberal ironist thus need not be a Bloomian interpreter who forsakes the author's intentions for her creative interpretive efforts, and who sees the author's intentions only as obstacles for the full realization of the aesthetic potentials of the work under interpretation. There is no essential connection between holding a view of interpretation expressed in Rorty's writings on the liberal ironist and satisfying those demands Rorty sets for literature. The intentionalist view of interpretation developed on Davidson's views in this essay is able to meet them as well. For this reason, Rorty's postmetaphysical critique of intentionalism fails.

5. Conclusions

That intentionalist theories of interpretation are capable of accounting for those factors in our engagements with literary works valued by Rorty does not by itself undermine Rorty's own pragmatist theory of literary interpretation. It merely shows that Rorty's postmetaphysical critique is based on a mistaken view of intentionalism. This conclusion, however, does not yet manage to resolve the more fundamental issue of which of the two, i.e., Rorty's pragmatism or Davidson's intentionalism, should be favored.

In order to dig into this problem in more detail it is worth observing that the social considerations central to Rorty's postmetaphysical culture are not the only factors by which he seeks to undermine intentionalist views of interpretation. The general anti-essentialist leanings of Rorty's pragmatist theory of literature may also call into question some fundamental assumptions underpinning different forms of intentionalism, most importantly the view of meaning they involve. Since interpretation always takes place against the backdrop of a certain cultural and historical setting, as Rorty emphasizes, the meaning of literary works cannot possess the kind of determinacy assumed in intentionalism, for that meaning cannot be determined in isolation from the different historical practices of interpreting, that are by nature contingent, and, hence, ever-changing.[49]

However, the difficulty with the criticism of intentionalism based on Rorty's anti-essentialist view of interpretation is that it implies a problem for Rorty's own position perhaps even more severe than the one that the anti-essentialism was supposed to reveal in intentionalism. Given the general anti-essentialist character of Rorty's pragmatist view of literary interpretation that lies behind the liberal ironist, one way of arguing against Rorty's position would be to show that his account involves problems similar to those his general pragmatist philosophy faces. These are that it ultimately falls into some form of relativism, and that his view of literary interpretation is thus plagued by the same contradictions and incoherencies that relativistic views involve in general. This line of argument is central, for example, to the criticism Reed Way Dasenbrock makes of Rorty's pragmatist theory of literature.[50] Relativism in literary interpretation has also been rejected on the grounds that it is in danger of depriving the interpretive sciences, such as literary studies, from any kind of intellectual credibility. E.D. Hirsch, for example, holds that the possibility of introducing "a genuinely discriminating norm" against which the comparative validity of different, possibly conflicting interpretations may be assessed serves as the precondition of the very meaningfulness of literary interpretation, and only the author's intention is able to provide the normative force this purpose requires.[51]

A response to Rorty's account of literary interpretation relying on these kinds of factors would, however, underestimate the ultimate challenge that his views set for literary theory and intentionalist accounts of interpretation. A large part of the commentary on Rorty's work has focused on the question of the possible relativistic consequences of Rorty's views and what they imply for the general credibility of his philosophy. The recurrence of the charge of relativism did not, however, weaken Rorty's trust in the ability of his theory to overcome that problem.[52] A central feature of Rorty's response is to reconsider the terms with which philosophical conceptions are assessed. That is, rather than seeing this as a metaphysical question on how our philosophical views correspond to an independent reality, the question of their strength should instead concern the "convenience" of those views.[53] For Rorty, this transformation precisely means that philosophical debates are modulated from "a methodological key" into an "ethico-political key," which is to say that "now one is debating what purposes are worth bothering to fulfill…."[54]

Leaving aside the question of what the transformation Rorty insists on means in the context of metaphysics and epistemology, these aspects of Rorty's work show that, in the case of the philosophy of literary interpretation, the critical edge of his views are ultimately metaphilosophical by nature. That is, Rorty's pragmatist view of interpretation calls for a re-evaluation of the factors with which the success of theories of interpretation is to be assessed. It may indeed be the case that Rorty fails to satisfy the requirement Hirsch introduces, but this does not mean that the strength of literary theories could not be assessed on other grounds, such as how convenient they are in regard to some relevant cultural considerations in which literature occupies an important position. If the kind of transformation Rorty is calling for in this response is accepted, the criticism of Rorty's position on literary interpretation which appeals to its likely relativistic consequences loses its force, for in this case the argument is in danger of just begging the question against Rorty. At one point Rorty notes that, instead of 'relativists,' a more accurate name for philosophers such as himself would be 'anti-Platonists.' That is, "we anti-Platonists cannot permit ourselves to be called 'relativists,' since that description begs the central question. That central question is about the utility of the vocabulary that we inherited from Plato and Aristotle."[55]

Now, one of the important upshots of the failure of Rorty's postmetaphysical critique of intentionalism is that this metaphilosophical way of arguing for his pragmatist position on literary interpretation does not work. The social implications involved in the Davidsonian intentionalism developed in this essay show that a very different view of literary interpretation is also able to meet those challenges that Rorty sees literature and literary theory facing in his postmetaphysical culture rather than his own. This implies that the factors Rorty raises in his metaphilosophical argument, such as the ability of the pragmatist view to provide resourceful tools for the liberal ironist, no longer offer exclusive support for Rorty's own position on literary interpretation. That is to say, Rorty's metaphilosophical argument fails because the satisfaction of the requirements of the position Rorty sets for literature does not require the kind of transformation Rorty's metaphilosophical argument insists.

