

# Rorty on Religion

Trinity College Dublin

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# Declaration

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# Summary

This thesis contains an exposition and a critical examination of Rorty's views on religion. It has six chapters and the following structure:

- First chapter provides the necessary background for the later discussions by sketching out the characteristics of Rorty's views on religion.
  - It explains the motivations behind the project,
  - provides an overview of Rorty's approach to religion.
- Second chapter places Rorty in the ethics of belief debate. It examines his approval of unjustified private religious beliefs.
  - It explains the challenge W. K. Clifford presents for Rorty's thesis,
  - examines an influential pragmatist response to Clifford by W. James,
  - investigates the similarities and differences between the arguments of Misak and Clifford,
  - explores Rorty's position on the debate and critically engages with Clifford, Misak and James,
  - suggests a charitable interpretation to Rorty's distinction between private and public.
- Third chapter maps out Rorty within his own pragmatic tradition by comparing him to William James and John Dewey.
  - It makes a difference between Rorty's "pragmatic religion" and his "pragmatic approach to religion",

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- argues against M. Slater’s characterization of Rorty as a neo-Deweyan/anti-Jamesian pragmatist,
  - identifies the Deweyan and Jamesian strands in Rorty’s approach and ties them to his ”pragmatic religion” and ”pragmatic approach to religion”, respectively.
  - Fourth chapter engages with the criticisms that are levelled against Rorty’s views on religion in public.
    - It discusses how religious beliefs can still be seen as private even if religion has an inseparable social aspect to it,
    - presents and discusses the criticisms by Nicholas Wolterstorff and Jeffrey Stout,
    - illustrates the chronological development in Rorty’s views regarding to the place of religion in public discussions,
    - examines if and how Rorty’s revised position can satisfy his critics
  - Fifth chapter examines Rorty’s priority of democracy over religion.
    - It explains and discusses the reasons behind Rorty’s said prioritization,
    - investigates the similarities and differences between Rorty and Rawls,
    - places Rorty in a debate with Paul Wheatman and Timothy Jackson on political liberalism,
    - engages with Robert Talisse’s criticisms of Rorty on politics.
  - Sixth chapter compares Rorty’s approach to its two main alternatives: the atheism of Richard Dawkins and the theism of Alvin Plantinga.
    - It elucidates Rorty’s position with respect to theism and atheism,
    - exposes the problematic points in the way Dawkins and Plantinga engage with religion,
    - explores the ways in which Rorty’s approach might be superior to that of Dawkins and Plantinga,
    - examines if Dawkins or Plantinga can present any challenges to Rorty’s approach.

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The first submission of this thesis was not necessarily a success. I have been asked to do major revisions. Since then I believe I have changed approximately 50% of the original text. The changes took a long time and I hated the fact that I had to do them, but they made the thesis objectively better. The revision process also taught me a lot about how to better organize and articulate my thoughts. It significantly improved my writing. For that, I thank my examiners, Prof. Lilian Alweiss and Dr. Neil Gascoigne.

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# Preface

I don't remember when exactly I came to terms with the fact that I am no longer religious. There is a blog post I wrote in November 2011 and it might as well be the earliest instance I explicitly declare my heresy. I remember writing that piece in a moment of emotional anguish. I was going through an existential crisis and felt very confused by the whole ordeal. I meant the blog post to be an exploration of the ongoing shift in my religious beliefs, the how's and why's of my newly acquired unbelief. I was not considering myself an atheist but also did not feel comfortable with statements like "God exists". I was not sure if God existed. "Agnostic" seemed like a label that might have suited, but I was not comfortable with it either. I still believed in a personal God, if not through reason but through feeling. But I also acknowledged that it was more than possible I felt the way I felt because I was strongly conditioned for a theistic worldview through my environment and education. I decided that my religious beliefs had no claims to truth and there is no solid, shareable and justifiable ground for them. They were deeply personal, and as such they only concerned me. I had no business preaching them to others.

By then, I already had grown weary of the theological/philosophical discussions about the factuality of God's existence. In the blog post, I declared that I believe in a God, a personal God, but I strictly refused to argue for his existence. Not because I had any sympathy for fideism, I did not. But maybe because, though unbeknownst to me at the time, I was already convinced that philosophical/theological arguments about the existence of God are simply useless. The supposedly analytic philosophy of religion felt barren and futile in its search for the truth. It felt nothing more than a sophisticated intellectual game

where philosophers try to score points for their side by outwitting the opponent team: Enjoyable and impressive at first, but does not provide any real sense of enlightenment or relief. It does not help with a crisis of faith and thus gets more and more uninteresting by time.

The blog post also declared that I am no longer religious. The nature of my faith in God was complex and difficult to articulate, but I was not confused about my rejection of Islam. I had no interest in what I take to be its sister religions, Christianity and Judaism, either. In the following years, my uninterest in organized religions only grew. At no point I considered myself decidedly anti-religious, but I must admit feeling a cluster of negative emotions towards religion over these years: disappointment, distrust, irritation, anger, and even occasional fury, rage, disgust, revulsion.

A side note here: In retrospect, even these two early reactions, my distrust in the so-called analytic philosophy of religion and my disbelief in organized religions, explain a lot about why Rorty's approach appealed to me as much as it did. Rorty shared the same reactions. He helped me to see the way forward from that initial blog post.

Why I had these reactions in the first place is a question I cannot address in this thesis. Partially because it is not necessarily relevant to this study, and partially because I do not have a sufficiently comprehensive answer. Undoubtedly, a significant part of it was philosophical. As an aspiring intellectual, I was committed to critical thinking and constant self-reflection, and this commitment gradually led me to conclude that most of my religious beliefs are either erroneous, or unjust, or unreliable. But I do not think critical thinking explains even half of the story, let alone the whole. An even more significant part has to do with psychology and with my personal history.

In *Notes On A Foreign Country*, Suzy Hansen writes that anti-Americanism is not a violent pathology, but instead "a broken heart, a defensive crouch, a

hundred-year old relationship”.<sup>1</sup> Upon reading her book, I could not help making the analogy. My negativity towards religion was not so different after all. It was less a philosophical/sociological critique of religion, but more a broken heart, a life-long relationship turned sour. I expected religion to provide me meaning, truth, peace, and it failed me. I trusted it to be a healing, nourishing force for both in my personal life and in the world, and I felt betrayed.

Admittedly, this part of the story is very personal and subjective. But I do not think I am alone in experiencing this heartbreak. I believe a good majority of anti-religious people are militantly anti-religious, not because of the books they read or the arguments they heard, but because religion broke their heart, be it in the form of an oppressively pious father, or in the form of an ISIS member. Religion, being an incredibly powerful global phenomenon, had significant effects on the lives of all, even the most secular of us. Some of us experienced these effects as devastating, crippling, and frustrating. Some of us experienced them as hostile, threatening, and fear inducing. Religion broke many a heart, religious and secular alike, but that does not necessarily mean it is evil. If you ask my brothers, both of them devout Muslims, they might say the exact opposite: That religion healed them, made their life worth living, provided them with meaning and purpose, brought them a peace of heart and a peace of mind. They did not feel betrayed. They felt at home. Theirs was a reciprocal love story, not a heartbreak. If you would ask me ten or so years ago, I might have said the same.

William James argues that philosophical theories are expressions of personal temperament. In a similar vein, Rorty thinks we usually have our political intuitions first and then tailor a philosophy to suit.<sup>2</sup> I tend to believe, when it comes to religion, what characterizes our attitude the most is either the heartbreak (the kind I felt) or the love (the kind my brothers feels). The way we react to our

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<sup>1</sup> Hansen, S. (2018). *Notes on a Foreign Country: An American Abroad in a Post-American World*. London: Little, Brown Book Group, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> Rorty, R. (2011). The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy. In R. B. Talisse & S. F. Aikin (Eds.), *The Pragmatism Reader: From Peirce through the Present*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p.384.

experience, our own brand of trauma or bliss around religion, paves the way to the kind of philosophical arguments we will be drawn to. Even after years and years of academic study of religion, I am still convinced that, no matter how much I strive for neutrality, my reasoning is and will always be affected by my past, my own brand of trauma. That is to say, I do not and cannot pretend to argue that Rorty's approach to religion is objectively, demonstrably the best approach for everyone. Similar to how I felt about my belief in God about 8 years ago, I feel about Rorty today: I believe in him, but I don't feel comfortable saying "Rorty got it right when others failed". The belief I had in God resisted being turned into a factual proposition. Rorty's approach to religion, somewhat similarly, resists being presented as "the right approach".

Having said that, however, I am comfortable enough to argue that it is "a right approach". The difference may look insignificant, especially because I don't plan to provide examples of other, equally right or equally good approaches. But it is an important point to make still, as I believe in the plurality of right approaches. This might also explain some of the choices I make in the thesis. I don't compare Rorty's approach, for example, with that of other pragmatists, like Jeffrey Stout, Michael Slater, Gianni Vattimo, Elijah Dann etc., as I do not have a gripe about their approaches. I do not think theirs and Rorty's are mutually exclusive. I only engage with Rorty's fellow pragmatists when they criticize Rorty. Because the criticisms, especially the ones from within pragmatism, provide me with the best opportunities to examine the robustness and the desirability of Rorty's approach.

The way I see it, there are a number of promising approaches to religion, and they are not limited to pragmatist ones, let alone to just Rorty's brand of pragmatism. Even the intellectuals famous for their harsh critiques of Rorty, like Terry Eagleton or Nicholas Wolterstorff, propose inspiring and promising ways to engage with religion. And I do believe we would probably be in a better position than we are now if we were to follow any of these approaches. Naturally they all have different strengths and weaknesses, so one might be tempted to ask "which one is the best". But I personally do not find this question interesting. The search for the best, to me, implies a kind of inquiry where you attempt to strip away

from your personal history to achieve the most possible neutrality. I do not think striving for such neutrality is my strongest suit.

I instead admit my admiration for Rorty's approach as a starting point. For a number of reasons I will explain later, I personally find Rorty the most intriguing of all the intellectuals I have read on the topic. I believe he provides us with an approach to religion that is philosophically robust, politically promising, and thus, right. What this thesis aims to, then, is to examine if I am justified in this hypothesis: If Rorty's approach is indeed philosophically robust, politically promising, and thus, right. To test its philosophical robustness I engage with what I take to be its most pressing criticisms: Clifford's criticism of unjustified private beliefs, Talisse's criticism of unjustified faith in democracy, Wolterstorff and Stout's criticisms of unjust liberal biases. . . . To test its political promises I engage with what I take to be its most influential contenders: Militant atheism (predominantly associated with Richard Dawkins), and reformed epistemology (predominantly associated with Alvin Plantinga). I also engage a number of other philosophers, intellectuals, and thinkers to better articulate the intricacies of Rorty's precise position. By doing so, I seek to strike a nice balance between expounding Rorty's approach to religion, and examining its philosophical and political value. I intend this thesis to be both an exposition and a critique.



# Chapter 1

## Rorty On Religion: An Overview

### 1.1 What Is Good About Rorty?

What is good about Rorty's approach to religion? I do believe and argue that he provides us with a different, alternative way of thinking about religion, which has significant advantages over the currently mainstream, already familiar ways, but what are these advantages? Before attempting to answer this question, however, I should clarify again that the things that I value the most in Rorty's approach come from its pragmatic character. I do not mean to say these advantages are unique to Rorty. Any similarly pragmatic approach to religion will have similar advantages.

Once again, the point of the dissertation is not to show the advantages of a Rortian pragmatist stance on religion as opposed to say, Jamesian, Deweyan, Kitcherian or Talissean stances. When it is relevant I will still point out why I think Rorty's approach is preferable to other pragmatic approaches, but I did not start writing this thesis to argue that Rorty provides the best pragmatist account of religion. The original intention was rather to show how a pragmatist approach to religion can be robust enough to withstand external criticisms, coherent and solid enough to avoid philosophical or practical dead-ends, and promising enough to challenge its contemporary alternatives. I chose Rorty to serve as an example

of such a pragmatist stance. The original intention still stands and I think Rorty turned out to be a very good choice for it.

I decided to focus on Rorty partially because I personally find him more exciting to read. I find him easier to sympathize with than other pragmatists. He was my entry point to pragmatism and his writings on religion got me inspired to think more about a possible pragmatic approach to religion. And as for a less personal reason, Rorty is pretty much the first name that comes to mind when one talks of contemporary pragmatism. He is considerably more famous and more influential than his fellow pragmatist contemporaries. It is only natural then I prefer to focus on his views when attempting to construct a (not “the”) pragmatic approach to religion.

Having said that, however, I do not intend to gloss over the fact that Rorty’s pragmatism is also heavily criticized. Thus, throughout the thesis, I will also examine the tensions between Rorty and some other prominent pragmatists who happen to be not very enthusiastic about certain aspects of Rorty’s pragmatism. I will argue that majority of the criticisms Rorty receives do not carry much weight on his views on religion. And for the minority, Rorty’s views can either be defended, or they can be slightly revised and reformed to accommodate the critics’ concerns.

Back to our question: What is good about Rorty’s pragmatic approach to religion? In order to draw an illuminating contrast, let me say a few words on what I think is bad about the dominant ways of thinking and talking about religion in the contemporary social, political and intellectual scenes. I have some degree of familiarity with how things are in the United States, some European countries and some Middle-Eastern countries. But Turkey is where I was born and spent most of my life, so I am most familiar with the problems of the contemporary ways of engaging religion in Turkey. The picture I will paint in the following paragraphs is particularly evident in Turkey, but I believe it is not so far from truth for the United States, or France, Denmark etc. either.

It appears that, socially and politically, fundamentalism about religious beliefs is on the rise. Maybe not necessarily in the extreme sense, but at least in the sense that people believe their religious beliefs are so fundamental so that these beliefs can trump democratic concerns, tolerance, civility etc. if need be. Growing intolerance and enmity between religious and secular citizens, as well as between the followers of different faiths, becomes more and more evident. More often than not, the encounters between different religious groups take the form of a conflict, controversy or disrespect rather than a healthy dialogue or a joint deliberation.

The actual political actors surely play a huge part in the rise of this religious foundationalism. Their actions and policies often help creating the kind of environments that provoke and foster such foundationalist attitudes. But there also seems to be an intellectual connection between these unhealthy religious attitudes and the essentialist and/or foundationalist tendencies people have when talking and thinking about religion. If religious beliefs are to be seen as the ultimate answers to the ultimate questions, if they are to be thought as founded upon some solid grounds, then it is difficult to genuinely argue that some other considerations, such as democratic considerations, should take precedence over one's religious beliefs. If you are sure, for example, what you believe about a certain matter is also what God intended that matter to be so, then there are hardly any good motivations for you to consider other people's opinions. You have no good reason to believe that what other people think on the matter is also important. That is to say, if you are certain, for example, it is not only your belief but also God's will that homosexuality is a sin and should not be allowed in morally decent societies, you may easily dismiss what your fellow citizens thinks on gay marriage. You would even have challenging arguments to dismiss them. After all, if you believe that God should have the final word on such matters and truth should not be bent according to people's whims, then you are well justified to conclude, for example, a referendum with a wrong outcome should not merit anything.

But even if we bracket out this kind of religious fundamentalism, it still is possible to point out the disconcerting tension between the ordinary religious person and the ordinary atheist. As things are, it appears that the ordinary religious positions himself in opposition with the ordinary atheist and vice versa. That is to

say, the relation between religious people and non-religious people are confrontational. They need to discredit the other to justify themselves, and thus they keep attempting to do so.

The academic scene regarding philosophy of religion is essentially not so different either. The core subjects in philosophy of religion still seem to be the ones that have a confrontational nature. I did my bachelors and masters in Istanbul. My department was arguably the most influential theology department in Turkey. And then I went on to doing my PhD in Dublin, again in arguably the most influential college of Ireland. In both of these universities, there were some articles that just keep appearing again and again in philosophy of religion courses as if they represent what philosophy of religion is essentially all about. Among these articles, I can name W. L. Craig's "Philosophical and Scientific Pointers to Creatio Ex Nihilo"<sup>1</sup> and J. L. Mackie's "Evil and Omnipotence"<sup>2</sup> for their representative power. Both of these articles exemplify well what I mean by the confrontational nature of contemporary religious debates. They both aim to establish why it has to be the case that their position is right, and why it cannot be the case that the other's position is right.

If you shift your attention from academic journals and books to TV and other media outlets, you will find that the most popular theme on the subject is still "science versus religion". For one "Varieties of Religious Experience" themed programme, for example, there are ten "Is Religion Compatible with Science?" themed panel discussions. The way this debate is structured and conducted, however, is rather aggressive and creates a barrier between the two opposing groups. It prevents them from better understanding and sympathizing with each other. I explain this point further in chapter 6, when discussing why I think the way Dawkins and Plantinga debate with each other is barren and unfruitful. Here I will confine myself to a quote from Stephen West, the creator and the host of "Philosophize

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<sup>1</sup> Craig, W. L. (1980). Philosophical and Scientific Pointers to Creatio Ex Nihilo", *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, 32(1), 5–13.

<sup>2</sup> Mackie, J. L. (1955). Evil and Omnipotence. *Mind*, 64(254), 210–212.

This!” podcast:<sup>3</sup>

Ever since the rise of this New Atheist movement in the early 2000’s, it is very easy (...) to think of our beliefs or our lack of beliefs about God as just one point on a giant line graph between two extremes that are actually a false dichotomy: You can either be a fundamentalist follower of religion (“God created the world in seven days!” “A man loaded up two of each animal onto a boat!”), or on the other hand, you can be a science loving, occasional skeptic that proportions your beliefs to the evidence. It is unfortunate. I do not want to live in a world between these two extremes. But it is conventional wisdom that these two extremes, unfortunately, are just the “God landscape” that we were born into.

West, however, is well aware that this is only a cartoonish representation of the actual God landscape:

It’s very easy to fall into that trap. But as people that like to think about this stuff more than the average person we of course know that this is a cartoonish representation of either side. It is nowhere near this simple. We do not live in some brand new world where these are the only two ideas that are intellectually respected. (...) But we can at least be sympathetic of the fact of how someone new to these discussions might look around them and feel like they live in this world. These two groups are very vocal. They are certainly the ones we see the most. And there certainly is a divide between the two of them, a divide that we have been led to believe, by either side, is irreconcilable.

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<sup>3</sup> West, S. (2016). *Philosophize This!* <http://philosophizethis.org/hegels-god/>. (Podcast) Accessed at 30.04.2018.

I believe how West describes the current “God landscape” conforms well to the point I am trying to make: The contemporary discourse around religion has a corrosive effect of creating and enforcing a false dichotomy. I would argue that this dichotomy is very powerful in encouraging intolerance and fundamentalism (of both religious and secular kinds). What is good about Rorty, then, is that his approach to religion sounds very promising in dissolving this bleakness of the contemporary scene. First of all, it is not confrontational, or at least, not when it comes to various religious beliefs and experiences. It brackets out the truth when it comes to religious beliefs/experiences and thus encourages a genuine “live and let live” attitude —or, to phrase it better, “believe and let believe”.

Rorty’s approach provides a certain flexibility of mind for believers and non-believers alike which does not usually exist in its non-pragmatist alternatives. That is to say, Rortian pragmatists can both have a genuine faith in their own beliefs (or disbeliefs) and also avoid the conclusion that other kinds of faiths in other kinds of beliefs must be in grave error. It utilizes the concept of “private irony” and promotes a healthy distrust about the discourse of getting things right, and thus allows people to be able to suspend their genuine, meaningful religious beliefs when they need to be suspended. Rorty provides the tools for people to hold on to their beliefs, yet also admit that their beliefs may as well be mistaken regardless of how passionate they feel about them. In Chapter 3, I talk about a distinction between “Rorty’s pragmatic religion” and “Rorty’s pragmatic approach to religion”. Briefly put, I say that Rorty’s pragmatic religion refers to his own private religious beliefs (including his strong dislike of the notion of a supernatural, personal God). And his pragmatic approach refers to the framework with which he thinks religious beliefs (especially other people’s beliefs) should be evaluated. I argue that being able to separate the two (one’s own substantive religious beliefs and the formal framework to evaluate and judge other people’s religious beliefs) helps people to believe what they believe, but also dislike the idea that their beliefs can or should be taken as the final word on the matter.

There is a commendable humility in this attitude, in making and respecting the distinction between your own private beliefs and the beliefs that should guide us all in our public endeavours. It stands in perfect harmony with the acknowledgement

of the limits of being human. It says: because you are human, you are fallible. And because you are fallible, you ought to maintain a level of irony even about your most passionate beliefs. The private irony promotes a healthy dose of self-doubt. The healthy dose of self-doubt helps taking others seriously. To me, this humility sounds like a perfect antidote to majority of the problems I mentioned above.

In another words, Rortian approach to religion promises an alternative mental picture of what religious beliefs are and what they do, and adopting this mental picture is very likely to prompt a much-desired humility in the believer. This mental picture and the humility that comes with it are very appealing on at least two accounts: Internally, they help to relieve the stress classical religious traditions tend to put on their followers. And externally, they help to dissolve the social tensions between different religious (and non-religious) groups.

Let me unpack what I have just said: In the traditional picture of understanding religious beliefs, the major emphasis is put on the beliefs' ability to get the metaphysical truths right (the truth about God, about heavens, about after-life etc.). More often than not, the emphasis on this ability is strengthened by the theme of salvation: It is either your beliefs get things right and you are saved, if not solely but primarily by virtue of them; or you fail in acquiring the right religious beliefs, and thus you deserve eternal damnation and punishment. This is a tremendously stressful mental picture and many religious people suffer from it. I know I did.

Now, there might be different ways to interpret Rorty on truth, and on getting things right. It is a highly controversial subject. But the Rortian approach I will put together in this dissertation does not necessarily seek to challenge the truth or falsity of religious beliefs. It is not interested in their presumed ability to get things right or wrong. It rather seeks to change the mentioned emphasis. It alters our understanding of religious beliefs so that whether we got things right or not does not matter as much as it did under the traditional picture. Shifting the emphasis this way helps to relieve the mentioned stress.

As for the social aspects, the Rortian mental picture promises to be very effective in solving the problem of hostility towards other beliefs. I grant that hostility towards other beliefs is a very complex psychological issue that cannot have a simple solution. Thus I do not wish to say that Rorty's suggestion would dissolve this issue altogether. But I do want to draw attention to its power in breaking down some prevalent attitudes that empower such hostilities.

