

What is decadence in philosophy? How does it come between Rorty and Deleuze?
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Abstract

Decadence in philosophy is defined in the relation between thinking and truth, and explored as a conflict between Richard Rorty and Gilles Deleuze.

Keywords

Decadence, Gilles Deleuze, Richard Rorty

Decadence in philosophy is truths dedicated to the intensification of thought. For decadents, the best truths don't primarily try to describe experience accurately or yield beneficial knowledge, they exist first to energize more philosophical thinking. Decadence, that means, reverses the traditional relation between thinking and truth: it's no longer that we have thought to reach truths, it's that we have truths to stimulate more thought.

Of course the academic world is decadent. That's why there's so much interest in the number of others who cite our work and use it for their own. As for whether they *agree* with what we've written, that's not so important. Stronger, as long as we're getting cited we can be confident that we've done well regardless of whether reactions to our work happen to be sympathetic or antagonistic because it doesn't matter whether others believe we're correct about things, it only matters that they're enticed to think and write about what we've thought and written.

Rorty, Deleuze and Decadence (New and better truths versus truths that are just new)

The reversed relation between thinking and truth sends fault-lines through philosophy. One opens between a sentence from Richard Rorty and another from Gilles Deleuze. Rorty: “The project for philosophy is to find new, better ways of speaking.”¹ Deleuze: “The object of philosophy is to create concepts that are always new.”² I’ll show why Rorty’s extra word—the demand that ways of speaking not only be new but also better than those we already have—resists decadence. And at the same time, but on the other side, Deleuze’s more compact idea of philosophy turns the discipline toward decadence.

Starting with Rorty’s resistance, when he asserts that a new way of speaking must be better than those we already have, he means better in the pragmatic sense, that is, it must allow us to live together more happily. What’s critical here is that Rorty forces philosophical reasoning to obediently pursue certain ways of speaking. Work aimed at experimental descriptions of reality seeming no better and maybe even (or probably) worse than those we already have can’t gain admission to Rorty’s discussions. How could he possibly allow full access to some of the most infernal trials weighing down the history of literature? Here’s one from Huysmans’s novel *Against the Grain (A rebours)*. It starts with an endeavor to experience music bodily, which doesn’t have anything to do with turning the volume up. Nothing was audible at all; what the novel’s sick hero proposed was that various alcohols with their different tones and resonances be imbibed symphoniously, with the violin, for example, “represented by old brandy, with the alto simulated by rum.” He drank as he ran the music through his mind, following “the composer’s motif step by step with combinations and contrasts of allied liquors.”³ Now, this extraordinary composing advanced until his emaciated frame collapsed under the weight of the innovative and drunken experiment.

Servants rushed for a doctor.

The doctor’s prescription was coherent with a Rortian vision of philosophy: there’s nothing wrong with investigating through your own body, just as long as the adventures are controlled so that what emerges on the other side is something better, not a human ruin. Thoughtful explorations of experience, in other words, are good, but *only if* the results leave you better off than you used to be.

The same prescription should be addressed to William Burroughs as he depicts himself in

Naked Lunch. “I hadn’t removed,” he writes, “my clothes in a year except to stick a needle every hour into the fibrous gray wooden flesh of terminal heroin addiction.”⁴ This vision of reality, like the musical drinking, is no doubt new, but there’s also no doubt that these bleak visions can’t fit into any philosophy demanding that the experiences and understandings we choose to embrace be *better* than the ones we’re leaving behind.

Conclusion. Rorty’s brand of philosophy *constrains* thought, bounds it. To the extent he refuses to countenance these unfortunate experiences, he’s leveraging a doctrine of truth to make a demand on investigation that limit its trajectories, that are *offenses* to thought, that reduce it to abject service.

Over on the other side, Deleuze’s side, his imperative that all concepts be new also appears to be an obstacle blocking exploring and writing, one only somewhat lower than Rorty’s. The accusation—as leveled against Deleuze—is that for him thought must generate something innovative or it won’t be allowed, and therefore his work, like Rorty’s, is repressive.