This conclusion implies two problems for Rorty's pragmatist account of literary interpretation. First, any problems that Rorty's views may face, but that Davidsonian intentionalism is able to overcome, provide strong reasons for supporting an intentionalist approach to interpretation over Rorty's pragmatist theory. The general credibility of Rorty's position crumbles as the list of these problems increases.[56] Second, the unpersuasiveness of Rorty's metaphilosophical argument is troubling also for the reason that there is still a group of philosophers who are not convinced by Rorty's way of defending his philosophical views by relying on the metaphilosophical factors he raises.[57] The ultimate problem that Rorty faces, once the prospects of Davidsonian intentionalism are accepted, is that at least in the context of the philosophy of literature the question regarding the strength of Rorty's metaphilosophical argument is in danger of becoming irrelevant. This is because an intentionalist view of interpretation, that arguably does not involve the kinds of

problems Rorty tries to overcome with the metaphilosophical factors he introduces, can accommodate those factors that are supposed to provide fuel for the metaphilosophical argument. So the problem Rorty's view of literary interpretation ultimately faces is not only that the metaphilosophical argument intended to support it might not be as convincing as Rorty presumes, but that the whole question whether it is convincing or not is irrelevant. These conclusions reveal the ultimate failure of Rorty's postmetaphysical critique of intentionalism.

In his essay "Solidarity or Objectivity?" Rorty writes:

> If we could ever be moved solely by the desire for solidarity, setting aside the desire for objectivity altogether, then we should think of human progress as making it possible for human beings to do more interesting things and be more interesting people, not as heading towards a place which has somehow been prepared for humanity in advance.[58]

The fact that intentionalist theories of interpretation are capable of accounting for those values and goals Rorty's postmetaphysical culture is founded on implies that, at least in context of literary interpretation, there is no incongruence between the goal Rorty wants us to pursue and the goal he wants us to give up. We can, in other words, keep our desire for objectivity in interpretation as this attitude is expressed in intentionalism without this in any way compromising our goal to enhance the feeling of solidarity between human beings.[59]

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Endnotes

[1] Rorty, Richard, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth. Philosophical Papers, volume 1*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 117.

[2] For example, there are no references to Rorty's views in the three essays by Reed Way Dasenbrock, Clive Stroud-Drinkwater, and Garry Hagberg that comprise the symposium "Davidson and Literary Understanding" in *Philosophy and Literature* vol. 26 (2002). See, Dasenbrock, Reed Way, "Philosophy after Joyce: Derrida and Davidson," *Philosophy and Literature*, 26, 2 (2002), 334-345; Hagberg, Garry, "Davidson, Self-Knowledge, Autobiographical Writing," *Philosophy and Literature*, 26, 2 (2002), 354-368; Stroud-Drinkwater, Clive, "Stevens after Davidson on Metaphor," *Philosophy and Literature*, 26, 2 (2002), 346-353.

[3] Contemporary modest intentionalists include such figures as Noël Carroll, Gary Iseminger, Paisley Livingston, and Robert Stecker. See, for example, Carroll, Noël, "Art, Intention, and Conversation," in Noël Carroll *Beyond Aesthetics. Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001/1992), pp. 157-180; Carroll, Noël, "Interpretation and Intention: The Debate between Hypothetical and Actual Intentionalism," in Noël Carroll, *op. cit.*, pp. 197-213; Iseminger Gary, "An Intentional Demonstration," in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 76-96; Iseminger, Gary, "Actual Intentionalism vs. Hypothetical Intentionalism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 54, 4 (1996), 319-326; Livingston, Paisley, *Art and Intention. A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005); Stecker, Robert, "Moderate Actual Intentionalism Defended," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 64, 4 (2006), 429-438. Jerrold Levinson is the foremost defender of the hypothetical intentionalist position on interpretation. He develops his account in "Intention and Interpretation in Literature" in Jerrold Levinson, *The Pleasures of Aesthetics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp.175-213. See also Levinson, Jerrold, "Hypothetical Intentionalism: Statement, Objections and Replies," in *Is There a Single Correct Interpretation?*, ed. Michael Krausz (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2002), pp. 309-318.