One such key attitude is having an inflated sense of certainty that one's own beliefs get things right. Again, I do not mean to say this certainty is the cause of such hostilities, but it is an attitude that gives rise to them. It is way more likely for one to disregard and disrespect other ways of living if one is sure that one's own way is in fact the right way. The mental picture Rorty proposes is full of cautions against such certainties while also being full of promotions towards solidarity. It presents an elegant theoretical framework that makes quite impossible for one to be absolutely sure of one's own way of making sense of the world, yet also allows one to still find meaning and value and beauty in it.

Allow me to make a personal remark here: In different stages of my life, I have experienced living with and without the mentioned certainty. There was a period of my life that I was absolutely sure "the Islamic way" (whatever that exactly means) was the one and only true way to believe and live. There was also a period in which I was comfortable and happy with who I am, what I believe and how I act, yet I would not dare to claim that it is the right way to live: I thought I was simply trying to do my best with my contingency. I also made acquaintances and friends with both kinds of people. I decided the latter kind, the kind that goes through life with a healthy dose of self-doubt, or with what Rorty calls "irony", are better people. I also liked my latter version better. I thought both my own latter version, and the latter kind of my friends, were more understanding, charitable, tolerant and sympathetic.

All of these aspects that I considered good in Rorty may of course be susceptible to criticism. Only to give an example, there is the criticism about the internal stress aspect. This criticism points out to the threat of intellectual dishonesty and self-deception. What if, while relieving the pressure of getting things right, we



open a door for all things fake and dishonest? What if this attitude equates to believing whatever makes us feel good? How come this Rortian mental picture does not end up justifying people's irresponsible and selfish ways of thinking? I engage with this criticism and its implications in Chapter 2.

I will, however, avoid particular criticisms and discussions at this early stage of the dissertation. Here, I just want to make the initial claim that Rorty's approach has a good number of gatekeepers to deal with such criticisms effectively. In fact, this thesis is all about how to utilize these gatekeepers to fend off or soften the critics' blows while bringing bits and pieces of Rorty's writings together to create what can be fairly called a Rortian approach to religion.

## 1.2 An Overview of Rorty's Approach to Religion

The purpose of this particular section is to provide an overview of Richard Rorty's thoughts on religion and how we should approach religious beliefs (both our own and others) so that we can have an initial outline of the subject before we get down into the detail in later chapters. But first, two preliminary points should be made:

(1) Rorty does not provide a clear description of what religion is. Neither is it always obvious what exactly he is talking about when he talks about religion and religious beliefs. His use of the term, therefore, is contextual. When discussing my work with other people I often get asked the question 'which religion?' when I tell people that I study Rorty's views on religion. And often, my answer is "no particular religion; religion in general". Now, admittedly, "religion in general" is a vague concept. But it is equally vague in Rorty and he has a reason for this. Rorty is, in a lot of ways, a Wittgensteinian. He is highly suspicious about essences, archetypes, Platonic ideals etc., and thus he is not interested to find a certain core feature, an all-encompassing description that all religions must share.

Wittgenstein, when asked by his imaginary interlocutor to explain what is essential to a language game, i.e. what is common to all different language games, answers as follows:

Don't say: "They must have something in common, or they would not be called 'games' " but look and see whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them, you won't see something that is common to all, but similarities, affinities, and a whole series of them at that.<sup>4</sup>

I believe Rorty does exactly what Wittgenstein tells his interlocutor to do. Instead of trying to come up with a definitive description of what religion is, he tries to talk about different manifestations of religions and various types of religiosities.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, when reading Rorty, it is important to keep this Wittgensteinian attitude in mind. Rorty makes many context-dependant definitions of religion ("religion as..."), and they all refer to a certain display of the phenomena or a particular manifestation of religiosity. Thus, whenever the term "religion" is used, it needs to be interpreted in its appropriate context, and not as an all-inclusive term.

(2) Though he became more and more interested in it in the later stages of his life, religion is not the central subject in Rorty's body of work. Of all the publications he had, there are only six articles that explicitly are about religion. Namely, these articles are:

- "Religion as Conversation-Stopper"<sup>6</sup>
- "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance"<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein, L. (1958). *Philosophical Investigations* (2nd ed.) (G. E. M. Anscombe, Trans.). Oxford: Basil Blackwell, p. 301.

<sup>5</sup> This is, of course, not always the case. In some of his earlier essays he sometimes seems to talk about religion as there is an essence to it. But later, he himself admits that those comments were "hasty and insufficiently thoughtful"; see: Rorty, R. (2003). Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration. *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 31(1), 141–149, p. 141.

<sup>6</sup> Rorty, R. (1999). Religion as Conversation-Stopper. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin Books.

<sup>7</sup> Rorty, R. (1999). Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin Books.

- “Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism”<sup>8</sup>
- “Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God”<sup>9</sup>
- “Atheism And Anti-Clericalism”<sup>10</sup>
- “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration”<sup>11</sup>

These six essays are the fundamental primary sources in constructing Rorty’s views on religion.<sup>12</sup> Yet Rorty’s interest in religion and the driving force behind

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<sup>8</sup> Rorty, R. (2007). Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism. *Philosophy and Cultural Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Rorty, R. (2007). Cultural politics and the question of the existence of God. *Philosophy and Cultural Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Rorty, R. (2007). Anticlericalism and Atheism. S. Zabala (Ed.), *The Future of Religion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.”

<sup>12</sup> There is another article that deserves a specific mention here for its content bears crucially on the topic: “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” (originally appeared in the 2004 book *Pragmatism, Critique, Judgment: Essays for Richard J. Bernstein*, edited by Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser. A shorter, revised version of it was reprinted in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*). Rorty considers this article as contributing to the project of explaining “Philosophy’s Place in Culture”. Its focus is not on religion, but on philosophy. Thus, it does not really belong to the list of “Rorty’s Works on Religion”, but it still makes a fundamental contribution to understanding Rorty’s views on the matter.

There are also two other sources that does not belong to this list, but needs to be mentioned here:

First, there is the lecture Rorty gives at West Valley College in 2000 with the title “Is Religion Compatible with Science?”. This lecture provides valuable information on and insights to Rorty’s views on religion, yet it has not been published as an essay; see Rorty, R. (2016). *Is Religion Compatible with Science? Lecture at West Valley College, California*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fn2F2BWLZOQ>

Second, there is the book *An Ethics for Today: Finding Common Grounds Between Philosophy and Religion*. Though the title suggests that the book should definitely be on our list here, I would argue that it is a slightly misleading title. The book is published under Rorty’s name, but only twenty pages of it actually belongs to Rorty, and the rest are commentaries on Rorty by different authors. Rorty’s essay is titled “An Ethics for Today” and mostly revolves around the issue of moral/ethical justification. I do not mean to deny its value in understanding

these essays lie in the larger context in which he produces his works. I argue that this larger context, that is to say the field of problematics that concerns Rorty the most, is best explained in his autobiographical piece, “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids”.<sup>13</sup>

In the article, Rorty recalls his early years: Coming from a socialist family, he remembers his childhood self as very much convinced that “the point of being human was to spend one’s life fighting social injustice”.<sup>14</sup> Yet he also remembers himself as having a passionate, rather incommunicable interest in wild orchids of North America and also convinced that there was something of significance about them.<sup>15</sup> These two convictions did not align themselves well with each other and it bothered the young Rorty. The trouble was to bring these two convictions together under a unifying, single intellectual or aesthetic framework which would reconcile them with each other. He recollects that for a period of time, which has to be around his high-school years,<sup>16</sup> he was attracted to religious ways of doing that, namely overcoming his private obsessions through a commitment to Christianity. But he also says his “prideful inability to believe what [he] was saying when [he] recited the General Confession gradually led [him] to give up on [his] awkward attempts to get religion”.<sup>17</sup>

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Rorty and his approach to religion, yet I do not consider it as a primary source since I believe its content is only helpful for this thesis in a rather roundabout way; see: Rorty, R. (2008). *An Ethics for Today. An Ethics for Today: Finding Common Grounds Between Philosophy and Religion* (7–27). New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Rorty, R. (1999). Trotsky and the Wild Orchids. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin Books.

<sup>14</sup> Rorty, “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids,” p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Rorty, “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids,” p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> This has to be sometime before his enrollment in the Hutchins College, that is when he was at best a high-school kid, for he remembers reading through Plato during his fifteenth summer. See: Rorty, “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids,” p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Rorty, “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids,” p. 9.

After about 30 years of involvement with philosophy, Rorty says, he gradually came to the conclusion that the attempt to bring these two convictions together under a single framework, or as he calls it, with reference to Yeats, holding “reality” (the things that are of ineffable importance to the individual) and “justice” (the liberation of the weak from the strong) in a single vision, is a mistake. For they are different projects with different aims and there is no particular reason why we should insist on making them fit within “one big overall account of how everything hangs together”.<sup>18</sup>

This is key to understanding Rorty’s talk about the public vs. private distinction and about religion being a private matter. To Rorty, religion is about “reality” —not in the sense of scientific truths about the universe we live in, but in the sense of the feelings, beliefs and desires of an individual that are of ineffable importance to her (the reality of individual’s own phenomenal world, if I may say). It is (or rather, should be) about one’s own quest of finding meaning and redemption in one’s private life.

But let me take a step back here and say a word or two about philosophy of religion in order to better articulate Rorty’s position: In contemporary debates in the philosophy of religion, religious beliefs are principally taken as beliefs that are to be confirmed or rejected. Though a final, decisive confirmation or negation may not be reached, the way contemporary philosophers approach religious beliefs is nevertheless oriented with the assumption that there is the objective matter of fact about their truth or falsity, and we can make informed decisions about that.

In a representative Blackwell textbook on the subject,<sup>19</sup> for example, the most important current controversies in the field have been brought under three headlines: (1) Attacks on Religious Belief, (2) Arguments for Religious Belief and (3) Issues within Religion. This distinction shows a characteristic of current analytic

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<sup>18</sup> Yeats, W. B. (1937). *A Vision*. London: MacMillan & Co., p. 25; Rorty, “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids,” pp. 7, 8, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Peterson, M. L., & Vanarragon, R. J. (2004). *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

approaches to religious beliefs, since the first two headings aim toward to reveal the arguments of both theism and atheism so that one can consequently decide which one is more rational to hold on, and the last one takes on to examine the coherence or appropriateness of certain religious beliefs.<sup>20</sup>

Yet for Rorty, philosophy of religion, if there has to be such discipline, should be concerned neither with the arguments for or against certain religious beliefs nor their coherence. That is to say it should not be concerned with the validity of religious claims. Following first Mill and then James, Rorty suggests that we ask only one thing when considering whether any claim should be met: “which other beliefs – ‘claims actually made by some concrete person’ – it runs athwart”.<sup>21</sup> What a proper approach to religion should do, according to Rorty, is to look for the practical consequences of these claims instead of seeking to determine their truth value. If they are practically harmful to others in any substantial sense, they should be called out and deemed as illegitimate. If they are not, they are legitimate.

Rorty utilizes the public vs. private distinction to explain this approach. The line of thinking goes as follows: Legitimacy hinges upon justification. If something is justified, it is legitimate. But the crux of the matter here is that justification is a thing of the public sphere. It should not be thought of in representational terms but in intersubjectivist terms. You justify yourself to someone, or to some group of people. Thus justification becomes irrelevant in the private sphere where there is no intersubjectivity but only the subject itself.

This, of course, pushes religion entirely back into the private sphere. Religious beliefs, in this Rortian picture, do not (and should not) have a claim to knowledge, to enjoy the status of being private and legitimate without justification. That is because, for Rorty, “truth and knowledge are a matter of social cooperation”.<sup>22</sup> Any claim to knowledge in science is considered a public claim, regardless of its

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<sup>20</sup> Peterson and Vanarragon, *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, p. xii.

<sup>21</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 148.

<sup>22</sup> Rorty, “Anticlericalism and Atheism,” p. 39.

religious outlook. In the conceptual world of Rorty, it is no longer a private religious beliefs but a scientific hypotheses, it should be treated as such. It requires justification. That is to say, religious beliefs cannot be on par with scientific beliefs if they are to be exempt from justification. For science is a public project and any proposal within a public project needs to be justified to and for other participants.

The same goes for political claims. When a religious belief is used in the political discussion as an argument or a premise, it no longer enjoys its status of being a religious belief, but is transformed into a proper political argument. It also requires justification, no less than any other kinds of political arguments. It is rather difficult, however, to figure out what Rorty thinks about religiously motivated political arguments. Some of his texts (mostly the earlier ones) suggest that Rorty thinks religiously motivated political arguments are somewhat different than plain old secularly motivated political arguments. He seems to suggest that the difference makes the former unsuited to the better ideals of democracy. This is where he gets heavy criticism from both his fellow pragmatist and non-pragmatist colleagues, such as Jeffrey Stout or Nicholas Wolterstorff. I argue, however, it is very plausible to interpret Rorty as suggesting that political arguments are political arguments, period. What makes a political argument unsuitable to the better ideals of democracy is not its religious or otherwise motivations, but its closedness to dialogue, conversation and tolerance. This interpretation is more charitable and more in line with Rorty's overall philosophy. It also does a good job in dissolving the worries of his critics.

The above picture also tells us that Rorty's understanding of private and public is very fluid. The same belief can be either private or public depending on how it is utilized by the person who holds it.

One immediate worry with this Rortian account of religious beliefs, however, is that it trivializes religious beliefs. If religious beliefs cannot have any public claims to truth or knowledge, then are they really good for anything? What are they good for? The brief Rortian answer is that all private beliefs, whether religious beliefs or beliefs about the ethereal beauty of wild orchids, are good for finding meaning and redemption in our private lives. And this is no small feat. The idea

that if a belief is not about truth or knowledge, then it is at best second-class belief that does not deserve much attention is simply problematic. It can only hold if one also buys the idea that beliefs are only good if they represent reality accurately.

But Rorty thinks there is no reason to approach beliefs in this way. Asking whether a belief represents reality accurately or not, for a pragmatist, is asking the wrong question.

The right question to ask is, 'For what purposes would it be useful to hold that belief?' This is like the question, 'For what purposes would it be useful to load this program into my computer?' On the Putnamesque view I am suggesting, a person's body is analogous to the computer's hardware, and his or her beliefs and desires are analogous to the software. Nobody knows or cares whether a given piece of computer software represents reality accurately. What we care about is whether it is the software which will most efficiently accomplish a certain task. Analogously, pragmatists think that the question to ask about our beliefs is not whether they are about reality or merely about appearance, but simply whether they are the best habits of action for gratifying our desires.<sup>23</sup>

As in the analogy of software, beliefs can only be called useless when they do not fulfill any needs. And they could only be ranked if and when the human needs they fulfill can be ranked. Rorty, however, cannot see why the need to find meaning or redemption in our private lives is less valuable than the need to describe our environment in a way that allows us to predict and control it. Thus, even when it is completely disengaged from the claims to truth, religion can still be as valuable a project as science or any other human projects.

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<sup>23</sup> Rorty, R. (1999). Introduction: Relativism: Finding and Making. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin Books, p. xxiv.



To sum up, the main idea here is that some people have the need to search and find meaning in their lives. Religion is one way to go about this need. And this need is no less worthy or meritable than any other human needs. Furthermore, how one goes about to fulfill this need is (or rather, should be) very much private, and thus is (or rather, should be) immune to criticism from outside.

This is all well and good in the individual level, but what happens when we consider the world's organized religions that surely have not one but many followers? The beliefs of a Christian or a Muslim are not purely private and individual but they are shared, interpreted, discussed and deemed acceptable within a community of believers. How Rorty would reply to that then? Would he argue that organized religions are simply mistaken in treating religious beliefs as public beliefs? Or would he say that when religious beliefs are subjected to justificatory processes they are no longer private but made part of a rather local public project, a project carried by a certain group of believers who seek to determine the acceptable conditions of belonging to that group?

My argument is that Rorty would do a bit of both: when the legitimacy of this or that religious belief is challenged within a certain group of believers, then the need for justification arises. And where justification is required, there the privacy of religious beliefs ceases to exist. A religious belief then turns into a partially public belief, the public in questing being that particular community of believers. But because Rorty insists on seeing religion as a way for individuals to create meaning in their own lives, he also sees the role of religious organizations and communities limited to offering pastoral care. When religious leaders, institutions or certain groups within a community try to determine what is legitimate to believe and what is not, he argues, they abuse and exploit the influence they have over the community. They do something they ought not to do: attempting to establish an authority on people's individual and private searches for a meaning to acquire political power.

Here is a place as good as any to mention the distinction Rorty makes between different uses of the term religion. He does not propose a very systematic classi-

fication among these uses, yet for the purposes of clarity, I will group them into three headings:

1. Religion as Pure Relation to a Non-Human Person,
2. Religion as Congregational Belonging,
3. Religion as Clericalism.

In "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre", Rorty says that religion, in its pure form, is "a relation to a non-human person". It might be "adoring obedience", "ecstatic communion", "quiet confidence" or "some combination of these", but it is not a doctrine of beliefs. Only after it has become mingled with philosophy, religion becomes to be mediated by a creed. Through this deprivation of purity, "the God of the philosophers" says Rorty, "has begun to replace the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob".<sup>24</sup>

In this sort of religiosity, argument is irrelevant, for it is not about the propositional beliefs, but rather about a special devotion to God. The analogy that explains best what it would be like to have this sort of faith in God is, for Rorty, to be in love with another human being:

People often say that they would not be able to go on if it were not for their love for their spouse or their children. This love is often not capable of being spelled out into beliefs about the character, or the actions, of these beloved people. Further, this love often seems inexplicable to people acquainted with those spouses and children - just as inexplicable as faith in God seems to those who contemplate the extent of seemingly unnecessary human misery.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Rorty, R. (2007). *Philosophy as a Transitional Genre. Philosophy and Cultural Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 92.

<sup>25</sup> Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," p. 158.

In his interpretation, the crucial point intellectuals such as St. Paul, Soren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, Emmanuel Levinas or Paul Tillich keep emphasizing was this sort of special devotion to God and not a set of propositional beliefs about God or heavens.<sup>26</sup> It is something similar to this understanding of religion Rorty wants to promote.

But when understood beyond this private relation, as a social phenomena, Rorty believes religion takes one of the two forms: It can either manifest itself as “congregations of religious believers ministered to by pastors” or as “ecclesiastical organizations”.<sup>27</sup> The difference between the two, for Rorty, is that in the latter case, religious professionals do not devote themselves just to pastoral care but they rather claim authoritative guidance over believers. Through this authority, they promulgate orthodoxy and acquire economic and political clout.<sup>28</sup>

In the first two senses of the term, according to Rorty, what religion does is only “to help individuals find meaning in their lives, and to serve as a help to individuals in their times of trouble”.<sup>29</sup> In the last sense, however, it goes beyond this and starts to engage with politics or epistemology, both of which are public projects and require exchanging justifications between citizens. Thus, for Rorty, the first two senses of religion are not problematic from a pragmatic perspective, but the last one is. When Rorty is against religion, he is against people or organizations claiming authority in public projects through religion. When he defends religion, he defends individuals’ right to find meaning for themselves in any way they see fit for their private lives.

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<sup>26</sup> Rorty, “Anticlericalism and Atheism,” p. 34; Rorty, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre,” p. 92.

<sup>27</sup> Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” p. 141.

<sup>28</sup> Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” p. 141.

<sup>29</sup> Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” p. 141.

## Chapter 2

# The Ethics Of Faith

This chapter will be about what William James calls "the lawfulness of voluntarily adopted faith",<sup>1</sup> a faith that is adopted not on conclusive evidence but partially or fully on personal preference, on what one feels right when the evidence is not conclusive. In 1887, Clifford questioned the morality of believing without sufficient evidence. He argued that if one cannot justify a belief, then one is morally obliged to drop it. And although Clifford is not a contemporary figure, his argument is still relevant and significant today thanks to intellectuals like Richard Dawkins utilizing a version of it in their widely influential attacks on religious faith. Cliffordian ethics of belief lays the foundation for a particular type of criticism: Religious people are immoral if for no other reason than their faith in God.

It is imperative for this thesis to engage with Clifford's argument, because what Clifford argues is in direct conflict with what Rorty argues. If holding an unjustified private belief were unethical, then Rorty's approach to religion would be unethical from the start. At the core of Rorty's position lies the argument that private beliefs do not need justification. It is not intellectually irresponsible for religious people to believe without sufficient evidence. One can believe even the

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<sup>1</sup> James, W. (1896). *The Will to Believe. Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, p. 214.

most unlikely things if one wishes and is able to do so, as long as doing so does not harm the solidarity of a society.

For Rorty, religion is only problematic when religious people start to take their beliefs as ultimate truths and thus threaten or harm the ideal of solidarity. It is not immoral when one believes in the existence of God in the absence of conclusive evidence, but it is morally wrong for one to use one's unjustified belief in God to support, for example, an anti-homosexual policy. This is because moral rights and wrongs are about our responsibilities to one another. Private beliefs, on the other hand, should not concern anyone but the believer herself.

There are two issues here in this argument: One is the distinction between private and public, which raises the difficult question of when a belief deserves to be called private. The other is the issue of justification: If a person is right to believe whatever she wishes even if the belief in question only concerns her own self.<sup>2</sup> These questions, however, are very much entangled. One major argument against the right to entertain unjustified private beliefs, for example, is that there are no such thing as private beliefs, that all beliefs are somewhat public in their nature. The locus of this chapter will be the latter issue: the lawfulness of entertaining private beliefs in the absence of sufficient evidence. I will, however, discuss the former issue (the distinction between private and public) at some length still towards the end of this chapter. I will also come back to it in chapters 4 and 5.

The debate around justification is frequently referred to as the “ethics of belief” debate. The term was coined by William Kingdon Clifford.<sup>3</sup> He made the highly

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<sup>2</sup> A question may arise if we are talking about epistemic rights or political rights here. But I would rather hold this question for later, and resist the urge to specify these “rights” by using either one of these adjectives as of yet. For the parties in the discussion seem to be at conflict on this very point too. Clifford talks about epistemic rights, but Rorty wants to say that the talk about epistemic rights is misconstrued from the beginning, so it is better if we leave it and talk about political rights instead. Thus limiting the discussion to either one of them, that is saying that this discussion is about epistemic rights or political rights seems wrong. The discussion takes place in a larger scope, one which includes the question what kinds of rights are we (or should we be) talking about.