The accusation doesn’t hold, though. Deleuze’s imperative to the new *isn’t* restrictive, just the opposite, it incites investigation because an articulated conception of reality that isn’t new doesn’t even result from thoughtful work, it’s only an easy repetition, a calcifying of intellectual labor. Someone who produces the description “hardened skin” *isn’t* considering their experience. Real consideration yields descriptions like “fibrous gray wooden flesh.” So, the minimum requirement for thought to function—for it to exist at all—is that it produce conceptions of experience that haven’t been trampled over. It follows that the imperative to the new is an *enabling*, not a limiting definition of the word thinking. Subsequently, and only after this enabling, can other definitional acts be committed and all of those, in contrast to the first, will limit, they’ll constrain our work.

The demand that a description of experience be new brings impels philosophizing, but without making the condescending demand that it move in one direction and not another. Articulated slightly differently, the word “new” in the sentence *Thinking must produce new concepts* appears to modify the noun “concepts,” but really it modifies thinking. Pushing the limits of standard English, “new” is an adverb for Deleuze, not an adjective. No matter how it’s formulated, though, there’s a single result: a crack of decadence opens between Rorty and Deleuze. It’s a space between someone who doesn’t, and someone who does believe that the pursuit of new and better truths is a grievously limited project,

and more, only the pursuit of new truths without restraint entirely preserves the dignity of philosophical thought.

When the dignity is preserved, conceptions of experience won't exist as what thinking is for, but only as what thinking uses to go forward. Within a decadent framework, the descriptions of alcoholic music and fibrous flesh no longer have value in themselves, they're only the symptoms or the abandoned remainders of a deeper desire that their authors felt to experiment with reality, to *make* descriptions as opposed to have them. So, these innovative and descriptive truths may be valuable, but *only* if they serve describing, only if they spur their readers to go on and produce further conceptions of experience.

Now there's no need to ask—as Rorty would—whether hearing music alcoholically is something we should avoid because the lessons yielded will threaten our welfare. And, there's no reason to worry about whether Burroughs's description of drug addicted skin actually corresponds with reality. Within the sphere of decadent philosophy, there's no need to ask these questions about whether truths are life-improving (Pragmatism) or correct (Correspondence theory) because whether truths happen to be felicitous or right is irrelevant. What's salient is that they're provocative; what's important is that they serve the thought that made them by driving still more.

Which they do, the writings Huysmans and Burroughs produced drove me to write this essay. This unequivocally proves their writings are good. The fact that this paper has been composed is sufficient to demonstrate that their truths are valuable ones in philosophy. And the same goes for Rorty and Deleuze. They've done what decadents are supposed to do, and the only thing they can aspire to do after the reversal of thinking and truth at philosophy's core. They write so that others may go on writing.

Decadence, Modernism, Postmodernism

Philosophy crossing into decadence has little in common with the move from Modernism to Postmodernism. Decadence isn't an extension of the last century's weakening of truth, it's not a further step away from absolute or objective knowledge. Actually, the move from capital "T" Truth to Nietzschean perspectivist understandings is nearly the opposite of decadence because Nietzsche and most of those who came after made the transition in order to *save* truth; they made the switch so that philosophy would still be relevant after hope collapsed for flawless political guidance, perfect ethical orientation and the rest. It was because Nietzsche still wanted philosophy to be *about* truth in one form or another

that he and his followers adopted extremely modest aspirations. Decadence does the opposite. Instead of clinging to truth, it turns away. Truths don't matter anymore, only the thinking they produce.

END

¹ Rorty, Richard, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 360.

² Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix, *What is Philosophy?* trans. Tomlinson and Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 5.

³ Huysmans, J. K., *Against the Grain (A rebours)*, trans. Havelock Ellis (New York: Dover, 1969), p. 45.

⁴ Burroughs, William, *Naked Lunch* (New York: Grove Press, 1991), p. xiii.