[4] One notable exception is Stecker, Robert, *Interpretation and Construction. Art, Speech, and the Law* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), pp. 12-14.

[5]Rorty, Richard, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 60. Cited hereafter as *CIS*.

[6] *CIS*, 196.

[7] *CIS*, 94.

[8] *CIS*, 80.

[9] *CIS*, 107.

[10]*CIS*, 78.

[11] *Loc. cit.*

[12] Rorty, Richard, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1982), p. 151.

[13] Dasenbrock, Reed Way, *Truth and Consequences. Intentions, Conventions, and the New Thematics* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), p. xiv.

[14] Fesmire, Steven, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination. Pragmatism in Ethics* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 3. Cited hereafter as *JDMI*.

[15] *JDMI*, 65.

[16]*JDMI*, 67.

[17] Rorty, Richard, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics. Philosophical Papers, volume 4* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 117. See also pp. 94-95.

[18] Vescio, Bryan, "Donald Davidson, Pragmatism, and Literary Theory," *Philosophy and Literature*, 22, 1 (1998), 200-211, ref. on 209.

[19] Davidson, Donald, "Locating Literary Language," in Donald Davidson, *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005/1993), pp. 167-181, ref. on p. 167.

[20] Davidson develops his critical account of conventionalism especially in relation to the controversial reading of Wittgenstein's private language argument offered by Saul Kripke.

[21] Gustafsson, Martin, "Systematic Meaning and Linguistic Diversity: The Place of Meaning-Theories in Davidson's Later Philosophy," *Inquiry*, 41, 4 (1998), 435-53, ref. on 439.

[22] Davidson, Donald, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," in Donald Davidson, *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005/1986), pp. 89-107, ref. on p. 89-90.

[23] Davidson, Donald, "The Social Aspect of Language," in Donald Davidson, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-125, ref. on p. 119.

[24] Davidson, Donald, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 14.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 28, pp. 116-117.

[26] Davidson, Donald, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," p. 101.

[27] *Loc. cit.*

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 107.

[29]*Ibid.*, p. 100

[30] Davidson, Donald, "The Social Aspect of Language," p. 110.

[31]*Loc. cit.*

[32] Davidson, Donald, "James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty," in Donald Davidson, *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989/2005), pp. 143-157, ref. on p. 147.

[33] *Loc. cit.*

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 153.

[35] Carroll, Noël, "Interpretation and Intention: The Debate between Hypothetical and Actual Intentionalism," p. 198.

[36] Livingston, Paisley, "Arguing over Intentions," *Revue International de Philosophie*, 50, 4 (1996), 615-633, ref. on p. 628.

[37] Davidson, Donald, "James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty," pp. 156-157.

[38] Dewey, John, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee

Books, 1980/1934) pp. 3-4; 16-17; 35-37. Cited hereafter as *AE*.

[39] *JDMI*, p. 4.

[40] *CIS*, p. 82.

[41] *AE*, p. 269.

[42] *JDMI*, p. 66.

[43] *AE*, p. 272.

[44] *AE*, p. 267.

[45] *AE*, p. 262.

[46]*JDMI*, p. 71.

[47] *AE*, p. 280. My italics.

[48] *AE*, p. 35.

[49] Dasenbrock, *Truth and Consequences*, pp. 44-47.

[50] Rorty, Richard, "The Pragmatist's Progress," in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, Stefan Collini (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1992), 89-107, ref. on pp. 93-94.

[51] Hirsch, E.D., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 26. Some contemporary versions of relativism are arguably able to structure interpretive practices to overcome Hirsch's challenge. Joseph Margolis' "robust relativism" is one of the most extensive and impressive defenses of interpretive relativism in recent years. See, for example, his *Historied Thought, Constructed World. A Conceptual Primer for the End of the Millennium* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995). For an extensive discussion of Margolis' views and of the possible problems involved in his relativistic theory of interpretation, see my *Reconsidering Relativism and Intentionalism in Interpretation. Donald Davidson, Hermeneutics, and Pragmatism* (University of Helsinki, 2009), chapter 1.

[52] See, for example, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 23-24, 30, 66-67.

[53] Rorty, Richard, "Putnam and the Relativist Menace," *Journal of Philosophy* 90, 9 (1993), 443-461; ref. on p. 457.

[54] Rorty, Richard, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 110.

[55] Rorty, Richard, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. xviii.

[56] I raise one such problem in my "Literature, Ethics, and Richard Rorty's Pragmatist Theory of Interpretation," *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* 36, 1 (2008), 29-41. springerlink.com/content/ru777n1156594121/

[57] See, for example, Baghramian, Maria, *Relativism* (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 144-151.

[58] Rorty, Richard, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 27-

28.

[59] Special thanks to the two anonymous referees of *Contemporary Aesthetics* for their extremely useful comments.