<sup>3</sup> Clifford, W. K. (1877). The Ethics of Belief. *The Contemporary Review*, 29, 289–309, pp. 289–309.

influential argument that no one has a right to believe anything unless there is sufficient evidence for it. Though it has been more than hundred years since Clifford's article was published, one can argue that this Cliffordian demand for evidence is still very much alive today, showing itself especially in the works of the intellectuals known as New Atheists.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, there is the equally influential response to Clifford by William James, who, in his 1896 article "The Will to Believe", claimed that it is absurd to ask for conclusive evidence for every belief. There are many cases that one can neither avoid making a decision nor can find sufficient evidence, so one has no other choice but to follow his heart. James suggested that this was the case for religious beliefs.

These two seminal articles set the groundwork for the discussions around intellectual responsibility. Also significant for us is that Rorty directly engages with both of them when articulating his own position in the discussion. Like James, Rorty also criticizes Clifford. Their criticism, however, are not exactly the same. Rorty agrees with James on his conclusions, but not on his approach. He finds James' strategy to discuss the issue through the dichotomy of passion versus intellect problematic. Instead James should have made a distinction between private and public beliefs, and defend people's unconditional freedom in their private matters.

## 2.1 Clifford and the Importance of Evidence

The article that christened the whole ethics of belief debate, "The Ethics of Belief" by Clifford, consists of three chapters that correspond to the three themes: (1) The Duty of Inquiry, (2) The Weight of Authority, and (3) The Limits of Inference. Each chapter focuses on the respective subject of their title and together they form a complete argument against the legitimacy of believing without sufficient evidence. (1) argues that we have a moral duty to conduct a thorough epistemic inquiry to be entitled to have any kind of beliefs, (2) examines the conditions in

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<sup>4</sup> Brian Zamulinski, for example, treats Richard Dawkins' argument in *The God Delusion* as just another, yet less successful version of Clifford's, see: Zamulinski, B. (2008). Christianity and the Ethics of Belief. *Religious Studies*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 334–335.

which one can legitimately rely on the testimony of others. Finally, (3) seeks to provide an account for having experience-based evidence for the beliefs that, by their nature, go beyond experience.

### 2.1.1 The Need for Justification

Clifford's article starts with a simple scenario: a story of a shipowner who doubts that his ship is seaworthy but succeeds in overcoming his doubts, in ways other than a patient investigation of the ship, and acquires "a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe."<sup>5</sup>

In the first version of the story Clifford tells, the ship goes down in mid-ocean and in the second version, she makes her voyage safely and many others after it. For each case, Clifford asks "[w]hat shall we say of him [shipowner]"<sup>6</sup> and for each case he finds him wrong and guilty. In the first case he is guilty of the death of all those men who were in the ship. As for the second case, Clifford argues the fact that the ship arrives its destination safely do not diminish the guilt of his owner. He explains, "when an action is once done, it is right or wrong for ever; no accidental failure of its good or evil fruits can possibly alter that".<sup>7</sup>

There is however, a question to ask here: It is clear that, in the first case, the shipowner is guilty of the deaths of the passengers of the ship and he acted wrongly toward them. Yet it is not as clear what the shipowner is guilty of in the second case, and to whom he did wrong. Clifford has an answer: He is guilty of entertaining a belief that he did not earn the right to entertain and thus he does wrong to not just one man or a group of men, but to the whole of mankind.

This answer may appear far too idealistic but there is a more charitable way to read it. It is not that Clifford thinks we have a responsibility to some immaterial,

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<sup>5</sup> Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," p. 289.

<sup>6</sup> Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," p. 289.

<sup>7</sup> Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," p. 290.

untimely entity called “Truth”, but we have a responsibility to each other. Two underlying ideas are at play here: (1) The inherent interdependency of beliefs and (2) the inescapable sociality of beliefs.

Once you believe in something, Clifford argues, your belief takes part in the aggregate of all the beliefs of all the people in a certain community and helps to shape common sense. And common sense, in turn, determines what is normal to believe and what is not. The beliefs are inherently interdependent, because, for Clifford, every single belief, “however trifling and fragmentary it may seem”, has an effect on the more general working of our thinking. “[I]t prepares us to receive more of its like, confirms those who resembled before, and weakens others; and so gradually it lays a stealthy train in our inmost thoughts”.<sup>8</sup>

And they are inescapably social, because we humans are naturally social creatures in the sense that we interact with each other. Exchanging ideas, opinions and beliefs are a significant part of this interaction. Once you utter a belief in the company of another, it immediately takes its part in the grand interaction of all beliefs. Out of this grand interaction appears what Clifford calls “general conception of the course of things”, which informs and guides our lives and shapes the ways we believe and act. It is thus, Clifford says:

Every rustic who delivers in the village alehouse his slow, infrequent sentences may help to kill or keep alive the fatal superstitions which clog his race. Every hard-worked wife of an artisan may transmit to her children beliefs which shall knit society together, or rend it in pieces.<sup>9</sup>

And it is thus, he firmly rejects the notion of private beliefs:

[N]o one man’s belief is any case a private matter which concerns himself alone. Our lives are guided by that general conception of the course

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<sup>8</sup> Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” p. 292.

<sup>9</sup> Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” p. 293.



of things which has been created by society for social purposes. Our words, our phrases, our forms and processes and modes of thought, are common property, fashioned and perfected from age to age; and heirloom, which every succeeding generation inherits as a precious deposit and a sacred trust, to be handed on to the next one, not unchanged, but enlarged and purified, with some clear marks of its proper handiwork<sup>10</sup>

Following this line of thinking, Clifford comes up with his famous motto: “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence”. And if one has no time to inquire into his beliefs, he says, ”then he should have no time to believe” at all.<sup>11</sup>

### 2.1.2 Credible Scientists, Doubtworthy Prophets

This clear-cut guiding principle for beliefs, however, seems highly impractical, and thus not very plausible. One major reason for this is that it does not fit well with many standard, unproblematic cases. We believe many things, for example, based on the authority of experts. When your doctor says you have this certain disease, you believe her even if she didn’t share with you the whole evidential bases of her diagnosis. It would be very skeptical of Clifford if he insisted on seeing evidential proofs each time he visits a doctor, or refrain from believing in the existence of germs, or the planet Mars, or even maybe Alhambra Palace, until he goes through the evidence by himself. The radical nature of his suggestion would somehow harm its plausibility.

Yet Clifford does not take this rather radical, skeptical route. He instead admits that there is a vast body of knowledge, which is daily growing upon the world and not any one person can possibly test a hundredth part of it. However, Clifford also believes that there is no practical danger that his motto is going to lead us

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<sup>10</sup> Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” p. 292.

<sup>11</sup> Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” p. 293.

to deprive ourselves from this body of knowledge and paralyze the actions of our daily life.<sup>12</sup>

But to make it apparent that the worry here is unfounded, it is not enough to say “it is wrong to believe on unworthy evidence”, one also needs to explain what evidence is worthy.<sup>13</sup> And this question takes two forms:

1. “[U]nder which circumstances it is lawful to believe the testimony of others”?
2. “[W]hen and why we may believe that which goes beyond our experience, or even beyond the experience of mankind”?<sup>14</sup>

The second part of Clifford’s article, “The Weight of Authority”, deals with the first question. The third part, “The Limits of Inference”, deals with the second.

Clifford provides three rules of thumb to determine when the testimony of others becomes worthy evidence. To have the right to accept one’s testimony as evidence, we need to have reasonable grounds to trust his (1) veracity, (2) knowledge, and (3) judgement. That is to say when we are offered a candidate of belief by another person or people, to be able to accept it as truth, we need to have reason to believe that they speak the truth as they know it (veracity), they had opportunities to know the truth about the matter at hand (knowledge), and they made a proper use of those opportunities in coming to conclusion which they affirm (judgement).<sup>15</sup>

That is why when, say, an esteemed physicist discovers a certain behavior of light and informs us about it, we can consider her word as sufficient evidence, as long as we have no reason to believe that she has other motivations to lie

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<sup>12</sup> Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” p. 296.

<sup>13</sup> Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” p. 296.

<sup>14</sup> Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” p. 296.

<sup>15</sup> Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” p. 296.

to us. We know her as someone who has morals and a strong research ethic (veracity), we have no grounds to doubt her expertise on the subject (knowledge) or be suspicious about her methods in coming to the conclusion that she did (judgement). To Clifford, this seems to be a paradigmatic example for how one is justified in believing scientific knowledge. One can lawfully believe in it on the basis of the testimony of scientists, without delving into the evidential background of scientific discoveries oneself.

Yet, in the case of religious knowledge, for example, we cannot rely on the testimony of prophets. That is because even if they can meet Clifford's first rule (veracity), they can hardly meet the other two (knowledge and judgement). A prophet may indeed be an exemplar of a perfect moral character, but this only means that he says the truth as he knows it. It does not mean that he knows the truth. Clifford argues that we do not have reasonable grounds to believe what he reports about God or heavens, for these are matters that are not capable of verification by him, or by any other human.<sup>16</sup> There is more than a considerable room for doubt when it comes to whether a prophet has the opportunities to know the matter at hand or whether he is making a proper use of those opportunities.

### **2.1.3 No Evidence for Supernatural**

What about the second question then: “[W]hen and why we may believe that which goes beyond our experience, or even beyond the experience of mankind”?<sup>17</sup> Clifford's answer starts off by admitting that every belief that serves as a guide to our actions goes beyond experience. When I believe that the fire will burn my hand if I touch it, this belief is based on the assumption that this fire that I am about to touch has a similar quality with other fires that have burned me sometime in the past. This assumption lies in the heart of the evidence for believing the harming power of fire, yet it goes beyond experience, because I have not yet experienced the fire in front of me today. Thus Clifford does not want to raise the unrefined

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<sup>16</sup> Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” p. 288.

<sup>17</sup> Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” p. 296.

positivist question, “may we believe what goes beyond experience?”, but instead he prefers to ask “how far and in what manner may we add to our experience in forming our beliefs?”<sup>18</sup>

Here, it is worth noting that Clifford does not propose to be skeptical about our inferences from the fires of past to the fires of present. He rather inquires into what it is that makes such inferences possible and justified. And he concludes that it is the assumption that there is uniformity in nature. The limits of inference are drawn by this assumption. We are allowed to assume, Clifford says, “that what we do not know is like what we do know”.<sup>19</sup> Yet the catch here is that since such an inference only works on the assumption that there is uniformity in nature, there cannot be any evidence to believe in something that goes against this uniformity:

If our experience is such that it cannot be filled up consistently with uniformity, all we have a right to conclude is that there is something wrong somewhere; but the possibility of inference is taken away; we must rest in our experience, and not go beyond it at all. If an event really happened, which was not a part of the uniformity of nature, it would have two properties: no evidence could give right to believe it to any except those whose actual experience it was; and no inference worthy of belief could be founded upon it at all.<sup>20</sup>

This is to say, any belief that goes against the assumption of uniformity is only justified by one’s personal experience. Even then, one’s experience cannot be enough evidence to come up with a general, guiding belief. It is because in the absence of the assumption of uniformity the possibility of inductive inference from experience is taken away.

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<sup>18</sup> Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” p. 306.

<sup>19</sup> Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” p. 306.

<sup>20</sup> Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” p. 308.

### 2.1.4 Three Rules for The Acquisition of Beliefs

At the very end, Clifford sums up his article with three rules. I will call these rules, (1) The Rule of Believing, (2) The Rule of Testimony, and (3) The Rule of Inference.

The rule of believing says "[i]t is wrong in all cases to believe on insufficient evidence, and where it is presumption to doubt and to investigate, there it is worse than presumption to believe".<sup>21</sup>

The rule of testimony says "[w]e may believe the statement of another person, when there is reasonable ground for supposing that he knows the matter of which he speaks, and that he is speaking the truth so far as he knows it".<sup>22</sup>

And the rule of inference says "[w]e may believe what goes beyond our experience, only when it is inferred from that experience by the assumption that what we do not know is like what we know".<sup>23</sup>

When one violates one of these rules, then one acquires one's belief unlawfully and thus one has no right to it. One is morally wrong to maintain that belief.<sup>24</sup> It turns out that religious people, more often than not, violate all three of these rules. Clifford's article thus implies that being religious, more often than not, is intellectually irresponsible and ethically wrong.

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<sup>21</sup> Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," p. 309.

<sup>22</sup> Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," p. 309.

<sup>23</sup> Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," p. 309.

<sup>24</sup> Here, I only presented a summary of Clifford's position. The ethics of belief debate Clifford sparked, however, created a large body of literature. Timothy J. Madigan's book *W. K. Clifford and "the Ethics of Belief"* serves as a good introduction to this literature. Madigan not only analyzes Clifford's position, but also places him in his historical context and provides an overview of his both contemporary and modern critics; see: Madigan, T. J. (2010). *W. K. Clifford and "the Ethics of Belief"*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

## 2.2 James and the Importance of Passions

The most prominent critic of Clifford's ethics of belief is William James. In "The Will to Believe", probably his most renowned article, James defends the right to have certain types of beliefs, such as religious ones, even if having them violates Clifford's rules.

### 2.2.1 Not All Decisions Can Be Justified

To efficiently discuss what he wanted to discuss, James provides the reader with a number of terms first: He says that there are "hypotheses" and they are either "live" or "dead". And then he says that there are also "options". These options can be "living" or "dead"; "forced" or "avoidable"; and "momentous" or "trivial". Finally, he calls certain type of options "genuine options" and argues that Clifford's rules do not apply to genuine options.

Let me briefly explain this Jamesian terminology:

"Hypothesis", for James, is the name for "anything that may be proposed to our belief".<sup>25</sup> Hypotheses can be either live or dead.

When a hypothesis "appeals as a real to him to whom it is proposed" it deserves to be called a "live hypothesis". When it "makes no electric connection with your nature" and "it refuses to scintillate with any credibility at all", however, it becomes a "dead hypothesis". Hypotheses are live or dead, not by their intrinsic properties, but in relation to whom they are proposed and the time and context of their proposal.<sup>26</sup> "The water is so warm and nice to swim" may possibly be a dead hypothesis to an Icelandic man in the dead of the winter but it will be live to a Greek man on a summer day.

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<sup>25</sup> James, "The Will to Believe," p. 214.

<sup>26</sup> James, "The Will to Believe," p. 215.

The term “option”, on the other hand, refers to “the decision between two hypotheses”.<sup>27</sup> Depending on the nature and significance of their hypotheses, options can be of several types:

First, they can be “living” or “dead”. If both of the hypotheses in an option are live then that option becomes a living option. If either one of them is dead, then the option becomes dead too. If you are in severe pain, you cannot bring yourself to believe that you are not suffering. Only in living options your will can play a role in deciding between the hypotheses

Second, the options can also be “forced” or “avoidable”. A forced option, for James, is a “dilemma based on a complete logical disjunction, with no possibility of not choosing”. If one has a chance to go with a third hypothesis, or if one can choose not to decide between the two hypotheses offered, then that option is avoidable. The option to call a theory either true or false, for example, can easily be avoided by not offering any judgement as to that theory. But embracing a certain belief or not embracing it is a forced option. You either embrace it or not. Even if you decide to suspend your decision, this practically counts as a choice. It causes you to not to embrace the belief in question.

Finally, an option can be “momentous” or “trivial”. The option is momentous when the opportunity is unique and “he who refuses to embrace [it] loses the prize as surely as if he tried and failed”.<sup>28</sup> “Per contra, the option is trivial when the opportunity is not unique, when the stake is insignificant, or when the decision is reversible if it later proves unwise.”<sup>29</sup> If your partner asks you to either marry them or they will leave you for good, then your option becomes momentous. Because the decision will have a significant impact on your life whichever attitude you take towards it. But the option to take an umbrella with you when you leave home is trivial. The gains or losses that comes with it are rather insignificant.

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<sup>27</sup> James, “The Will to Believe,” p. 215.

<sup>28</sup> James, “The Will to Believe,” p. 215.

<sup>29</sup> James, “The Will to Believe,” p. 215.

Now James makes all these clarifications and comes up with the above terminology in order to argue this: When an option is living, forced and momentous, Clifford's rules become inapplicable and irrelevant. James calls living, forced and momentous options "genuine options".<sup>30</sup> He says that when one is faced with a genuine option one has no other choice than to decide; and this decision has to be made by one's passional nature. Because genuine options cannot, by their nature, be decided on purely intellectual grounds.

### **2.2.2 Formulation of Intellectual Duty: A Passional Decision**

The nub of James' position in this article is summarized in the following thesis:

Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passional decision —just like deciding yes or no— and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.<sup>31</sup>

Regarding the notion of truth, James questions Clifford's premises. Clifford's article is mainly about our intellectual duty when forming a belief, but James argues it is possible to understand this duty in two significantly different ways: When asked "what is our intellectual duty?" we can reply "to know the truth", or we can say "to avoid error".<sup>32</sup> These two replies are not the same. They lead to two different intellectual imperatives: Believe as many truths as you can!" or "Avoid error as much as possible!". Choosing one or the other can colour our intellectual life very differently. If we opt for the former we may consider the possibility of

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<sup>30</sup> James, "The Will to Believe," p. 215.

<sup>31</sup> James, "The Will to Believe," p. 220.

<sup>32</sup> James, "The Will to Believe," p. 223.



error as a small risk worth taking on the way to truth, but if we prefer the latter we may think that going without some true beliefs is a small price to pay to make sure we are not in error.

James thinks Clifford exhorts us to the latter course, yet he finds this exhortation utterly faulty. He likens Clifford to “a general informing his soldiers that it is better to keep out of battle forever than to risk a single wound”.<sup>33</sup> He himself, on the other hand, thinks it is absurd to be this afraid of being in error. “Not so are victories either over enemies or over nature gained” he says, “our errors are surely not such awfully solemn things. In a world where we are so certain to incur them in spite of all our caution, a certain lightness of heart seems healthier than this excessive nervousness on their behalf”.<sup>34</sup>

But what is important here is not James’ preference of the former over the latter, but his insistence that this preference itself is not intellectual but passional. The formulations of our intellectual duty are only expressions of our passional life. Should our intellectual duty be “to attain as many true beliefs as possible” or “to avoid as many errors as possible”? The notion of evidence is irrelevant here. Pure reason cannot decide between the two. We cannot avoid making a passional decision in this very first step which then determines our attitude towards our practices of forming opinions.

### **2.2.3 Genuine Options: Where Clifford’s Rules Fail**

Now that it is clear that our very first decision here is made by our passional nature and not on conclusive evidence, James asserts, it must also be clear that Clifford is wrong in always asking decisive evidence for all the beliefs. The ethics of beliefs cannot be constructed in the Cliffordian way, because from the very beginning passion plays an undeniably significant role in the process of forming beliefs and opinions. This is also why, following Clifford’s three rules cannot be a

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<sup>33</sup> James, “The Will to Believe,” p. 224.

<sup>34</sup> James, “The Will to Believe,” p. 224.

universal moral imperative for an intellectually responsible life. It may at best be a passionate choice between two equally justifiable (or one may say unjustifiable) intellectual attitudes.

If the formulation of intellectual duty would be the one and only passionate decision we had to make, maybe a Cliffordian could try to make it an exception to the rule. But it is not. For James, taking no further passionate steps would only be possible if all our options were avoidable and/or trivial. Because then "throwing the chance of gaining truth away" to "save ourselves from any chance of believing falsehood" would not be a big deal.<sup>35</sup> We do face, however, forced and momentous options in our lives. Moral questions provide good examples for such options. They cannot be decided on purely intellectual grounds, based on sufficient evidence, for 'what it is' is never a sufficient evidence to determine 'how it should be'. And Clifford cannot say that they should be left undecided either, for that would be equal to suggesting the suspension of all of our moral judgments. We would never arrive at any moral conclusion.

Assume a scenario, for example, in which Clifford's shipowner reads a bit of Nietzsche (On The Genealogy of Morals, maybe). He then starts to wonder if it is a good idea to empathize with his crew in the first place. He wonders if his empathy indicates a weakness in his will. He worries that he is submitting to slave morality and doing the wrong thing for himself. Whether he interprets Nietzsche correctly is of course a different (and rather irrelevant) matter, but now he finds himself doubting about what is the morally better thing to do when it comes to his doubts about his ship. Should he follow Clifford's rules and make sure that the ship is thoroughly investigated? Or should he do a profit/loss analysis and take the more profitable course of action?

From what I understand, James' point here is this: When faced with a moral question between privileging his interests or that of his crew, the notion of sufficient evidence becomes irrelevant to Clifford's shipowner. Because the decision between the two moral positions cannot be made by acquiring more empirical information,

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<sup>35</sup> James, "The Will to Believe," p. 224.

it requires an ethical stand. And this ethical stand is not an immediate intellectual result of acquiring sufficient knowledge about the facts, but it involves a passionate attitude towards those facts. By asking to keep passions out of the process of belief forming, always and in all cases, Clifford's rules inadvertently preclude the acquisition of any moral beliefs

Clifford's rules fail to accommodate not only moral choices, but also what James calls genuine options. When faced with a genuine option, one is forced to arrive at a decision by one's whole nature, both intellectual and passionate. And these decisions "resolve to stand or fall by the results", not by the evidence.<sup>36</sup> Thus, James concludes that it is not perfectly lawful, but also inevitable to appeal to our passionate nature when we are faced with genuine options.

#### **2.2.4 Religious Hypothesis: A Genuine Option**

It is no secret that Clifford primarily had religious people in mind when denouncing beliefs held on insufficient evidence. It is equally apparent that James' primary intention was to defend religious belief in "The Will to Believe". It is not as obvious, however, if James' and Clifford's subjects of concern were exactly the same. Clifford was most likely thinking repressive, exclusivist, anti-democratic ways of believing in certain dogmatic teachings when he denounced religious beliefs. James, on the other hand, had something else, much wider and more vague, in mind. In that sense, one can say that they were imagining different scenarios about what exactly it is to have religious beliefs. This being the case, however, Clifford's rules end up forbidding some ways of believing that James wants to allow, so the conflict and the difference of opinions between the two is real, and not just a misunderstanding.

What James wanted to defend on behalf of religion is what he called "the religious hypothesis".<sup>37</sup> Religious hypothesis, according to James, says two things:

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<sup>36</sup> James, "The Will to Believe," p. 226.

<sup>37</sup> James, "The Will to Believe," p. 228.

1. “The best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word”.
2. “We are better off even now if we believe [this] first affirmation to be true”.<sup>38</sup>

James does not explain the hypothesis any further, except quoting a phrase from Charles Secrétan: “Perfection is eternal”.<sup>39</sup> Admittedly, this is not enough to elucidate the full implications of James’ religious hypothesis. But regardless, Clifford’s rules condemn even believing in something as broad and vague as James’ religious hypothesis. This, to James, is a testimony to their absurdity. Any plausible ethics of belief should be able to accommodate passionate responses to genuine options. According to James, the religious question is momentous and forced. Thus, for whom the hypothesis has some degree of credibility, religion presents itself as a genuine option.

The question is momentous because the hypothesis says subject matter of religion is the most important. Our attitude towards it will cause us to either gain or lose a vital good. The religious question is also forced, because there is no middle ground, no suspending the judgement without losing the good. That is to say, being skeptical about the hypothesis is practically the same with not embracing it. “Skepticism, then” says James, for genuine options in general, and for religious hypothesis in particular, “is not avoidance of option, it is option of a certain particular kind of risk”.<sup>40</sup>

Better risk loss of truth than chance of error —that is your faith-vetoer’s exact position. He is actively playing his stake as much as the believer is (. . .) To preach skepticism to us as a duty until “sufficient

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<sup>38</sup> James, “The Will to Believe,” p. 228.

<sup>39</sup> Secrétan, C. (1877). *Discours Laïques*. Paris: Sandoz et Fischbacher, p. 5; via James, “The Will to Believe,” p. 228.

<sup>40</sup> James, “The Will to Believe,” p. 228.

evidence” for religion to be found, is tantamount therefore to telling us, when in presence of religious hypothesis, that to yield to our fear of its being error is wiser and better than to yield to our hope that it may be true. It is not intellect against all passions, then: it is only intellect with one passion laying down its law.<sup>41</sup>

## 2.3 Rorty and the Importance of Context

Thus far I have outlined Clifford’s and James’ positions on the lawfulness of unjustified private beliefs. In a simplified summary, Clifford’s ethics of belief does not let anyone hold any belief under any circumstances without sufficient evidence, yet James thinks there are many significant cases in which it is perfectly unproblematic for people to hold beliefs without enough evidence. Now I will turn to Rorty.

### 2.3.1 Private Is Public, Take One: A Pragmatic Reading of Clifford

The way Rorty reads him, what Clifford asks us to do boils down to this one principle: Be responsive to the evidence. The right to believe comes from evidence alone. James’ response to this demand was to question the universality of Clifford’s principle. Rorty’s response, however, is to question the notion of evidence itself. Rorty would ask Clifford, or the imaginary Cliffordian, how do they understand “evidence”. The precise question is this:

Is evidence something which floats free of human projects, or is the demand for evidence is simply a demand from other human beings for cooperation on such projects?<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> James, “The Will to Believe,” p. 228.

<sup>42</sup> Rorty, R. (1999). Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin Books, p. 150.

If it is the latter, evidence is irrelevant to private beliefs. When there is no public project there is no demand for cooperation. When there is no demand for cooperation there is no demand for evidence either. Thus, the notion of evidence becomes only relevant when the belief at question is part of a public project and concerns or challenges other people too.

As for the former claim, “evidence floats free of human interests and projects”, Rorty identifies two traditional ways to argue for it: Realism and Foundationalism. Clifford can take a realist way and say that “the only true source of evidence is the world itself”.<sup>43</sup> Or he can prefer to be a foundationalist instead by suspending his judgement on the intrinsic nature of reality but claiming only the existence of “a natural, transcultural, transhistorical order of reasons”<sup>44</sup> for every belief to occupy a place within.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 150.

<sup>44</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 151.

<sup>45</sup> In this particular discussion, Rorty defines foundationalism as “the epistemological view which (...) claim[s] that every belief occupies a place in a natural, transcultural, transhistorical order of reasons —an order which eventually leads the inquirer back to one or another ‘ultimate source of evidence’.”; see: Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 151.

It can be argued that Rorty’s definition of “foundationalism” here is rather idiosyncratic. It can also be argued that Rorty is not consistent in his definition and understanding of foundationalism throughout his works. Susan Haack, for example, criticizes Rorty of using three different senses of foundationalism (which she calls “foundationalism”, “*foundationalism*” and “**FOUNDATIONALISM**”) in different occasions and confusing them with each other:

(experientialist) foundationalism: theory of justification distinguishing basic beliefs, held to be justified, independently of the support of any other beliefs, by experience, and derived beliefs, held to be justified by the support of basic beliefs [i.e., which postulates basic beliefs justified by experience as the foundations of knowledge];

*foundationalism*: conception of epistemology as an a priori discipline –of the explication of criteria of justification as an analytic enterprise, of their ratification as requiring a priori proof of their truth-indicativeness [i.e., which regards a priori epistemology as founding science];

**FOUNDATIONALISM**: thesis that criteria of justification are not purely conventional but stand in need of objective grounding, being satisfactory only if truth-indicative [i.e., which takes criteria of justification to be founded by their relation to truth].

A pragmatist like Rorty would take issue with both of these approaches.<sup>46</sup> But such broad and fundamental controversies between realists/foundationalists and pragmatists cannot be our subject here, as neither this chapter nor this thesis aim to make a case for pragmatism or anti-realism/anti-foundationalism. Suffice it to say that if Clifford takes either of the realist or foundationalist ways, his ethics of belief ceases to be interesting for a pragmatist. Then the disagreement turns out to be too fundamental to render rather local discussions (such as this one, ‘the lawfulness of unjustified private belief’) vain and barren.

What makes Clifford more than just another realist/foundationalist, however, is that his ethics of belief, that is to say his demand for evidence, can be understood

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Haack argues that though Rorty is right in thinking that the first two senses of foundationalism (“foundationalism” and “*foundationalism*”) is not defensible, he has no good arguments against foundationalism in the third sense (“**FOUNDATIONALISM**”); see: Haack, S. (1993). *Evidence and Inquiry: Towards Reconstruction in Epistemology*. Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Blackwell, p. 186.

This is surely an interesting discussion, but it falls outside of the scope of this chapter, and in fact, this thesis. Our concern here is not to decide if Rorty is right in his criticism of foundationalism, but to focus on his criticism of Clifford when Clifford’s claims are understood in a minimalist/pragmatist form.

<sup>46</sup> The pragmatist objection to realism would be something along these lines: “It is impossible to strip the human element from even our most abstract theorizing”. Thus “a belief’s purported fit with the intrinsic nature of reality adds nothing which makes any practical difference to the fact that it is widely agreed to lead to successful action.” The notion “the world as it is in itself”, in other words, is rather redundant, and it often leads to what Rorty calls table-thumping; see: James, W. (1987). *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 150, via Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 151.

Foundationalism as well can be responded to with a similar objection by pragmatists: “[T]he question of whether [our] inquiries trace such a natural order of reasons or merely responds to the demand for justification prevalent in [our] culture is, like the question whether the physical world is found or made, one to which the answer can make no practical difference”; see: Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 151.

This, I believe, means to say that even if there is such a natural order of reason, because our knowledge is fallible, all we can say about it is it will necessarily be contingent, cultural, historical. Thus it is redundant to assume the existence of it. Even if there exists such evidence that is free from human interest, we wouldn’t know if or when we have it. Thus, the existence of such evidence would make no difference for us, because it would not be part of our world, so to say.

in a minimalist, one can even say pragmatist, form. Rorty attempts to interpret his demand in a such minimalist way. It goes like the following:

1. "Intellectual responsibility is simply responsibility to people with whom one has joined in a shared endeavor"<sup>47</sup>
2. Language using is a shared endeavor, i.e., it is a public project.
3. "The wrongness of believing without evidence is, therefore, the wrongness of pretending to participate in a common project while refusing to play by the rules"<sup>48</sup>

I believe this formulation represents Clifford's view better than its realist or foundationalist interpretations, for it explains better Clifford's persistent emphasis on the societal/communal effects of beliefs. In such a formulation, what Clifford says comes to this: "Believing is inherently a public project: all us language users are in it together."<sup>49</sup> Thus there cannot be such things as private beliefs. This interpretation also makes Clifford relevant to contemporary discussions within pragmatism even if his article is more than hundred years old. When Cheryl Misak criticizes any hard and fast distinctions between private and public, for example, her criticism sounds very much in line with a minimalist/pragmatist interpretation of Clifford's views.<sup>50</sup>

Let me elaborate on this interpretation then: On this minimalist view, the meaning of a statement consists in inferential relations. These inferential relations hook the statement up to the rest of the language. If there are no such inferential relations, then what one has is not a belief but an emotion, a desire or a feeling etc. But if the inferential relations are there, if it is indeed a belief, then one

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<sup>47</sup> Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," p. 151.

<sup>48</sup> Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," p. 151.

<sup>49</sup> Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," p. 152.

<sup>50</sup> See §2.3.2. Private Is Public, Take Two: The Example of Cheryl Misak.



has an intellectual and moral responsibility to one's fellow humans to explain and defend these relations. Which would effectively be the same with justifying one's belief. Because in this view, beliefs are seen as propositions. Every proposition needs to inferentially relate with the rest of the language and the right inferential links are what the evidence is. One justifies a proposition by pointing out how that proposition is linked with others. Thus, believing without evidence is equal to maintaining a belief but keeping it out of the inferential links. And that is intellectually irresponsible because creating the broad web of inferential links and keeping it intact is a public project in which all language users partake. When one adds a belief to the web, one ought to link it up with others in a proper way, or else one is messing with the web itself. But the web is not one's own to mess with. It belongs to everybody.

This interpretation saves Clifford from committing to either realism or foundationalism, yet still lets him keep his demand for evidence legitimate. We can still argue, however, there are certain difficulties with this view.

Consider the cases in which beliefs are not expressed, thus do not partake in the publicly used language: Clifford's shipowner, for example, overcomes his own doubts about his vessel's sea-worthiness, but no one ever questions him about it, so he never puts his belief in a statement. The ship goes back from its voyage safely, so no harm is done to anybody or anything. None of the passengers got hurt, nor was the language muddied by an unlawful sentence. Surely Clifford would not change his mind. He would think the shipowner is as guilty as he was in his original scenario. But in Rorty's minimalist interpretation, it appears as if Clifford does not have anything against the shipowner to accuse him of any crime.

This problem, however, arises only because the shipowner acts on his belief. If he would still believe that his ship is seaworthy with no evidence, but has the ship examined nevertheless because he knew his belief is fallible, what would Clifford say about it? If we imagine Clifford maintaining that the shipowner is still guilty in even holding his unjustified belief, then we can surely infer that Rorty's minimalist interpretation will not hold. If, however, Clifford would step back from

his seemingly too tough criteria and finds such a belief harmless and lawful, then Rorty is right to read him as trying to make a pragmatist demand.

Being too strict, the former approach does not seem very plausible. So let us imagine Clifford takes the latter approach. He allows the shipowner believe whatever he wants as long as the shipowner makes sure that the ship gets examined. What does this mean for Clifford's ethics of belief? How can he still maintain that it is intellectually irresponsible to believe without evidence? One possible way is to return to the distinction between beliefs and emotions. Clifford can argue that in this case the shipowner does not have a belief but only a desire or an emotion about the safety of his ship. "Because", the imaginary Cliffordian might say, "if what he has is a belief then it should stand in an inferential relations with other beliefs". For his belief "this ship is safe" to mean something he should apply the concept "safe" to the subject "this ship". And both the meaning of the concept "safe" and the rules of inference to apply it rightly to a subject are determined through the broader web of beliefs.. Elaborating and explaining how and why one applies the concept "safe" to the subject at hand ("this ship") equates to justifying one's belief through evidential links. If one's belief has these proper evidential links, then one has a right to call it a belief. But one then has to be able to explicate them. It is thus one should only hold beliefs that one can justify. It is thus justification is an intellectual duty and one should not hold any beliefs without evidence.

This would be a coherent and pragmatic Cliffordian ethics of belief. It would say, at the end of the day, "although your emotions are your business, your beliefs are everybody's business."<sup>51</sup> Because standing in inferential relations with others is the norm for mental states to be beliefs. You can only have beliefs if you have evidence. Without evidential links all you can have is feelings, emotions, or desires, etc. That is to say, for a minimalist Cliffordian, if one does not have good enough evidence for one's belief that "this ship is safe" (or one's belief that "God exists", for that matter) then there are two possibilities: It is either the case that what one has is something like a wish or a hope and the term "belief" is a misnomer here; or

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<sup>51</sup> Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," p. 152.

one violates the rules of inference and thus guilty of an intellectual crime. It seems like only through an interpretation like this we can come up with a somewhat pragmatic objection to holding unjustified private beliefs. In all other scenarios, when one's belief has no significant consequences on other people's lives, then there are no good reasons to accuse one of irresponsibility, be it a moral or an intellectual kind.

Rorty, however, still has an objection to this view. He questions the rationale behind this idea of one single inferential web of beliefs and its exclusion of feelings, hopes, wishes or desires. "On the traditional account" he says, "desire should play no role in the fixation of belief. On a pragmatist account, the only point of having beliefs in the first place is to gratify desires."<sup>52</sup>

Clifford wants to protect our web of beliefs from unlawful inferences. But why do we have this inferential web of beliefs in the first place? If we leave representational answers aside, any answer to this question would point out a certain human desire: To cope with our environment, to predict its future behavior, to be able to control it etc. But then, these answers suggest that this web of belief itself should be thought in pragmatic terms, in terms of its relation with human interests. It should not be seen as something overarching and all encompassing like "reason", but rather as a particular project to designate what can be appropriately called "knowledge". The project knowledge, then, is not "the project", but "a project" among many. Thus having beliefs that are not inferentially supported by other beliefs should be perfectly acceptable as long as they do not have a claim to knowledge. Not all beliefs have to participate in the project knowledge, thus not all beliefs have to follow the rules of it.

This analysis concludes Rorty's discussion of Clifford. As for William James, however, Rorty seems to be in two minds about him. He admires James. He says that much of James' writing foreshadows Rorty's own utilitarian ethics of belief. But he also finds James' engagement with Clifford substantially problematic because of James' highly unpragmatic claims.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," pp. 154–155.

<sup>53</sup> Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," p. 152.

### 2.3.2 A Wrong Strategy: James' Departure From Pragmatism

Let us remember that James objects to Clifford in two critical points: (1) Even our intellectual claims have emotional grounds, that is to say our beliefs are eventually grounded in our emotions. (2) Clifford's approach does not conform to our experience. We encounter situations in which we cannot avoid having a belief one way or another even if we do not have evidence for it. In "The Will to Believe", James goes on about these two criticisms by establishing a duality in human nature as "intellectual" and "passional". He then argues that the latter is as important as the former. Rorty thinks this is a mistake. He argues that:

James accepts exactly what he should rejects: the idea that the mind is divided neatly down the middle into intellect and passion, and the idea that possible topics of discussion are divided neatly into the cognitive and non-cognitive ones.<sup>54</sup>

Rorty is suspicious about this dichotomy between intellect and passion. He finds it neither accurate nor useful. Hence he suggests replacing it with another, rather political distinction: Private and public. Dropping the former in favor of the latter has significant consequences for the ethics of belief discussion. One such consequence is the angle you take: James, for example, does not take any issue with the notion of intellectual responsibility. He only focuses on the absurdity of Clifford's criteria to fulfill it. Rorty's engagement with Clifford, on the other hand, centers on the claim that we have an intellectual responsibility when acquiring personal beliefs. Rorty argues that our responsibility here is political, not intellectual. That is to say, James' angle to the debate is still fairly epistemological. Rorty's angle, however, is more political than anything else. James is mostly concerned with the psychology of belief forming. Rorty's primary concern is the outcome of the belief and the effects it has on other people.

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<sup>54</sup> Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," p. 155.

When Rorty says James adopts the wrong strategy and “gets off on the wrong foot”,<sup>55</sup> he points out James’ departure from the pragmatic angle. When one takes the pragmatic angle, argues Rorty, “the notion of ‘source of evidence’ gets replaced by that of ‘consensus about what would count as evidence’.”<sup>56</sup> Then, instead of asking questions like “is there any evidence for p?”, one starts to ask questions like “is there any way of getting a consensus on what would count in favour of p?”.<sup>57</sup> When questions are asked this way, the difference between passion and intellect, or beliefs and desires, ceases to be important. Instead, new concerns emerge:

1. “Am I going to be able to justify p to other people?”
2. “What sort of belief, if any, can I have in good conscience, even after I realize that I cannot justify this belief to others?”<sup>58</sup>

Now through this reasoning, Rorty still engages with the same issue yet frames it in a marginally different way. When asked the second question, Clifford would say: “You cannot have any beliefs that you cannot justify to others. You can only have hopes, wishes, desires, yearnings and the like”. James’ answer may be the following: “You can only have such beliefs if (or when) you find yourself before a live, forced and momentous option which cannot be decided on intellectual grounds”. Both of these answers are concerned with how you come to possess that belief. They either presume or prescribe an epistemology, which settles the right ways of possessing a belief from the wrong ways of possessing a belief. But ought we to have such an epistemology in the first place? Rorty believes not. It is one of the major claims of his magnum opus, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, that the need for epistemology, that is a theory of knowledge, is not philosophically self-evident, but is a product of a certain, historical, contingent way of thinking, and

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<sup>55</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 154.

<sup>56</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 155.

<sup>57</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 155.

<sup>58</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 155.

thus optional.<sup>59</sup> And if one can choose to do without a detailed epistemology, then both of the above answers turn out to be arbitrary. Insisting on them amounts to imposing one's own need to have a theory of knowledge to other people who may not have such a need.

Rorty's own answer to the second question, therefore, is this: It does not matter "whether what you have is a belief, a desire or a mood. Just insofar as such states as hope, love and faith promote only such private projects, you need not worry about whether you have a right to have them".<sup>60</sup> That is to say, you can have any beliefs whatsoever as long as you keep them your own business.

Rorty, following Mill, wants to argue for a utilitarian ethics which says that "our right to happiness is limited only by others' rights not to have their own pursuits of happiness interfered with. This right to happiness includes the right to faith, hope and love —intentional states which can rarely be justified, and typically should not have been justified, to our peers".<sup>61</sup> Here the question of intellectual responsibility does not arise because "our intellectual responsibilities are responsibilities to cooperate with others on common projects designed to promote the general welfare, and not to interfere with their private projects".<sup>62</sup>

### 2.3.3 The Confusion Around Private/Public Distinction

So far what Rorty says comes to this: The only times you have to justify your beliefs are the times when your beliefs have significant consequences for other people as well, and thus they ask you to do so. For the rest of the time, you do not have such a responsibility, because there is nobody or nothing that can hold you accountable for your private beliefs. He suggests that if there is to be an

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<sup>59</sup> Rorty, R. (1979). *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 136.

<sup>60</sup> Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," p. 155.

<sup>61</sup> Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," p. 154.

<sup>62</sup> Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," p. 154.

ethics of belief, it should be concerned with the distinction between public beliefs and private beliefs, not with the epistemology of knowledge or the psychology of opinion forming. Above I have explained Rorty's reasons for this claim. Now, in the following, I am going to discuss if Rorty's claim can hold against the critiques of this very distinction itself.

Let us go back to Clifford and let us assume that he granted to Rorty that there is indeed no authority to which we humans are responsible in having beliefs (as he unproblematically would in the minimalist interpretation). We are responsible only to other human beings when our beliefs concern them too. Clifford still could, and most likely would, continue to insist that our beliefs concern other people not only sometimes but all the times.

One way to develop this argument is to assume an essential connection between every uttered belief of each person and what Clifford calls the "general conception of the course of things". This "general conception of the course of things", of course, is of public nature. Clifford sees it as common property to the people of a society—and sometimes even the whole of humanity.<sup>63</sup> And every sentence uttered in the company of others helps to re-shape it. It is rather unclear, however, how to unfold this "general conception of the course of things" here if Clifford is trying to say more than the very simple assumption that whenever someone utters a sentence in the company of others, this sentence will have an effect on others by the sole virtue of them listening to it. They do not even have to accept it. They may hear it and immediately reject it, or completely ignore it, but because they heard it they are now in a different state than they were before, even if the difference is unnoticeably small. And this counts as enough of an effect to be relevant.

As for the significance of this effect, however, Clifford seems to overplay it. He seems to say that because there will be such an effect, every act of uttering a belief will necessarily be public. In the strict reading, he says that no belief is private (because what you believe makes what you are and how you behave,

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<sup>63</sup> Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," p. 292.

and what you are and how you behave in turn effects other people), and in the more tolerant reading, that no belief uttered in public is a private belief (because uttering a belief in the company of others has an effect on “the general conception of the course of things”). Note that neither of these arguments is constructed here as representationalist, foundationalist or essentialist. When so constructed, they cease to be interesting for a pragmatist philosopher. Their value here comes from their ability to make sense purely in the context of interpersonal responsibility. They rely on the very pragmatic notion that one ought to have some responsibilities towards one’s fellow people.

Whether you read it in the strict sense or in the more tolerant sense, however, both of these Cliffordian arguments are based on the idea that beliefs cannot be private if they affect other people. If Rorty draws the line between “private projects” and “public projects” from “the things that concern only the person herself” and “the things that concern other people too”, his Cliffordian opponent can always argue against him saying that everything we do has an effect on other people, regardless of how significant this effect is. If the criterion for privateness is “not having any effects on other people”, then none of our actions may meet it. In the strict reading of the argument, your beliefs themselves (i.e. your acts of believing) will fail to meet the criterion, and in the tolerant reading, you should never vocalize them if you wish to keep them private.

But surely, there is something odd going on with this objection. We want to be able to say that some things are private, in the sense that neither I have to explain myself to others nor they have any right to interfere with my decisions/actions. Consider the example of love. It seems absurd to assume that who I fall in love with is a public matter and thus other people should have a say in my falling in love with this or that person. Regardless of my keeping it secret or declaring it in a family/friends gathering, we want to be able to say that my falling in love is still my private business even if it may have some effects on the people around me. I am not morally obligated to explain why I am feeling this way, or why I believe that this person is the right person for me.

Imagine a different scenario: Assume that I was born Muslim, have devout Muslim parents, and they wanted me to be as devout as they are themselves. But



I decided that Islam does not make much sense to me and became an atheist. I do not try to make a case for atheism and I do not want to change their religious views to match mine. Maybe I am not even well enough informed on the subject to be able to have a successful debate with my parents. But I do feel that Islam is not working for me, so I let my parents know that I am no more a Muslim and I live my life as an atheist. In such a scenario, it seems pretty normal to assume that my religious beliefs are my private business and my parents should not be entitled to have any rights on them, be it moral or legal. My decision surely affects my parents: I make them sad and anxious about what awaits me in the hereafter, and I disappoint them. Yet, this does not seem to be enough reason to give them the right to interfere with my decisions about my religious affiliation. And if I am reluctant to make a sound case for my new worldview, I should be within my rights to refuse to discuss my decision. It is true that my family may want to discuss my views and they may even argue that it is not just my business, but theirs too. They may argue, for example, that our family members were Muslims for generations and when I declare my atheism it not only affects their feelings, but this declaration also has an impact on the family name and tradition. Yet this argument, I believe, is still odd and problematic.

Consider an analogy with Rorty's private belief that the "noble, pure, chaste, North American wild orchids were morally superior to the showy, hybridized, tropical orchids displayed in florists' shops".<sup>64</sup> Assume that my family are florists for generations and they take pride in displaying and selling the best tropical orchids. Also assume that I have the same private belief Rorty has, that "some 40 species of wild orchids" found in "the mountains of north-west New Jersey" are superior<sup>65</sup> to the kind of orchids my family has been selling for generations. So, when I declare my financial independence and open my own florist shop, I start displaying and selling wild orchids instead. What I do may have an effect on our family name, because I still have the same surname, yet it seems perfectly reasonable to say that which kind of orchids I want to sell in my own shop is my own business, not

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<sup>64</sup> Rorty, "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids," p. 7.

<sup>65</sup> Rorty, "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids," p. 7.

my family's. My parents do not get to have a say on the matter. I do not have to justify my decision to them either. I may owe them an explanation, but that would be purely due to the kind of relationship between us. If our relationship is that of love and respect, then surely I would try my best to let them understand my decision. But even then, just like Rorty, I may not be quite sure why I think wild orchids are better. My explanations may fall short of satisfying them. Regardless of my desire or ability to explain it to my family, however, both my belief that wild orchids are superior and my decision to sell them in my own shop stay as my own private matters.<sup>66</sup>

Through these examples, I do not wish to claim that Clifford's position is absurd. But if Clifford aims to show how unviable it is to make a distinction between private and public, I believe the above examples, in contrast, shows how it makes sense, at times, to insist on such a distinction. Here one cannot help sensing that there is something confusing going on around the use of the word "private". It might help to look for the roots of this confusion to understand Rorty better. But let me first take a detour and introduce Cheryl Misak. This introduction promises to be fruitful in two respects:

1. It may highlight how the above discussion around Clifford is still relevant to contemporary pragmatism. As far as I can see, some of the passages in *Truth, Politics, Morality*<sup>67</sup> is very reminiscent of Clifford. By introducing Misak, I want to show how a minimalist form of a Cliffordian ethics is still present in a contemporary pragmatist philosopher's work.
2. It may provide further context to our discussion about the nature of private/public distinction and how to understand these terms.

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<sup>66</sup> Here again, the term private is used in the sense that the belief/act in question does not require justification to others. It should not be confused with a more strict meaning of private, namely that it does not involve any connection whatsoever with other people, for surely, selling orchids is not private in that sense. It requires other people who will buy the orchids. The latter sense of private is not interesting for the purposes of this thesis.

<sup>67</sup> Misak, C. (2000). *Truth, Politics, Morality*. London/New York: Routledge.

### 2.3.4 Private Is Public, Take Two: The Example of Cheryl Misak

It is worth noting that Misak's arguments in this book are not directly targeted at the private/public distinction itself, but the privatization of morality: the liberalist idea that "substantive moral judgements should be kept out of public life".<sup>68</sup> This idea is usually associated with the neutrality principle: State should be neutral towards different conceptions of life.<sup>69</sup> And the way to achieve it is to keep politics free from private morality, because "if the questions of the good are at issue in politics, then we shall find ourselves in a battle of traditions, each fighting for supremacy".<sup>70</sup> As I will discuss later in Chapter 5, Rorty does not necessarily embrace the neutrality principle. But he does argue for the privatization of religion. He also promotes a version of the liberalist idea that private moral judgements should better be kept out of public life.

Misak calls attention to the connection between the neutrality principle and private/public distinction. She says, for example, that the "liberals who place a premium on neutrality would like substantive judgements about the good to be kept out of public debate and confined to one's private morality".<sup>71</sup> In contrast, she proposes "a kind of holism": a view that "treats all of our beliefs as an interconnected whole. There is in this view no room for any hard and fast distinction between what kinds of reasons can play a role in our private and in our public

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<sup>68</sup> Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality*, p. 119.

<sup>69</sup> "Liberals often seek to connect respect for persons with the requirement of state neutrality through the notion of autonomy: respect for persons requires respect for each person's autonomy; since the exercise of autonomy may lead to the acceptance of any of a variety of conceptions of the good, respect for each person's autonomy requires the state to be neutral between different views of the good life."; see: Mason, A. D. (1990). Autonomy, Liberalism and State Neutrality. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 40(161), 433–452, p. 433.

<sup>70</sup> Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality*, p. 118.

<sup>71</sup> Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality*, p. 117.

decision-making”.<sup>72</sup> Her suggestion to see “beliefs as an interconnected whole” sounds very much like in the same spirit of Clifford’s holism in the minimalist interpretation. Not only that they both promote this notion of an interconnected, single web of beliefs, but Misak’s justification as to why we should see views as inherently interconnected is similar to Clifford’s as well. Both of their arguments focus on how even the most personal moral beliefs will have a public effect. Here is Misak:

[W]hatever our intentions, we might find a personal idiosyncratic decision serving as a model for others. This is usually not the case when there are no moral considerations involved in the decision, as when I am deciding whether I prefer blueberry to blackberry jam. Moral considerations can, however, play a part in preferences and when they do, they can have influence. I might prefer Bridgehead Nicaraguan coffee to others because its producers have fair labour practices. This might look like a personal preference, but it can of course affect others – even if I do not campaign or try to browbeat others into buying Bridgehead. It can bring new reasons to light for others. (...) So, even when I think of my reasons as being relative to my personal interests and beliefs – even when I aim at getting something right for me, not for the community – they might in fact have a larger scope. I might find that they have a pull on others in similar circumstances. And when they have such pull, it is a misnomer to call them personal, or mere preferences, or reasons entirely relative to my circumstances. Not many reasons and judgements can be so confined.”<sup>73</sup>

Compare this passage with “The Ethics of Belief” pages 292, 293, where Clifford talks about how even the most casual sentences of the most common folks has unintended public effects.<sup>74</sup> The resemblance is striking, although there is a

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<sup>72</sup> Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality*, p. 118.

<sup>73</sup> Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality*, p. 146.

<sup>74</sup> Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” pp. 292, 293.

difference: Clifford seems to argue that every sentence and every act, without exception, will necessarily have a public effect. Misak, on the other hand, is only interested with the sentences and acts that involve moral decisions. Accordingly, Clifford denies private/public distinction altogether. Misak finds the distinction morally and politically irrelevant. In other words, Misak finds it problematic when liberal philosophers invoke this distinction to justify the neutrality principle. If even the most private of our moral acts, like choosing a fair-trade brand over other brands, can have a public effect, then invoking the private/public distinction in politics is futile. “Personal conceptions of the good” she writes, “aren’t entirely personal”.<sup>75</sup> Hence, the liberalist demand for the privatization of morality (and consequently, the privatization of religion) is at best misconstrued and misplaced.

Although Misak clearly positions herself against Rorty, I will argue that her political conclusions are not dramatically different than that of Rorty’s later views. Just like Jeffrey Stout and Nicholas Wolterstorff, Misak also has Rorty’s initial, immature position in her mind when she positions herself against him. In Chapter 5, I will discuss how Rorty revises his position in response to the criticisms. I will argue that his revised position allows him to be able to take his critics’ concerns into account while still insisting on the private/public distinction and the privatization of religion. Misak’s main concern, for example, seems to be that the private/public distinction discourages positive change and serves to maintain status quo. She refers to the feminist slogan, “the personal is political” and how “the women’s movement has succeeded in getting some important issues out of the private closet” into the political arena.<sup>76</sup> Through this politicization of private, Kimberle Crenshaw writes, women, as well as other minority groups, started to speak more powerfully and demand real change:

For example, battering and rape, once seen as private (family matters) and aberrational (errant sexual aggression), are now largely recognized as part of a broad-scale system of domination that affects women as

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<sup>75</sup> Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality*, p. 7.

<sup>76</sup> Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality*, p. 119.

a class. This process of recognizing as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual has also characterized the identity politics of African Americans, other people of color, and gays and lesbians, among others.<sup>77</sup>

Misak's implication is that not only private/public distinction is conceptually problematic, but also a certain disregard for it is sometimes necessary for progressive movements to succeed.

Gay activists too have made a public issue out of what has often been taken to be a private matter. Attempts, for instance, have been made by various educational authorities, always vehemently protested, to publicly display the gay lifestyle in a positive manner.<sup>78</sup>

According to Misak, the liberals "who place a premium on neutrality" lack the tools, both conceptual and political, to publically portray a conception of good and thus, to drive any meaningful, progressive change. Misak concludes her discussion on the matter with a reference to Seyla Benhabib: "The struggle over what gets included in the public, what gets put on the public agenda, is itself a struggle for justice and freedom. To prejudge the question is to beg it."<sup>79</sup>

I believe these are very valid and strong criticisms. In Chapter 5, we will see that both Jeffrey Stout and Nicholas Wolterstorff make very similar criticisms to Rorty: They both criticize the liberal idea that private conceptions of good do not have a place in public debates. In Chapter 5, I will explain how Rorty agrees with its critics and how he revises his position to be able to address their concerns. In

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<sup>77</sup> Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299, pp. 1241, 1242.

<sup>78</sup> Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality*, p. 119.

<sup>79</sup> Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality*, p. 119; Benhabib, S. (1989). Liberal Dialogue versus a Critical Theory of Discursive Legitimation. N. L. Rosenblum (Ed.), *Liberalism and the Moral Life*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, p. 94.

this chapter, however, I will focus on how we can (and should) read Rorty agreeing with Benhabib and Misak on the nature of the private/public distinction: That what is private and what is public are not fixed, but always the subject of an ongoing political struggle. Let me, then, unpack this idea that the line between private and public can be seen as permeable and the beliefs can move from one area to another.

### **2.3.5 How To Understand Private/Public Distinction**

It seems to me that there are at least two different ways one can understand the private versus public distinction. I will differentiate these two different understandings as in the following:

1. Private versus Public as an Ontological Distinction
2. Private versus Public as a Political/Legal Distinction

If you assume that there is a natural line between the area that rightly belongs to the individual and the space that belongs to the society, and call these areas “private” and “public”, respectively, then your distinction can be called “ontological”. In this assumption, the line you are looking for will be immobile, stationary and sharp.

In contrast, if you believe that there is no such natural line to be found, but still insist on actively drawing one (presumably because you believe it helps to achieve optimal equality and freedom in your society), then your distinction is “political/legal”. On this latter understanding, the words “private” and “public” do not capture the already-there nature of the relationship between the individual and the society. They are instead conceptual tools to effectively organize this relationship in order to achieve certain goals. And because they are “made” rather than “found”, they are always open to rebuttals and thus reconsideration. The things that are considered private today can be considered public tomorrow, or vice versa. That is to say, the line between the two is not sharp and stationary, but

rather vague and moving. It is not “a sturdy and immovable wall of separation” but “a deployable fence that is never stable”.<sup>80</sup>

I want to argue that Rorty’s private-public distinction should be understood in this latter, “political/legal” sense. This would not only be the most charitable reading, but also the most coherent one.

Rorty explicitly mentions Mill as being a major guide in thinking about such matters. It is thus no surprise Rorty’s fundamental question on the matter is very similar to that of Mill’s: What is “the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual”?<sup>81</sup> In the context of our discussion, we can reframe the question as the following: “When it is legitimate for the society to expect justification from the individual for her beliefs or actions?”—which is pretty much the equivalent of the following question: “What is the moral limit within which one may rightly abstain from giving justifications for her beliefs or actions?” Rorty’s answer to this question is rather general, and not particularly enlightening: One may abstain from giving justifications when the beliefs or actions in question belong to the area that is marked as private by the society one lives in. As for the question what should be marked as private and what public, Rorty does not have a conclusive answer to offer, save a very blurry guideline, which is pretty much taken from Mill directly: One’s private space ceases to be private when it starts to invade the space of others.

This may work mostly fine for Misak, because the lack of definitive criteria allows beliefs to be moved from private to public and vice versa. What may be considered private yesterday can be argued to be public today, as it was the case for second-wave feminists. When the distinction is interpreted as political rather than ontological, Misak’s concern that it may stand in the way of progress will no longer be necessarily valid.

But it still begs the original Cliffordian objection, or Misak’s objection that private morality is not private after all: I can be seen as invading someone else’s

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<sup>80</sup> Dellwing, M. (2012). Fences: Rorty’s Private-Public-Dichotomy as a Situational Game. *Minerva*, 16(6), 62–82, p. 73.

<sup>81</sup> Mill, J. S. (1863). *On Liberty*. Boston: Ticknor and Fields, p. 7.



space even in my most private things, such as expressing a personal belief or falling in love. Misak's personal preference for fair-trade coffee can still be argued to have public effects. But now, being aware that this discussion is not about "what actually is private" but rather "what should count as private", Rorty can turn the tables by asking: "Should I be considered as invading someone else's space by only expressing my belief?"

This opens up a discussion that is only secondarily relevant to our subject: What are the appropriate criteria to determine the lawful invasions from the unlawful ones? A traditional Millsian liberal answer to this is "the harm principle", which says that the unlawful invasions can be distinguished from the lawful ones by the harm they cause to others. The definition and elaboration of harm (i.e. what exactly should count as harm), however, is and will be an ongoing discussion, as it is context-sensitive. What may be considered as a lawful offense in certain circumstances can be considered an unlawful harm in other circumstances.

Consider, for example, the Jylland-Posten Muhammad cartoon incident, when the Danish newspaper published satirical cartoons depicting Muslim's prophet Muhammad and caused a lot of demonstrations and riots around the world. This was, of course, clearly a public issue. They were political cartoons, published in a newspaper, and meant to be a contribution to public discourse. They also led to a public disturbance. So the example is not about the blurriness of the line between private and public. But it exposes well still the blurry nature of the harm principle.

Do offensive cartoons cause any harm to others? They did offend some Muslims, but it seems common sense to say that such an offence did not cause them real harm. But it is also commonsensical to say that hate speech, speech that encourages xenophobia and racism do indeed cause harm to society. Publicly associating Islam with terrorism may as well be seen as hate speech towards a lawfully existing religious community and cause real harm to them. There are no ready-made, instantly available solutions here to determine if the cartoons were indeed harmful or not. It requires an engagement with the context to decide if publishing offensive cartoons about a certain group of people is a form of racism or hate speech, or is

it just harmless offense and an inseparable part of free speech. The decision will be a trade off between one parties' freedoms and other parties' inconveniences. In the process, some harms will be labeled as insignificant and negligible, and some restrictions on freedom as necessary. But the decisions will be contingent and contextual. An event in the future of a similar nature may dictate that we reconsider what we thought were insignificant harms and necessary restrictions. That is to say, Mill's harm principle cannot determine what counts as harm once and for all. Yet it still can hold as a meaningful, working principle.

Similarly, Rorty cannot provide more than a context-dependent guideline to decide what is private and what is public. He cannot offer a conclusive formula with which one can judge any possible controversies that may occur in the future. His lack of answer is not due to a weakness in his account, but rather due to the contingent and contextual nature of the distinction.

Another caveat here is that the harm principle does not necessarily have to be the only criterion if one is to distinguish the lawful invasions from the unlawful ones. Arthur Ripstein, for example, attempts to replace it with what he calls "the sovereignty principle":

[E]ach person is free to use his or her own powers, individually or cooperatively, to set his or her own purposes, and no one is allowed to compel another to use their powers in a way designed to advance or accommodate any other person's purposes.<sup>82</sup>

In Ripstein's principle, the limits of the private sphere are not drawn on by one's not causing harm to others, but by one's not invading other people's autonomy. Ripstein suggests understanding freedom as "nondomination", i.e. in terms of people's respective independence:

You are independent if you are the one who decides what ends you will use your powers to pursue, as opposed to having someone else decide

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<sup>82</sup> Ripstein, A. (2006). Beyond the Harm Principle. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 34(3), 215-245, p. 230 (footnote 23).

for you. You may still mess up, decide badly, or betray your true self. You may have limited options. You remain independent if no one else gets to tell you what to do. Each of us is independent if neither of us gets to tell the other what to do. (...) A system of equal freedom demands that no one use his or her own powers in a way that will deprive others of theirs, or use another person's powers without his or her permission.<sup>83</sup>

This idea of restricting the limits of private not through “harm”, but through “domination” seems to provide an even more useful tool to rebut Cliffordian-like objections: Whatever effects I might have on you with expressing my beliefs, I do not take away your freedom to decide what to do with my beliefs. I may be causing you offense or an emotional disturbance with them. You may even go as far to believe that being exposed to my malicious thoughts has a bad effect on your healthy thinking. But regardless of what harm you consider my expression of beliefs caused, it is clear that I am not hindering your autonomy. I am neither preventing you from setting your own purposes nor restraining you from using your powers to attain them.

I will refrain, however, attempting to further develop this line of reasoning here, for it is not central to our discussion. There can be different ways to argue why expressing a belief is not an invasion of other people's private space. But it is hardly something that Rorty needs to do. It is already the case that in Western democracies expression of personal beliefs is widely considered as an exercise in freedom of thought and speech, and not as a violation of other people's rights. The individuals' right to have religious beliefs is already recognized and celebrated as an integral part of a functioning democracy. As such, they are by default private. They only become public if/when they trigger a public debate. Rorty does not have to argue for this political/cultural arrangement unless it is challenged. The fact that “everything can affect everything else”, however, does not seem to provide any substantial challenges to Rorty. It neither invalidates the private-public distinction

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<sup>83</sup> Ripstein, “Beyond the Harm Principle,” p. 231.

itself, nor makes a robust case for us to reconsider our current political/cultural arrangement around personal/private beliefs.

If we understand Rorty's distinction as a context-sensitive and flexible political/legal tool, then this Cliffordian objection falls short of being an effective criticism. It no longer challenges the distinction itself, but instead becomes a rather trivial and pedantic political position within the very framework of private versus public.

That is to say, Rorty may not have a way to agree with Clifford and still argue for the legitimacy of unjustified private beliefs. But he does have a way to actually agree with Misak (on this particular subject) and still argue that private beliefs exist and they are legitimate even if they are not justified. All Rorty needs to do is to say that private beliefs are no longer private when they are brought into the public arena. If the line between private and public is permeable, then beliefs can be moved from one side to another, while the rules for both sides stay the same. You keep your belief private, you do not need to justify it. Your beliefs becomes part of a public project (that is politics), you owe justification to others as you intend to make a change in that public project.

When the demands of the critics, be it Clifford or Misak, are framed in a non-representationalist way, the question eventually turns out to be about the responsibilities of the individual to the community. Rorty wants to insist that such responsibilities arise when your belief concerns not only you but also other people. This is why the Cliffordian demand for evidence misses the point entirely. It misses the pragmatist point that a belief only exists to satisfy this or that human need.

This is why, on the matter of religious beliefs, Rorty proposes to shift the axis of discussion from the Cliffordian question "do religious beliefs require justification?" to the more pragmatic question "when are religious beliefs appropriately private?" By reformulating the question this way, Rorty also addresses Misak's concerns, as the latter question do not mark all religious beliefs as private once and for all. It seeks to differentiate the times that religious beliefs are just the individual's

business and the times that they cease to be so. It allows that certain religious beliefs, previously thought as private, can be called out for their public/political effects. The question has to be open ended. It cannot be answered once and for all, because its answer depends on the context and on the political/cultural discussion around it.

One final point about this discussion: Rorty argues for the legitimacy of unjustified private beliefs by referring to their being private. And when asked how then to distinguish what is private from public, he ultimately refers to the outcome of the society's cultural/political discussions about it. The reason why we should consider religious beliefs as private, for example, is that because we have decided that "liberty of thought and feeling"<sup>84</sup> is of utmost importance in modern, secular democracies. We still continue to believe it, because so far there have been no arguments strong and challenging enough to dethrone it. To an uncharitable eye, this may seem either circular or trivial.

I believe it is neither. The argument is not circular for it is not just about semantics. Rorty does not arbitrarily equate the meaning of 'what is private' to 'what does not require justification'. Private beliefs are private, because they do not have to respond to anyone (or anything), save the individual herself. Justification is a social game. One only needs to justify a belief to others if the belief in question has considerable social consequences. It is this pragmatic principle that justifies unjustified private beliefs. And this pragmatic principle itself is not justified circularly, with reference to privacy. It is a public principle, open to discussion, argumentation and rejection.

Furthermore, Rorty's argument here is not trivial either, for it suggests replacing the question "how can I rationally justify my religious beliefs" with the question "when are my religious beliefs appropriately private". As discussed above, these two questions are fundamentally different in what they are asking. Asking one instead of the other can paint both our intellectual and political life very differently.

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<sup>84</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 28.

## Chapter 3

# Pragmatic Religion vs. Pragmatic Approach To Religion

In the last chapter, I have discussed what I considered the single most important feature of Rorty's approach to matters concerning religion, namely his privatization of religion and the immunity of private religious beliefs, be it epistemological immunity or political immunity. Rorty, I argued, establishes that as long as religious beliefs can be legitimately claimed to be one's own business, they stay out of the jurisdiction of others.

However, there might be a discrepancy between what Rorty considers a private religious belief and what some religious believers consider an appropriate religious belief. In Rorty's account, for example, a properly private religious belief cannot have a claim to knowledge. This is because a claim to knowledge means a claim in a public project. If you wish to put forward your religious beliefs as claims of knowledge, you ought to take part in what Brandom calls "the game of giving and asking for reasons".<sup>1</sup> This indicates a notable parting of ways with many believers

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<sup>1</sup> Brandom, R. (1997). Study Guide. W. Sellars (Ed.), *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. Harvard University Press, p. 123; Brandom attributes this particular phrase, "the game of giving and asking for reasons", to Sellars. Yet I have failed to find this very phrase in Sellars' writings. Chauncey Maher, in his book *The Pittsburgh School of Philosophy: Sellars, McDowell, Brandom*, also reports the same curiosity and writes: "while the idea might come from Sellars,

of traditional religions, who have a tendency to see their beliefs not only as a way to make sense of their lives but also as a special sort of knowledge about how everything comes together in this universe and heavens. In the following, I will outline Rorty's own preferred way of understanding religious beliefs, particularly his claim that religion is essentially a form of "romance". For simplicity's sake, I will call this Rorty's theology. Although Rorty does not make any distinctions between his theology and his philosophy, I argue that Rorty's theology can be separated from his philosophical approach to religion. In certain contexts, this distinction is useful. One such context, for example, is when we try to determine how exclusivist or inclusivist Rorty's views are when it comes to commonplace supernatural religious beliefs, such as the belief in a personal, transcendental God. In this context, it is useful to say that Rorty's theology is very much atheistic and thus exclusivist, yet his approach to religion is agnostic and thus inclusivist.

Another such context is when we try to map out Rorty's views in the broader "pragmatism vs religion" scene. How similar or different Rorty is, for example, to the classical pragmatists he publicly admires? In this chapter, in relation to this question, I will also address James' and Dewey's views on religion, two prominent figures in the history of pragmatism who have distinctively unique perspective on the matter. I will focus on these names, not only because Rorty admires them and mention them every so often, but also because they represent two different ends of a scale on which I can place Rorty in the middle. By comparing Rorty to these major pragmatic figures, I can elaborate better the unique place Rorty occupies within the philosophical tradition to which he belongs.

The picture I plan to paint here is different than another, rather common picture which tends to place Rorty and Dewey on one (atheistic) end of a scale and James on the other (theistic). Jason Boffetti, for example, groups Rorty and Dewey together in proposing "a vision for a public life" (in which democracy takes the place of religion and serves as "a metaphysics of the relation of man and his experience in nature"), while stressing the difference between Rorty and James

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I have not seen him use the phrase in print", see: Maher, C. (2012). *The Pittsburgh School of Philosophy: Sellars, McDowell, Brandom*. Routledge, p. 127.

(“neopragmatism of a Rortian stripe”, he writes, is “not to be confused with the Jamesian sort”).<sup>2</sup>

Even the more meticulous and detailed studies do tend to make similar associations. Dewey usually appears as a natural ally to Rorty while James is either presented as an opponent, or ignored as irrelevant. A good example of such a meticulous study is William R. Slater’s monograph *Pragmatism and Philosophy of Religion*.<sup>3</sup> Slater’s reading of Rorty in this book is not incorrect, but he only focuses the Deweyan strands in Rorty and thus his book paints a somewhat misleading picture about the place of Rorty in the pragmatist philosophy of religion scene. The picture I plan to paint in this chapter helps me to offer relatively subtle yet still significant modifications to Slater’s reading of Rorty.

Briefly put, in his monograph, Slater provides an in-depth analysis of how the three major classical pragmatists, Peirce, James and Dewey, understood religion and how their understandings differ from each others. In the picture Slater portrays, there are two rival versions of pragmatism: One is the atheist, naturalistic stance that “weds pragmatism to naturalism”<sup>4</sup> (naturalism being “the view that nothing of a supernatural kind exists: supernatural beings such as God, supernatural realities or places such as heaven, supernatural entities or properties of

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<sup>2</sup> Boffetti, J. (2004). How Richard Rorty Found Religion. *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*, (143), 24–31; John V. Woell also comes close to painting a picture of the latter kind when he contrasts Rorty with James. Woell writes that “one obvious feature of Rorty’s pragmatism is its strident atheism. (...) [W]hen Rorty does turn his attention to religious concerns, one is immediately struck by the stridently non-Jamesian (if not also non-Peircean and non-Deweyan) tone of his argument. He is, frankly, dismissive.” Woell does not explain further what might count as the non-Deweyan tone in Rorty’s argument. But the point here is that he clearly stresses how non-Jamesian Rorty is on religion. He argues that though “Rorty works admirably to rehabilitate” James “on so many other front”, he is simply dismissive when it comes to James’ views on religion; see: Woell, J. W. (2012). *Peirce, James, and a Pragmatic Philosophy of Religion*. Bloomsbury Publishing, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Slater, M. R. (2014). *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 1.



entities such as souls, and so on“).<sup>5</sup> And the other is the religious, pluralistic stance that “resolutely rejects such marriage”.<sup>6</sup> Of the three major classical pragmatists, Dewey represents the naturalistic version of pragmatism whereas Peirce and James represent the pluralistic version.<sup>7</sup> The book argues for the latter version against the former. Slater believes that “pluralistic pragmatism has a number of distinctive features that many theologians and religiously committed philosophers might find attractive”.<sup>8</sup>

Where I want to take issue with Slater, however, is his portrayal of Rorty as a neo-Deweyan pragmatist who belongs to the naturalistic/atheist side. I agree that Rorty is both a naturalist/atheist and a follower of Dewey in many ways. But I also think he admires and adopts various aspects of James, so much so that Rorty’s approach can also be appropriately called pluralistic still. I want to argue that Rorty is both Deweyan and Jamesian in equal measures on the subject of religion. It is entirely plausible to read Rorty as a resolutely atheist/naturalist pragmatist (like Dewey), yet offering an inclusive, pluralistic approach to religion (like James). Within the binary framework Slater’s book seem to operate this subtle yet most significant aspect of Rorty becomes invisible. Rorty appears as a rival naturalistic pragmatist to Slater because Slater encourages pluralistic pragmatism. What I find interesting is that, in the way I read Rorty, he and Slater are not rivals. Rorty can accommodate the majority of the pluralist characteristics Slater wishes to see in a pragmatist approach to religion.

To better explain how my reading of Rorty works, towards the end of this chapter, I will suggest that we make a distinction between (1) how Rorty personally sees religion and what he thinks religious belief should be like and (2) the extent his pragmatic approach allows religious believers to believe and act. For the sake of simplicity, I will call the former “Rorty’s theology” (or his “pragmatic religion”),

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<sup>5</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 5.

and the latter “Rorty’s philosophy of religion” (or his “pragmatic approach to religion”). I will argue that, thanks to this distinction, Rortian pragmatists can both talk about better and worse ways of having religious beliefs, and still be tolerant towards what they consider misguided or wrong beliefs, as long as these beliefs are politically innocuous.

Having outlined what I plan to do in the chapter, let me start with Rorty’s ideal form of religion, a religion that is both private and naturalist. I can then move on to James and Dewey in mid-chapter, only to distinguish and highlight the Jamesian and Deweyan aspects of Rorty later on. This way I can clarify my claim that Rorty is not only a neo-Deweyan naturalist as Slater suggests, but a neo-Jamesian pluralist as well.

### **3.1 Rorty’s “The Better Form Of Religion”: Romance**

As I have discussed in the last chapter, Rorty thinks a pragmatist approach to religion should first and foremost focus on the distinction between public and private, and consequently the legitimacy of private religious belief. According to Rorty, philosophy of religion cannot evaluate or judge private religious beliefs. No one has an authority on private projects except the individual herself.

In this respect, the approach Rorty suggests says very little about the content of religions and religious beliefs. It does not prescribe or promote a particular set of beliefs, nor does it provide any means by which to choose between different sets of beliefs. This makes the approach fairly limited in what it asserts, yet highly inclusive in what it accepts. This approach does not offer any judgements on private beliefs/acts save the judgement that they do not need to be justified to anyone. In this sense, it welcomes all things private. Public beliefs and acts, on the other hand, are seen as political rather than religious.

This Rortian approach to religion, then, has only two claims to make on religion:

1. People have a right to believe whatever they like as long as it is private,
2. When a religious belief ceases to be private it needs to be treated as a political belief. These two claims establishes both the core and the limits of what one may call a Rortian approach to religion.

Rorty's writings on religion, however, are not limited to construing this Rortian approach. Having established the right to private religious belief, Rorty goes on to say a bit more on the subject of religion: What would be a properly pragmatic religious belief like? His passages on this question disclose the better form of religion according to Rorty, the form of religiosity he associates with the word "romance".<sup>9</sup> This extra attempt, the attempt to reimagine the nature and the content of religious faith in a better, more pragmatic way, can be called Rorty's theology.

### 3.1.1 Religion as Romance

This notion of religiosity as romance puts the emphasis not on the subject of one's orientation, but on the orientation itself, the type of orientation it is. Rorty quotes a passage from Dorothy Allison to better illuminate what he means:

There is a place where we are always alone with our own mortality, where we must simply have something greater than ourselves to hold onto – God or history or politics or literature or a belief in the healing power of love, or even righteous anger. Sometimes I think they are all the same. A reason to believe, a way to take the world by the throat and insist that there is more to this life than we have ever imagined.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," p. 160.

<sup>10</sup> Allison, D. (1994). *Believing in Literature*. *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class and Literature*, 165–81, p. 181; via Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," p. 161; Dorothy Allison is a contemporary novelist and essayist from South Carolina. The passage above is from one of her essays called "Believing in Literature" in which she refers to her own system of belief as "a kind of atheist's religion". Rorty praises both the essay (he calls it "remarkable")

And follows it with the below commentary:

What I like best about this passage is Allison’s suggestion that all these may be the same, that it does not greatly matter whether we state our reason to believe – our insistence that some or all finite, mortal humans can be far more than they have yet become – in religious, political, philosophical, literary, sexual or familial terms. What matters is the insistence itself – the romance, the ability to experience overpowering hope, or faith, or love (or, sometimes, rage).<sup>11</sup>

Here Rorty defines “romance” as “the ability to experience overpowering hope, or faith, or love (or, sometimes, rage)” and in an earlier paragraph he describes it as “a fuzzy overlap of faith, hope and love”.<sup>12</sup> In both, he seems to be talking about something different than what traditional theism calls as “faith in God” —one may say something broader and inclusive, yet also more ambiguous and indefinite.

“Romance”, in this sense, puts the emphasis on believing in the possibility of humankind’s becoming far better than they are, and not on how’s or why’s or through-what’s of it. So long you have this romantic belief in mankind, Rorty thinks, it does not greatly matter whether you state your reasons for it in religious terms or secular terms. In other words, what is religious here in this notion of romance has nothing to do with the supernatural, it figures in human experience as something fully human. It figures as the ability to believe in the possibility of human beings to do unimaginably vast good even if one cannot provide cogent reasons to believe so.

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and the author (“I think James would have liked Allison’s pluralism” he writes). William M. Curtis goes as far to mention Allison among Rorty’s “poetic champions”, together with Whitman or Emerson; see Curtis, W. M. (2015). *Defending Rorty: Pragmatism and Liberal Virtue*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 266.

<sup>11</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 161.

<sup>12</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 160.

This is why, one might say, it is a fundamentally anti-Cliffordian attitude. The romantic belief in the future possibilities of humankind, or in the future possibilities of one's own self, has very little to do with the empirical evidence one gets from history or from the current state of things, but much to do with imagination. One can legitimately hold on to this romantic belief even in the darkest times, after a sober analysis of how things were in the past and are in the present. Since this belief is a blend of faith, hope and love, it resists to be judged and vetoed by the existing evidence.<sup>13</sup>

Rorty associates this notion of romance with a famous remark of James. James believes that there is a common and generic fact about the religious question, “[t]he fact that the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come”.<sup>14</sup> In Rorty's reading, here James is talking about our ability

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<sup>13</sup> This romantic notion, argues Nicholas Smith, carries within it a tension between Rorty's utilitarianism. Analyzing Rorty's unjustifiable religious hope, Smith writes:

It is easy to see the tension between the “romantic” elements of Rorty's pragmatism – those which, according to Rorty, enable pragmatism to satisfy the religious impulse – and the “utilitarian” elements re-emerging here. On the one hand, Rorty wants to make room for the “unjustifiable” but “glorious” hope that, for example, Christianity and Marxism helped keep alive. He wants to accommodate hope for what seems for all the world impossible, a hope that is not limited by the conceptual resources currently available to us. The realisation of such hope may involve something like world-transformation, but that doesn't mean we should give up hope for it. On the other hand, speaking as a utilitarian, he is suspicious of such hope, and warns against taking orientation from abstract hopes about the future. What matters is the here and now, and the hope that things can get better bit by bit, through small scale increases in the sum of human happiness, within the framework of the current (liberal, social democratic) standpoint of the world.” – Smith, N. H. (2005). Rorty on Religion and Hope. *Inquiry*, 48(1), 76–98, pp. 94, 95

I tend to agree Smith's analysis here, but I do not see this tension as problematic for Rorty as Smith seems to think. Seeking to keep the glorious hope that one day we can achieve something like world-transformation while at the same time being aware of the dangers of taking orientation from such abstract hopes does not strike me as necessarily an incoherent position. The hope itself may not have anything to do with the evidence, but this does not mean that romantic believer should dismiss the evidence in her course of action either. The tension is not disruptive for Rorty, on the contrary, it is constructive. It allows and encourages the hope while warning against its dangers and advising the believer to be grounded.

<sup>14</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 161; James, W. (2002). *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. London & New York: Routledge, p. 397.

to create a wider, better, potential self through imagination and hope. This wider self, in turn, positively effects and transforms our present self. He then says that it is not very important what kind of terms and metaphors we use to create and connect with this wider self, whether political, literary or credal.<sup>15</sup> What is central in the religious experience is not the tropes one uses but the very ability to feel connected to a wider self.

Having agreed with James on this, however, Rorty also thinks that it is unfortunate for James to gravitate towards the supernatural in his description of the religious hypothesis. James famously writes “the best things are the more eternal things”.<sup>16</sup> Rorty finds this comment unattractive and even problematic. He considers this Jamesian reverence to supernatural a betrayal of pragmatists’ better instincts, for it associates religion with the conviction “that a power that is not ourselves will do unimaginably vast good, rather than with the hope that we ourselves will do such good”.<sup>17</sup>

Rorty, on the other hand, thinks that the attraction of religion lies in the fact that it enables us to have faith in “the future possibilities of moral humans”.<sup>18</sup> But there is no need to associate this religious faith with supernatural powers, not anymore. He reads the history of humankind as a progressive process, a gradual success of humans to make their lives less wretched. Thanks to this progress, we no longer need to assume supernatural powers to be able to imagine a better human future. It may be that once upon a time being religious was the equivalent of being able to imagine an ideal human community. But today, Rorty argues, we do not need to look for a power that is not ourselves to create a vastly better human future, because we can imagine ourselves creating such a future.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 161.

<sup>16</sup> James, “The Will to Believe,” p. 228.

<sup>17</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 161.

<sup>18</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 160.

<sup>19</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 162.

This view of Rorty may appear reductive regarding what makes people believe in supernatural entities. It can also be seen as naively optimistic about our ability to create ideal human communities. Hence a few things need to be noted here: First is that, for our purposes, it does not matter much if Rorty is being reductive in his reading of the sources of religious faith or the psychology behind it. His central point is not exactly why religious faith exists, but that we are able to imagine an ideal human community today without needing to assume supernatural powers or entities. Even if one is not impressed with Rorty's implications about the sources and the psychology of religious faith, one can still separate his central claim from these implications and treat it independently. The central claim is that we can turn ourselves into vastly better beings without needing help from beyond this world. The plausibility of this claim does not depend on Rorty's reading of the history.

As for the criticism of Rorty's naive optimism, it may not be very accurate to call him an optimist, let alone a naive one, just because he says that humankind is a more worthy object of faith than any imagined power that is not us. It is neither naive nor necessarily optimistic, for it does not say that this faith will certainly prevail. It just says that having such faith in humankind allow us to create a wider self for ourselves and connect with it in an existentially significant sense. This, in itself, is somewhat a religious experience and can have important moral outcomes.

Rorty, however, also recognizes the moods in which one craves confirmation. In such moods one can seek to prove that one's faith, hope, and love is indeed put in the right place. In James' terminology the beliefs that associate to such moods are called "over-beliefs". Over-beliefs, James says, are "the most interesting and valuable things about a man".<sup>20</sup> They are "essential to individual's religion" and are "absolutely indispensable".<sup>21</sup> It is not surprising, then, people may hanker for confirmation that their over-beliefs are indeed correct.

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<sup>20</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 397.

<sup>21</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 397.

Rorty thinks James fluctuated between two moods in his works. When he is at his best, he talked about God “as a perhaps obsolete name for a possible human nature”.<sup>22</sup> At those times, what James says about religion is perfectly compatible with the things Rorty says about romance. At other times, when he sought confirmation, “he [was] driven to adopt the ‘religious hypothesis’ that somewhere, somehow, perfection is eternal, and to identify ‘the notion of God’ with the ‘guarantee’ of ‘an ideal order that shall be permanently perserved’.”<sup>23</sup>

Rorty thinks we all fluctuate between such states of mind, atheists and theists alike. We fluctuate between the two kinds of moods:

1. The moods in which we are “content with utility”,
2. The moods in which we “hanker after validity”.<sup>24</sup>

He thinks it is unfortunate for us to give rein to illusions of external guarantors, supernatural powers that will warrant us what we cannot warrant for ourselves, when trying to cope with the latter moods. Looking for such external guarantors is a mistake pragmatists should avoid, for the mere reason that due to our being the limited beings we are, we are in no state to find such guarantors. Anything offered for such role will be deemed to be only an illusion.

But even after admitting the futility of looking for external guarantors, pragmatists are presented with two attitudes when it comes to God:

Those who, like Dewey, would like to link their days each to each by transmuting their early religious belief into a belief in the human future, come to think of God as Friend rather than as Judge and Saviour. Those who, like me, were raised atheist and now find it merely confusing to talk about God, nevertheless fluctuate between moods in which

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<sup>22</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 163.

<sup>23</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 163.

<sup>24</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 163.



we are content with utility and moods in which we hanker after validity as well. So we waver between what I have called 'romance' and needy, chastened humility.<sup>25</sup>

The former, Deweyan attitude, may still find some use for the religious vocabulary, while the latter, Rortian attitude, does not. In other passages, Rorty even actively encourages one to drop religious terminology, especially in public, not only because he finds it confusing, but also because he is afraid it may give "aid and comfort to ecclesiastical organizations, and thus to religious exclusivism".<sup>26</sup> Emptied of religious terminology, Rorty's pragmatic religion does not resemble a religion at all. It becomes a private romance. Rorty however does not leave the subject here. He has a few more exploratory thoughts on pragmatic theism.

### 3.1.2 Pragmatic Theism

Contrary to what it may seem, in a notably interesting passage, Rorty denies that pragmatists are instrumentalists about God. He argues that pragmatic theists' belief in the existence of God is real and genuine. On this, he writes:

Pragmatist theists are not anthropocentrists, in the sense of believing that God is a 'mere posit'. They believe that God is as real as sense impressions, tables, quarks and human rights. But, they add, stories about our relations to God do not necessarily run athwart the stories of our relations to these other things.<sup>27</sup>

The last sentence of the quoted passage, however, draws a limit to what pragmatic theists can sensibly believe. And many conventional beliefs which are accepted as fundamental in the orthodox traditions of major religions do not fall

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<sup>25</sup> Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," p. 163.

<sup>26</sup> Rorty, "Anticlericalism and Atheism," p. 142.

<sup>27</sup> Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," p. 156.

within these limits. Among the beliefs pragmatist theists have to get along without, he mentions a few orthodox beliefs, such as “personal immortality, providential intervention, the efficacy of sacraments, the Virgin Birth, the Risen Christ, the Covenant with Abraham, the authority of the Koran”.<sup>28</sup> Or, he says, “if they want them, they will have to interpret them ‘symbolically’ (...) for they must prevent them from providing premises for practical reasoning.”<sup>29</sup>

Unfortunately, however, he does not explain in detail why that has to be so. Why cannot pragmatists sensibly believe the risen Christ, for example? Why does he say that pragmatist theists must prevent their religious beliefs from providing premises for practical reasoning?

Rorty’s reasoning here is made more clear by his following remark: “whatever theism is good for, it is not a device for predicting or controlling our environment”.<sup>30</sup> The word choices in this sentence immediately remind the reader of what Rorty says about science: Science “enables us to predict and control”,<sup>31</sup> its purpose is “predicting and controlling phenomena”.<sup>32</sup> What Rorty comes to say then, is religion should not attempt to replace science. The core reason why science and religion should be kept separate is because one is a public project and the other is private. Science is in the service of the public and religion is in the service of the individual. The beliefs cited above are violations of the line between the two. They are attempts to influence public projects with private unjustified beliefs and thus they are unacceptable.

“On a pragmatist account”, says Rorty, “scientific inquiry is best viewed as the attempt to find a single, unified, coherent description of the world — the description which makes it easiest to predict the consequences of events and actions, and

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<sup>28</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 156.

<sup>29</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 156.

<sup>30</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 156.

<sup>31</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 153.

<sup>32</sup> Rorty, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre,” p. 100.

thus easiest to gratify certain human desires.”<sup>33</sup> When scientific inquiry viewed this way, it can be understood why claiming the literal truth of risen Christ would be problematic for a pragmatist. “The literal truth” then equates here to “the scientific truth”, because, taken literally, the belief in the risen Christ turns out to be a part of a bigger project in describing how things work in our environment. And thus, it falls within the jurisdiction of a major human project we call science. Scientific truths, however, are established collaboratively and through justification. By assigning a literal/scientific truth to an unjustified religious belief that contradicts scientific data, one violates the rules of a project one wants to take part in.

The equation of literal truth with scientific truth seems to be the reason why Rorty is adamant in disapproving of certain traditional religious beliefs. But is there a way to argue against such an equation? Is it not possible for one to be fully in accord with science on, say, how our metabolisms work, on homeostasis, on the definition and description of death etc., but still believe, for example, in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead? I am not only talking about psychological possibility here but also the logical compatibility of these two beliefs: is there a possible way for one to believe both the scientific account of how things work and the literal truth of, say, miracles, without contradicting oneself?

One apparent way to make them compatible with each other is demythologizing religious beliefs. Rorty seems to think it is the only way. He is well aware that many traditional believers will find it disingenuous, but he believes it is “a small price to pay for insulating these doctrines from ‘scientific’ criticism”.<sup>34</sup> In other words, where many religious believers see trivialization of religious beliefs Rorty sees a necessary and small compromise. The question turns out to be, then, is it really necessary to make this compromise? To Rorty, it seems necessary. The religious belief is either taken literally or metaphorically. If the former, it becomes a contender in the realm of science, a claim to knowledge. When a religious belief is

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<sup>33</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 149.

<sup>34</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 156.

dressed as a scientific claim, it endangers the collective public project of science by undermining its aim and function (“predicting and controlling our environment”). It also violates the justificatory processes through which “knowledge” is produced. But what if one can find ways to separate his religious beliefs from the scientific body of knowledge without giving up on those beliefs’ literal truth? What if, for example, she says something like the following on the resurrection of Jesus:

Though I do not think the resurrection of Jesus is knowledge in the scientific sense, I still believe that this was the case. Yet because it is my own personal (that is, private) belief, I do not expect it to influence public projects in any significant way. I do not wish for it to be taken either as a premise to a scientific inquiry or as a scientific theorem to be proven. Science is a humble project with its limitations, and I believe the subject of my faith falls outside of its current limits. I do agree with everything science says on how life and death works, and take it as the best explanation we currently have. But I also think Jesus’ case was an exception to the rule, as miracles typically are.

In this example, the religious believer does not demythologize her beliefs. What she says is not apparently contradictory either. And most importantly, she does not attempt to interfere in a public project with her private beliefs. For a Rortian pragmatist, it should not be of particular importance if her beliefs are convincing or totally sound, as these beliefs are her own. It only matters if they violate the Rortian private-public distinction. Here in this example they do not.

Rorty’s disapproval is directed to the religious believers who attempt to take part in public projects illegitimately with their unjustified beliefs. Such attempts do not only violate the engagement conditions for these projects, but also characteristically made in bad faith. An example would be creationist science. Rorty thinks creationist science is bad science because it subordinates very widespread human desires (such as being able to guess how our environment will react to our actions) to other, less widespread desires (such as converting more people into

a certain worldview and lifestyle).<sup>35</sup> So, to a pragmatist theist, making scientific claims based on religious beliefs is equivalent to unfairly hijacking a public project, and thus unacceptable. Rorty's initial remarks on the incompatibility of certain religious doctrines with pragmatic theism can be interpreted and reconstrued along these lines.

But even so, Rorty's claim that pragmatist theists either "have to get along without" such doctrines or "have to interpret them symbolically"<sup>36</sup> is still problematic. He seems to imply that the belief in the literal reality of such doctrines is a form of religious fundamentalism.<sup>37</sup> He claims that this religious fundamentalism is of a piece with scientific realism. They are both "attempts to make one's own private way of giving meaning to one's own life - a way which romanticizes one's relation to something starkly and magnificently nonhuman, something Ultimately True and Real - obligatory for the general public".<sup>38</sup> He disapproves both views.

But it is difficult to see why Rorty makes these implications and claims. He does not provide enough reasons for them. He also misses the fact that religious people who believes in the literal truth of such doctrines do not necessarily have to make knowledge claims out of their beliefs. As exemplified in the hypothetical scenario above, it is possible, both psychologically and logically, to believe in the literal truth of many such religious doctrines while admitting their irrelevance to science. It appears as if Rorty is trying to do two conflicting things: He wants to make religion private. But he also wants to tell people what is acceptable to believe in private and what is not. This is, of course, problematic. The reason why he does so, I want to argue, is because he is torn between two tendencies, two strands of thought, two different approaches: A libertarian approach aiming to defend the legitimacy and immunity of all kinds of private religious beliefs including mystical/supernatural ones, and a naturalist approach seeking to discredit all

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<sup>35</sup> Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," p. 149.

<sup>36</sup> Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," p. 156.

<sup>37</sup> Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," p. 157.

<sup>38</sup> Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," p. 156.

mystical/supernaturalist interpretations of religious beliefs. I propose to call the former “Jamesian” and the latter “Deweyan”.

In the following sections I will explore where Rorty stands in comparison to William James and John Dewey, mainly to shed more light on the mentioned strands in Rorty’s thinking but also to show how his approach shares similarities and differences with that of these two canonical pragmatic philosophers. I will first focus on James, and then Dewey, only to come back to Rorty again at the end of the chapter for a final analysis.

### **3.2 William James: Pluralist in Public, Supernaturalist in Private**

In a similar fashion to what I have been saying about Rorty above, in the following few pages I want to make a distinction between what James thinks a proper study of religion should be like and what he personally believes about the existence of God and heavens etc. Relying on this distinction, I want to argue that Rorty and James share a lot of similarities in their approaches to religion. Though James is a theist and Rorty an atheist, and thus they differ in their personal religious beliefs, they mostly agree on how the matters of religion should be handled when they are subjected to the public inquiries or discussions. It might be argued that James defends an objective science of religion and Rorty criticizes any attempt to bring religion and science together, thus they must have opposing views, but I would be hesitant to agree with this argument. James’ efforts were indeed aimed to make the study of religion as objective and scientific as possible, but it is safe to assume that he would also protest against the creationist science, for example, and would scorn on the idea that religion should inform science, as much as Rorty does.

In the next four sections then, I will portray and briefly discuss the most characteristic features of James’ approach to religion. For this, I will follow Slater in referring to three key dichotomies: “Pluralism versus Essentialism”, “Anti-Intellectualism versus Intellectualism” and “Supernaturalism versus Naturalism”. I will argue that James thinks a proper study of religion should be pluralist and

anti-intellectualist, but he does not take a decisive stand on the last dichotomy. The decision to choose between supernaturalism and naturalism, James maintains, is up to people's own individual inclinations and choices. And in relation to these three key dichotomies, Rorty is a faithful successor of James: He is also pluralist and anti-essentialist, and though Rorty himself is a strict naturalist, his approach allows people to believe in the supernatural in private. In that respect, my approach differs from that of Slater who portrays Rorty and James as opposing figures.

### 3.2.1 Why Be A Pluralist (1): The Importance of the Religious Feeling

Central to James' pluralism is his uncompromising rejection of essentialist and *sui generis* conceptions of religion. Slater defines essentialism as "the view that it is possible to specify the necessary and sufficient conditions for the proper application of the concept of religion". *Sui generis* view of religion, on the other hand, is "the view that religion is uniquely different from other human phenomena and requires its own distinctive methods of inquiry".<sup>39</sup> These two views are mostly intertwined: Essentialism usually implies a *sui generis* view of religion and vice versa.

James rejects essentialism, saying it is "foolish to set up an abstract definition of religion's essence, and then proceed to defend that definition against all comers".<sup>40</sup> He says, in the beginning of "Lecture II" of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, "the very fact that [definitions of the essence of religion] are so many and so different from one another is enough to prove that the word "religion" cannot stand for any single principle or essence, but is rather a collective name".<sup>41</sup> To him, this urge to find one single essence for all phenomena associated with religion stems from the theorizing mind's tendency toward oversimplification. It

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<sup>39</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 15.

<sup>40</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 27.

<sup>41</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 26.

is this tendency that leads to absolutism and the one-sided dogmatism with which James thinks both philosophy and religion is infested.<sup>42</sup> One who knows better resists this tendency. Instead of looking for a definition to capture the essence of religion, she enjoys an intimate acquaintance with all the particularities of different religious phenomena in turn. As a result, she “would naturally regard an abstract conception in which these were unified as a thing more misleading than enlightening”.<sup>43</sup>

Because the phenomena of religion are too complex and variable to be defined once and for all, James suggests we should instead turn to arbitrary, context-dependant definitions for the purpose of the inquiry at hand.<sup>44</sup> And then he gives his own arbitrary definition for the purpose of his inquiry into religion:

[T]he feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.<sup>45</sup>

This definition puts the individual in the centre —arbitrarily, one might add, and defines religion around her. But it does not mean, for example, that James thinks the social aspects of religion or theologies behind particular religions are irrelevant. The arbitrariness here only implies that “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men” is where he prefers to focus his attention and how he wants to narrow his inquiry.

James also rejects *sui generis* views of the concept of religion. He sees religious phenomena as “at once continuous with other human phenomena and capable of being investigated using the empirical methods of the natural and human sciences”.<sup>46</sup> For James, there is no reason to assume the existence of a specific kind

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<sup>42</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 26.

<sup>43</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 26.

<sup>44</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 28.

<sup>45</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 29, 30.

<sup>46</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 15, 16.



of religious sentiment that is fundamentally different than all other human sentiments. “There is religious fear, religious love, religious awe, religious joy, and so forth.” He writes,

[R]eligious love is only man’s natural emotion of love directed to a religious object; religious fear is only the ordinary fear of commerce, so to speak, the common quaking of the human breast, in so far as the notion of divine retribution may arouse it; religious awe is the same organic thrill which we feel in a forest at twilight, or in a mountain gorge; only this time it comes over us at the thought of our supernatural relations; and similarly of all the various sentiments which may be called into play in the lives of religious persons. As concrete states of mind, made up of a feeling plus a specific sort of object, religious emotions of course are psychic entities distinguishable from other concrete emotions; but there is no ground for assuming a simple abstract “religious emotion” to exist as a distinct elementary mental affection by itself, present in every religious experience without exception.<sup>47</sup>

Religion, according to James, is rooted in the individual and her feelings, acts and experiences. This is why he thinks an appropriate and fruitful study of religion should revolve around the psychology of the religious believer. Slater calls this view “an individualist view of religion.”<sup>48</sup> James, however, does not reject what is beyond the individual experience. He only says that whatever the religious question is, for it to be fairly and objectively discussed, the inquiry should start from the individual. Rorty echoes this Jamesian concern with the individual when he sees religion primarily a private project. Very much like James, Rorty also does not deny the social aspects of religion, but he thinks if we were to inquire into religious beliefs, our inquiry should start from the fact that religion is primarily a personal, private search for meaning.

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<sup>47</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 27.

<sup>48</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 21.

Slater analyzes the different senses James defends the individualist view of religion and sums them up in four claims. Two of these claims are particularly relevant:

1. Religious doctrines or “formulas” (as well as such enterprises as philosophical theology and the development of religious philosophies) depend upon religious feeling, insofar as there would be no *motive* for developing such doctrines or formulas in the absence of such feelings.
2. Intellectual operations in religion, such as the formulation of doctrines and religious philosophies, depend upon religious feeling or direct religious experience for their *basic subject matter*; they are “over-beliefs, buildings-out performed by the intellect into directions of which feeling originally supplied the hint”.<sup>49</sup>

Both of these claims explain how, for James, the religious feeling occupy the most fundamental place in the phenomena of religion. Without the feeling to motivate the individual, religious beliefs would not come to exist. In the light of such individualism then, it would not be far from James’ spirit to even say that the truth of the religious doctrines can only play a secondary role to the individual religious feeling. And this assessment too would be very much in line with the Rortian approach to religion.

### **3.2.2 Why Be A Pluralist (2): The Indeterminacy of the Religious Truth**

Contributing to James’ individualism is also his anti-intellectualism. This anti-intellectualism, as Slater correctly points out, is not hostility against intellect/reason, but rather a reactive approach which promotes caution about the limits of reason. It is a reaction to the intellectualism, which James finds guilty of

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<sup>49</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 21.

overplaying the value and functions of so-called pure reason.<sup>50</sup>In contrast, his anti-intellectualism draws attention to the place of emotions/feelings in our reasoning and the hybrid nature of our rational thinking.

I assume the reader should already be familiar enough with the outlines of James' anti-intellectualism at this point. The argument behind it is explained in James' masterpiece article "The Will to Believe" and I have discussed it in the previous chapter in sufficient depth. In the following, I will seek to add more flesh to what has already been presented earlier.

### **The Collaboration of Reason and Intuitions in Religious Matters**

Remember the basic premise in James' defense of religious faith: the faculty of reason cannot always be neatly detached from intuitions and expected to work free from their influence. Making a clear-cut distinction between our intellectual nature and our passionate nature and asking us to let the former reign over the latter is ill-judged and misleading. It is neither in conformity with actual human psychology nor delivers its promise of getting closer to the truth of matters.

In *The Varieties*, James says that when we are convinced of a belief, it is not only because we are presented with good reasons for it, but also, and maybe more so, because our intuitions so far have already prepared us to be convinced of that belief. Intellectualism is superficial in that it assumes intuitions and feelings are irrelevant to rational thinking. On this, James writes:

If you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level which rationalism inhabits. Your whole subconscious life, your impulses, your faiths, your needs, your divinations, have prepared the premises, of which your consciousness now feels the weight of the result; and something in you absolutely knows

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<sup>50</sup> Woell, in his *Peirce, James, and a Pragmatic Philosophy of Religion* provides an account of James' anti-intellectualism via James' "philosophical critique of Kant". He argues that James meant this critique to be used "in the larger context of denying "the mere conceptual logic can tell us what is impossible or possible in the world of being or fact" "; see: Woell, *Peirce, James, and a Pragmatic Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 98–100.

that that result must be truer than any logic-chopping rationalistic talk, however clever, that may contradict it.<sup>51</sup>

The way our intellectual and passional natures are intertwined is particularly relevant when it comes to the matters of religion and our beliefs about metaphysical realms and entities:

This inferiority of the rationalistic level in founding belief is just as manifest when rationalism argues for religion as when it argues against it. That vast literature of proofs of God's existence drawn from the order of nature, which a century ago seemed so overwhelmingly convincing, today does little more than gather dust in libraries, for the simple reason that our generation has ceased to believe in the kind of God it argued for.<sup>52</sup>

And thus, James comes to the conclusion that:

In the metaphysical and religious sphere, articulate reasons are cogent for us only when our inarticulate feelings of reality have already been impressed in favor of the same conclusion. Then, indeed, our intuitions and our reason work together (...) Instinct leads, intelligence does but follow. If a person feels the presence of a living God after the fashion shown by my quotations, your critical arguments, be they never so superior, will vainly set themselves to change his faith.<sup>53</sup>

James' account here seems thoroughly descriptive. Yet it does more than describe how human psychology works. It also implies that because human psychol-

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<sup>51</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 62.

<sup>52</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 62.

<sup>53</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 62.

ogy works the way it works, intellectualist approaches are bound to fail in both understanding and evaluating the phenomena of religion. The futility of intellectualism, according to James, is pertinent for both of the opposing camps; for both atheism and theism. Neither the naturalist theories of religion can decisively argue against the existence of God nor can the natural theologies prove it.

### **Problems for Intellectualist Arguments for Atheism**

A salient example of intellectualism is naturalism with regard to religion. The naturalist theories deny the existence of any kind of supernatural entities and explain the phenomena of religion through purely natural causes. James, to my knowledge, neither sets to work to disprove them nor fully ignores them. He argues against their being presented as one true explanation about the truth of religion. He is more concerned by their intellectualism than their naturalism.

Naturalism cannot have the final word on the matter, James argues, because naturalist theories of religion are not as robust and decisive as they are taken to be. They tend to assume from the outset that religion must be explained in fully natural terms for the explanation to be philosophically and scientifically valid. This, however, only begs the question. Methodological naturalism leads to ontological naturalism, precisely because it dogmatically assumes the claim that “religion has purely natural causes” in the first place.<sup>54</sup> For all intents and purposes, the foundational assumptions naturalist theories typically make are far from being purely intellectual. But they nevertheless operate presuming the truth of intellectualism.

Now it should be noted that James himself is a proud proponent of using empirical methods and “the empiricist way of believing”.<sup>55</sup> But he also thinks that there are not, and can never be, empirical evidence to prove or disprove the existence of supernatural entities, or “an unseen order”.<sup>56</sup> On this, Slater writes:

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<sup>54</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 27.

<sup>55</sup> James, “The Will to Believe,” p. 220.

<sup>56</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 46.

[S]cientific theories of religion and the various causal mechanisms they hypothesize are, at bottom, guesses based on a limited body of evidence, which inevitably reflect metaphysical assumptions about the nature of religion that are ultimately unverifiable on empirical grounds. Such theories have their place on James's view, but we should not expect them to explain religion in any exhaustive way or to resolve the "big" metaphysical questions surrounding this important area of human experience.<sup>57</sup>

The conclusion to draw, then, is that it is impossible to decisively determine the truth of either theism or atheism.<sup>58</sup> It seems to me that this is not a radical position. One does not need to be a relativist, or even a pragmatist, to agree with James' anti-intellectualism regarding to religious matters. A simple principle of fallibility together with the lack of sound empirical evidence would constitute a strong enough ground to hold this position.

### **Problems for Intellectualist Arguments for Theism**

James' approach to intellectualist theistic arguments resembles very much his approach to intellectualist atheistic arguments: These arguments do have their place in understanding, interpreting and challenging our views on religion, but they fail to serve as final, decisive explanations. Take, for example, perhaps the most prominent instance of intellectualism in the history of theistic arguments: classical natural theology. James is not against the very act of providing rational support for the belief in God, but he still criticizes classical natural theology because of its intellectualist pretensions.

The problematic premise behind this theology is familiar: "[R]eason can be used to settle the questions of faith in an objective and definitive manner with-

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<sup>57</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 30.

<sup>58</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 378–379.

out assuming any religious or irreligious commitments in advance”.<sup>59</sup> What draws theist intellectuals to this premise is, of course, the intellectualist demand that religious believers should provide justification for their beliefs in a universally accessible and convincing way. “This”, however, “is a burden the religious believer cannot and need not satisfy”. Slater writes:

[C]annot, because in point of fact no theological argument or system has ever done so, and nor is there any good reason to think that the future will produce different results, given the diversity of views that human beings hold on religious matters and the tenacity with which they frequently hold them, and need not, since not everyone feels the force of this demand or is inclined to recognize it as binding.<sup>60</sup>

Slater here not only explains James’ reasoning, but also agrees with him. What is worth noting, however, is that this is exactly the same reasoning Rorty promotes in his approach. All three intellectuals agree that it is not only problematic but also ineffective to claim the final word on religious matters by compelling intellectual assent or providing coercive reasoning. Intellectualism is futile because religious beliefs are not ultimately grounded in reason but in religious feeling.<sup>61</sup>

The motivations behind James’ pluralism, then, can be summarized in two claims:

1. Religion is primarily a matter of the heart and the will.
2. Intellectual operations have their place in religious inquiry, but this place is limited to providing rational support for religious beliefs or criticism against them. Intellectual arguments cannot decisively justify or disprove people’s faith.

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<sup>59</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 66.

<sup>60</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 64–64; when interpreting James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 337–338.

<sup>61</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 76.

One of Rorty's favourite analogies, the analogy between religion and love, is made by James to underline the idea that in the field of religion reason only plays a secondary role to intuitions and feelings:

I believe, in fact, that the logical reason of man operates in this field of divinity exactly as it has always operated in love, or in patriotism, or in politics, or in any other of the wider affairs of life, in which our passions or our mystical intuitions fix our beliefs beforehand. It finds arguments for our conviction, for indeed it has to find them. It amplifies and defines our faith, and dignifies it and lends it words and plausibility. It hardly engenders it; it cannot now secure it.<sup>62</sup>

This is why, for James, the religious believer is not under any intellectual obligation to justify her beliefs through coercive reasoning and/or compelling evidence: "The possible truth of religious beliefs (presumably in conjunction with their demonstrated pragmatic value for how we live and how we make sense of the world and human existence) is sufficient to justify them".<sup>63</sup> Following this Jamesian line of thinking, Rorty concludes that religion then should necessarily be privatized. If religious truth cannot and need not be justified, then it also cannot and need not have any place in public projects.

### **The Nature and Value of Mystical/Religious Experience**

Important to note here is that James did not propose to replace the intellectualist's "reason" with "religious experience" as some of his Christian apologist successors, most famously William P. Alston,<sup>64</sup> did. Contrary to Alston, James did not think religious experience had much epistemic value except for the individual herself.

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<sup>62</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 337–338.

<sup>63</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 55.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example: Alston, W. P. (1993). *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.



James describes religious experiences, or as he puts it “mystical states”, as “excitements like the emotions of love or ambition, gifts to our spirit by means of which facts already objectively before us fall into a new expressiveness and make a new connection with our active life.”<sup>65</sup> These excitements, however, do not overwrite, contradict or deny the sense data. For James, they are not alternative ways to acquire information about the world, but their existence helps “to overthrow the pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate dictators of what we may believe”.<sup>66</sup> They inject an element of subjectivity to an otherwise objective experience. The upshot of this argument, then, is that such religious experiences are eventually only individual “excitements”. They serve an important role for the individual herself, but are totally without merit as evidence in an argument. James writes:

[M]ystics have no right to claim that we ought to accept the deliverance of their peculiar experiences, if we are ourselves outsiders and feel no private call thereto. The utmost they can ever ask of us in this life is to admit that they establish a presumption.<sup>67</sup>

His denial of the epistemic validity of religious experience in public discussions differs James from his Christian apologist successors, such as the reformed epistemologists. His acceptance of its epistemic value in personal/individual level, on the other hand, distinguishes him from the rationalist critics of mysticism, such as the new atheists. This, I believe, is yet again a noteworthy similarity between Rorty and James, as we will see in Chapter 6.

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<sup>65</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 331.

<sup>66</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 331.

<sup>67</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 328.

### 3.2.3 Supernaturalism Over Naturalism: A Private Choice

Where James stands in the first two dichotomies is very clear: He argues for pluralism against essentialism, and anti-intellectualism against intellectualism. And he does so by arguing that there are compelling philosophical/pragmatic reasons for both pluralism and anti-essentialism. Or to put it even more accurately, he argues that there are significant and fundamental problems with essentialism and intellectualism. When one recognizes these problems, one figures that they are not feasible and opts for pluralism and anti-intellectualism instead. In this respect, James' stance in the third dichotomy, supernaturalism versus naturalism, is slightly different. He "undoubtedly" favours supernaturalism over naturalism and even argues for its credibility,<sup>68</sup> yet he does not think that there are decisive or compelling reasons for everyone to adopt supernaturalism. He admits that naturalism may as well be equally convincing for some other people as supernaturalism is highly convincing for him. This is because they are both over-beliefs. James believes that there exists an unseen, metaphysical order. He does not shy away from discussing the plausibility and the cogency of his position either. Yet at the same time, he also admits he is only offering his own over-belief and it may appear "a sorry under-belief" to many.<sup>69</sup>

In a rather stronger claim, however, Slater argues that James "makes clear toward the end of *Varieties*, being a religious person in a practically meaningful sense entails belief in a really existent unseen order, one that produces real effects in the world and in the lives of human beings".<sup>70</sup> This is a significant claim indeed, for if that is the case, then James must be arguing, contra Dewey and contra Rorty, that there cannot be a naturalist religion in a practically meaningful sense. This, I believe, is a more radical position than James actually holds.

Unfortunately Slater does not argue for this claim but only mentions it in passing. He finds it sufficient to broadly refer to two passages: the end of *Varieties*

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<sup>68</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 401.

<sup>69</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 397.

<sup>70</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 25.

and the end of *Pragmatism*.<sup>71</sup> As far as I can see, however, the passages he refers to do not necessarily support his claim.

In the end of *Varieties* James explains in detail how a belief in a really existent unseen order can produce practically meaningful, real effects in the life of a religious person. Yet he does not argue the belief in supernatural is *the necessary condition* for such practically meaningful effects to come about. I fail to see why Slater thinks this passage necessarily excludes naturalists from the possibility of being a religious person in a practically meaningful sense.<sup>72</sup> James was not particularly concerned bringing in naturalism and religion together harmoniously, so he did not discuss if religion can achieve the same meaningful effects without a belief in supernatural. This passage promotes the belief in supernatural, that is correct, but it is not necessarily an argument against naturalism.

Similarly, at the end of *Pragmatism*, James writes on how pragmatism allows a pluralistic and moralistic religion with a belief in superhuman God. Here again I fail to see how these passages support Slater's stronger claim, since James does not argue that belief in a supernatural order is necessary for a practically meaningful religiosity.<sup>73</sup> If anything, the passage is a praise for supernaturalism, not a repudiation of naturalism. That is to say, Slater's stronger claim is not justified by the primary texts he refers to. If this claim is to have any merit, Slater needs to refer to a passage where James actively argues against the possibility of a practically meaningful naturalist religion.

On the other hand, Slater agrees that both naturalism and supernaturalism are over-beliefs for James, and thus "there is insufficient evidence to determine

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<sup>71</sup> Slater does not give any references to his other publications where he might have argued his case in more detail. I have also examined his monograph on James, *William James on Ethics and Faith*, but I did not come across a more detailed discussion of this claim there either; see: Slater, M. R. (2009). *William James on Ethics and Faith*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>72</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 395–400.

<sup>73</sup> James, W. (1975). *Pragmatism*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, pp. 143–146.

[their] truth (in a neutral, non-question-begging sort of way)".<sup>74</sup> "Overbeliefs", writes Slater, "have their basis not in something impersonal such as objective evidence or universal reason but rather in human temperaments, of which they are expressions".<sup>75</sup> If that is the case, it is more reasonable to assume that James was very much aware that his preference for supernatural was his personal over-belief, and not universalisable. In the absence of textual support for Slater's stronger claim, I do not see why James would argue only supernatural beliefs can produce a meaningful practical effects in religious peoples' life. To me, such a claim does not seem in the spirit of James.

It is still true, however, James places an overwhelming significance on the belief in supernatural. To him, what really matters in our lives is the supernatural ("the best things are the more eternal things")<sup>76</sup>, the metaphysical, the unseen order that really exists. This creates a mild tension between James' supernaturalism and his pluralism. To resolve this tension, James makes a distinction between one's own overbeliefs and the scientific assumptions one can legitimately make when studying religion. To put it in Rortian terminology, he chooses to be a supernaturalist in private and a pluralist in public.

### 3.2.4 Merits of James' Approach To Religion

There apparently are some commendable features in James' approach to religion, some merits which make it more appealing than many of its alternatives. In the context of this chapter, two of them come to the front:

1. James does not decide between the existence and non-existence of a metaphysical, unseen order from the outset.<sup>77</sup> His pragmatist, psychological ap-

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<sup>74</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 395–400.

<sup>75</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 395–400.

<sup>76</sup> James, "The Will to Believe," p. 228.

<sup>77</sup> This position is also in line with James' "corridor in a hotel" metaphor for pragmatism:

proach leaves the question of what exists open,<sup>78</sup> neither proving nor disproving either of the opposing naturalist and supernaturalist assumptions about God's existence.

2. James has a self-critical stance towards the very enterprise of explaining religion. His reflections on religion are always marked by the awareness that "our views concerning religion inevitably reflect particular preferences and biases on our part and always depend on particular normative, methodological, and metaphysical background assumptions that inform the conclusions we arrive at".<sup>79</sup> This awareness, in turn, makes his views on the relevant matters significantly impartial, unbiased and open-minded. The consequent pluralism of this attitude allows many different, and even opposing, religious positions to be able to relate to James' views and find him persuasive.

Both of these Jamesian attitudes have their echoes in Rorty too, though sometimes with slight modifications.

### 3.3 John Dewey: Naturalist in Public, Naturalist in Private

Dewey's account of religion, on the other hand, is significantly different than that of James', or any of his predecessors for that matter. Some of his signature intellectual

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"it lies in the midst of our theories, like a corridor in a hotel. In one you may find a man writing an atheistic volume; in the next someone on his knees praying for faith and strength"; see: James, *Pragmatism*, p. 32.

<sup>78</sup> I believe Woell makes a similar point when he remarks that "James does not see pragmatism as entailing a metaphysical view". He then goes on to say that James "does see certain metaphysical views as being better suited to pragmatism". In these remarks, however, Woell's context is not religion (it is radical empiricism). Thus he does not discuss if James sees supernaturalism better suited to pragmatism. I do not know if anyone makes that argument. But Woell makes it clear that even if that would be James' view, James still would hold that one can remain a pragmatist while rejecting the metaphysical view at question (in our context, supernaturalism); see: Woell, *Peirce, James, and a Pragmatic Philosophy of Religion*, p. 135.

<sup>79</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 34.

moves, such as his distinction between religions and “the religious”, are so peculiar and idiosyncratic so that he was no stranger to the accusations of obfuscation, misinformation, ignorance etc. Willard E. Arnett, for example, writes that Dewey (1) mistakes religion with ethics,<sup>80</sup>(2) misrepresents his own position,<sup>81</sup> and (3) dodges the real contemporary questions. Arnett is thus tempted to accuse Dewey of engaging in “strategic obfuscation”.<sup>82</sup>

My intention in the following pages, however, is not to defend Dewey, but simply to provide an exposition of his views so that I can draw comparisons between James, Rorty and Dewey. As mentioned earlier, Slater portrays Rorty’s account of religion as “neo-Deweyan”.<sup>83</sup> This exposition will also help me to clarify why I think Rorty’s theology may indeed be mostly “neo-Deweyan”, but that is not necessarily the case for his philosophical approach to religion.

### 3.3.1 A Common Faith: Naturalism for Everyone

Slater thinks the following three terms outline Dewey’s approach to religion the best: “Naturalism”, “Secularism” and “Accommodationism”. These three commitments make up the constitutive elements in his uniquely Deweyan approach.

Naturalism in Dewey takes the shape of “ontological naturalism”, in that it denies the existence of any supernatural entities.<sup>84</sup> Hence it appears as a metaphysical doctrine in itself and not just a methodological restriction. Dewey simply

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<sup>80</sup> Arnett, W. E. (1954). Critique of Dewey’s Anticlerical Religious Philosophy. *The University of Chicago Press*, 34(4), 256–266, p. 257.

<sup>81</sup> “Dewey failed to understand even one side of religion: he was and remained ... an “incorrigible moralist” all his life”; see: Arnett, “Critique of Dewey’s Anticlerical Religious Philosophy,” p. 257.

<sup>82</sup> “Dewey cannot correctly be called a religious man, unless religion is defined so broadly as to become almost meaningless”; see: Arnett, “Critique of Dewey’s Anticlerical Religious Philosophy,” p. 258.

<sup>83</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 131–153.

<sup>84</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 109.

believes we should give up on all our supernatural beliefs and replace them with their secular versions. Contra James (and contra Rorty), Dewey is a naturalist in public as well as in private, in that there is no legitimate place for supernatural religious beliefs in Dewey's pragmatism.

His secularism, on the other hand, is inseparably linked to his idiosyncratic distinction between "the religious" and "religion". The latter term, religion, refers to particular bodies of religious beliefs, institutions and practices. This is the same with what common people understand from religion: Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism... But the former term, "the religious", has almost nothing to do with these religions. It is not a particular belief or a common practice all these religions share, but rather a particular quality in the individual's experience. On this, Dewey writes:

To be somewhat more explicit, a religion (and as I have just said there is no such thing as religion in general) always signifies a special body of beliefs and practices having some kind of institutional organization, loose or tight. In contrast, the adjective "religious" denotes nothing in the way of a specifiable entity, either institutional or as a system of beliefs. It does not denote anything to which one can specifically point as one can point to this and that historic religion or existing church. For it does not denote anything that can exist by itself or that can be organized into a particular and distinctive form of existence. It denotes attitudes that may be taken toward every object and every proposed end or ideal.<sup>85</sup>

It is worth repeating here that Dewey does not think of "the religious" as a distinct kind of experience. That is to say, the religious experience, for him, is not necessarily marked off from aesthetic, politic, moral, and scientific etc. experiences. "But "religious" as a quality of experience signifies something that may belong to

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<sup>85</sup> Dewey, J. (2013). *A Common Faith* (2nd ed.). London: Yale University Press, p. 9.

all these experiences.”<sup>86</sup> Much like Rorty’s “romance”, Dewey’s “the religious” is about one’s attitude or orientation, not the topic of this attitude or orientation.

And finally, Dewey’s accomodationism refers to his aim of “accommodating religious faith to the values, ideals, and epistemic norms of a secular democratic and scientific culture”.<sup>87</sup> He seeks to reform religious faith so that it will be in perfect harmony with the contemporary secular and democratic values of the prevailing Western culture. To reform religious faith in this fashion, Dewey proposes a new theology. Central to this theology is the rejection of “the identification of the religious with the supernatural”.<sup>88</sup>

Dewey thinks that “the actual religious quality in the experience” is “the effect produced, the better adjustment in life and its conditions, not the manner and cause of its production”.<sup>89</sup> What determines the religious value of an experience is its function, how it operates, the way in which it lends “deep and enduring support to the process of living”.<sup>90</sup> That is to say, the religious quality of an experience is completely independent from its association with the supernatural. What makes an experience religious is neither the object nor the nature of it, but the effect it produces. And who is to say that this religious effect can only be produced via belief in the supernatural. The identification of this effect with the belief in the supernatural is a historic residue of traditional religions. Residues of this kind, Dewey writes, “limit the credibility and the influence of religion”.<sup>91</sup>

Though their theologies seem very similar at the outset, unlike Rorty (who prefers to do away with any religious terminology), Dewey believes in the power

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<sup>86</sup> Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 10.

<sup>87</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 109.

<sup>88</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 112.

<sup>89</sup> Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 13.

<sup>90</sup> Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 14.

<sup>91</sup> Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 78.



of religion and its potentially vital “importance to the ongoing project of a secular, scientifically oriented moral democracy”.<sup>92</sup> Whereas Rorty prefers to privatize religion, Dewey positively encourages “a common faith” for all members of a democratic society: A reformed religious faith emancipated from its supernaturalist encumbrances.<sup>93</sup> But this encouragement is not to be confused with a proposal of a new religion. Dewey writes that he is “not proposing a religion, but rather the emancipation of elements and outlooks that may be called religious”.<sup>94</sup> What his encouragement comes down to, then, is denying supernatural beliefs of any legitimacy.

The crucial distinction between Rorty and Dewey, however, is not that Dewey’s ideal society is naturalist all the way through. Rorty’s ideal society would also be naturalist all the way through. The distinction is that Rorty’s pragmatism renders private beliefs outside of philosophy’s jurisdiction whereas Dewey, in a somewhat Cliffordian fashion, thinks people’s private beliefs have to align well with the ideals and values of a democratic society. Rorty has very little to say about what people believe in their private hearts as long as they get along well with their fellow citizens. He is content with achieving solidarity in public. Dewey, on the other hand, seems to think that supernatural beliefs, even in private, are counterproductive for democracy.

### 3.3.2 Religious Faith as an Ethical Commitment

It is clear, then, Dewey and Rorty operate in different frameworks when judging other people’s religious faith. When it comes to their own theologies, however, they have more similarities than differences. Most importantly they both agree, contra James, that a metaphysical, unseen realm is highly improbable to exist and a naturalist religion would be much superior to its supernaturalist, traditional pre-

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<sup>92</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 117.

<sup>93</sup> Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 9.

<sup>94</sup> Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 8.

decessors. Consequently, they both have a naturalized (or in Dewey's terminology, "emancipated") interpretation of what constitutes a religious faith.

Given that they both reject the supernatural, it is not surprising that Dewey and Rorty seek to reconstruct religion in purely naturalist terms. It is surprising, however, how similar Dewey's definition of religious faith is to James' description of the "positive content of religious experience".<sup>95</sup> Dewey defines religious faith as "the unification of the self through allegiance to inclusive ideal ends, which imagination presents to us and to which the human will responds as worthy of controlling our desires and choices".<sup>96</sup> In another passage, he expands on the notion of "the unification of the self":

The idea of a whole, whether of the whole personal being or of the world, is an imaginative, not a literal, idea. The limited world of our observation and reflection becomes the Universe only through imaginative extension. It cannot be apprehended in knowledge nor realized in reflection. Neither observation, thought, nor practical activity can attain that complete unification of the self which is called a whole. The whole self is an ideal, an imaginative projection. Hence the idea of a thoroughgoing and deep-seated harmonizing of the self with the Universe (as a name for the totality of conditions with which the self is connected) operates only through imagination—which is one reason why this composing of the self is not voluntary in the sense of an act of special volition or resolution. (...) And it is pertinent to note that the unification of the self throughout the ceaseless flux of what it does, suffers, and achieves, cannot be attained in terms of itself. The self is always directed toward something beyond itself and so its own unification depends upon the idea of the integration of the shifting scenes of the world into that imaginative totality we call the Universe.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 397.

<sup>96</sup> Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 31.

<sup>97</sup> Dewey, *A Common Faith*, pp. 17–18.

To Dewey, then, whichever attitudes, experiences or orientations help to achieve this “integration of the shifting scenes of the world” and to create “a thoroughgoing and deep-seated harmonizing of the self with the Universe”, they are of “religious quality”.

These passages are reminiscent of James in at least two ways: (1) Dewey’s notion of “the unification of the self” is very much like James’ observation that “the conscious person is continuous with a wider self”.<sup>98</sup>(2) Dewey, like James, rejects sui generis views of religion: What makes an experience or a belief religious is not its unique kind or content, but a particular quality that is present in it. That is to say, “the religious” is not an alternative category to “the moral”, “the scientific”, “the political” or “the aesthetic”. All these experiences or beliefs can also be “religious” if/when they have the religious quality in them.

Slater writes that Dewey viewed religious faith as “a form of ethical commitment”. It “essentially consists in commitment to any ideal end which is capable of providing a deep and enduring unity to the self and its various relations (with other human beings, with the natural and social worlds and the conditions of existence in those worlds, etc.)”.<sup>99</sup>Important to note here that Dewey was aware how radical his interpretation of religious faith is for his contemporary religious believers. *A Common Faith* acknowledges that all religions involve specific intellectual beliefs and consider them true in the intellectual sense. Thus, his suggestion to reconsider religious faith as a form of ethical commitment is not very much in line with how members of religious communities traditionally understood religious faith. But then again, Dewey’s view of traditional religions that promote belief in supernatural is rather dim. He believes that they are “at once obscuring the real source and ground of our values and ideals, diverting energies that might be put to better use in the pursuit of realizing purely natural values or human social

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<sup>98</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 397.

<sup>99</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 118.

ideals, and hindering the effective realization of those values and ideals”.<sup>100</sup> This is why religion needs to be “emancipated”. He writes:

The opposition between religious values as I conceive them and religions is not to be bridged. Just because the release of these values is so important, their identification with the creeds and cults of religions must be dissolved.<sup>101</sup>

This brings us to the source of the disagreement between James and Dewey: Religious faith can in fact be naturalist all the way through, but what about when it is not? What should we think of the supernatural religious faith?

### 3.3.3 The Rejection of the Supernatural

Dewey rejects any and all supernatural religious beliefs. This rejection grounds itself on three claims:

1. Supernatural religious beliefs are unnecessary.
2. Supernatural religious beliefs are inconvenient.
3. Supernatural religious beliefs are unjustified.

Unfortunately Dewey does not offer much in the way of argument to support his first and second claims. But he still has a narrative. The narrative goes like this: Supernatural elements are not central to religious belief, but they are the remnants of religious traditions. And thus, they “have been relative to the conditions of social culture in which peoples lived”.<sup>102</sup> They can and do change. When an aspect of religion no longer reflects the beliefs and values of its current time and

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<sup>100</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 116.

<sup>101</sup> Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 27.

<sup>102</sup> Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 6.

environment, it is either rejected or reinterpreted.<sup>103</sup> Dewey calls this process the “method of disposal of outgrown traits of past religions”.<sup>104</sup> This method compels us to see the inconvenient aspects of the religions of today. It compels us to inquire into the notions and traits that no longer reflect our beliefs and values. When we do this, Dewey believes, we will conclude “there is nothing left worth preserving in the notions of unseen powers”.<sup>105</sup> Belief in supernatural is both unnecessary and inconvenient.

In support of his third claim, however, he has a bit more to say. He starts with an observation: There is a growing dissatisfaction among what he calls “religionists”<sup>106</sup> about so-called proofs of the existence of God, be it ontological, cosmological or teleological.<sup>107</sup> Whether it is because Kant showed the insufficiency of them to prove anything supernatural, or they are now believed to be “too formal to offer any support to religion in action”,<sup>108</sup> Dewey argues that many religionists now think that such proofs are inadequate and unsuccessful. This dissatisfaction, together with their envy of the empiricist methods used in other scientific fields, made religionists to seek to prove the existence of supernatural entities through what they see a peculiar kind of experience, namely religious experience.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 118.

<sup>104</sup> Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 6.

<sup>105</sup> Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 7.

<sup>106</sup> Dewey does not explicitly define what he means by the term “religionists”, but a passage from the very beginning of *A Common Faith* strongly suggests that the term refers to the people “who hold that nothing worthy of being called religious is possible apart from the supernatural”. In the mentioned passage he further explains that “they range from those who accept the dogmas and sacraments of the Greek and Roman Catholic church as the only sure means of access to the supernatural to the theist or mild deist. Between them are the many Protestant denominations who think the Scriptures, aided by a pure conscience, are adequate avenues to supernatural truth and power. But they agree in one point: the necessity for a Supernatural Being and for an immortality that is beyond the power of nature.”; see: Dewey, *A Common Faith*, pp. 1, 2.

<sup>107</sup> Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 10.

<sup>108</sup> Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 10.

<sup>109</sup> Dewey, *A Common Faith*, pp. 10, 11.

Dewey, however, argues that religious experiences are unable to prove anything other than “the existence of some complex of conditions that have operated to effect an adjustment in life, an orientation, that brings with it a sense of security and peace.”<sup>110</sup> The experience speaks only for itself and not for its object, because “the subjects of such experiences invariably interpret the religious function in experience (which is essentially non-supernatural in nature, according to Dewey) in terms of the religious culture or “doctrinal apparatus” in which they have been inducted”.<sup>111</sup> “Thus”, writes Slater, “according to Dewey’s naturalistic explanation, religious and mystical experiences do not involve direct perceptions of putative supernatural objects but rather always involve inferences about what is being experienced that are drawn from a particular cultural and doctrinal background and which in reality involve interpreting (or rather misinterpreting) the essentially non-supernatural religious aspect or function of experience in supernatural terms.”<sup>112</sup>

On these grounds, Dewey rejects the idea that religious experience can provide any support to supernatural religious beliefs. And therefore, he thinks that belief in supernatural is not only unnecessary and inconvenient, but also lacks the epistemic justification to be convincing or challenging before naturalism.

This narrative, however, would not be convincing to James. It is easy to dismiss the first and second claims as Dewey’s personal over-beliefs. And as far as James is concerned, Dewey’s third claim carries no weight either, for James would be the first person to admit that his supernatural beliefs lack justification. All over-beliefs do, including Dewey’s own naturalism. Here in this narrative, there is even room for James to accuse Dewey of intellectualism.

On the other hand, this is a rather convincing narrative for Rorty. Rorty would happily agree that supernatural religious beliefs are unnecessary, inconvenient and unjustified. This might be one ground to call him a “neo-Deweyan”. But this agreement fades into insignificance if you consider their proposed approach to

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<sup>110</sup> Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 12.

<sup>111</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 120.

<sup>112</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 120.

religion. Dewey seeks to establish and promote a common faith for all members of society, Rorty wants to privatize religion and let the individual blamelessly believe whatever she wants to believe.

### 3.4 Rorty in Between: Pluralist in Public, Naturalist in Private

In this chapter so far, I have outlined three different accounts of religion by three prominent pragmatists. For at least two of these account (that is, of Rorty's and of James') I believe we can make a distinction between (1) what the pragmatist philosopher himself believes, i.e. what is his understanding and suggestion of a properly pragmatic religion, (2) how the pragmatic philosopher suggest we should engage with other people's religious beliefs and how should we carry out the study of religion. For the sake of simplicity and clarity, I sometimes called the former the philosopher's theology, and often referred to the latter as the philosopher's approach (to religion).

I will further detail this distinction,<sup>113</sup> but for the moment, let us note that Slater does not make a similar distinction in his book. He focuses mainly on his subjects' attitude to metaphysic, and thus presents us with a slightly misleading picture about where Rorty stands in relation to James and Dewey. He describes Rorty's account of religion as "neo-Deweyan",<sup>114</sup> and argues that Rorty was also committed to the Deweyan project of naturalizing, secularizing, and accommodating religious faith.<sup>115</sup> This, however, is only partially true. Dewey was indeed Rorty's "principal philosophical hero"<sup>116</sup> and Rorty's account of religion is also highly influenced by him. It is only natural Rorty is a "neo-Deweyan" in signifi-

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<sup>113</sup> See §3.4.1. "Pragmatic Religion" and "Pragmatic Approach to Religion"

<sup>114</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 131.

<sup>115</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 132.

<sup>116</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 131; Rorty, R. (1999). Preface. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin Books, p. xii.

cant ways. His personal beliefs around religion, his theology one might say, were more similar to Dewey than James, for example. I have argued, however, when it comes to his approach to religion, Rorty is decidedly more neo-Jamesian than neo-Deweyan, exactly because his commitment to the legitimacy of unjustified private beliefs.

That it to say, it is a mistake to think of Dewey and Rorty representing one pragmatic approach to religion and James another. Rorty shared many motivations and insights with Dewey when it comes to religious faith, yet he also had a lot in common with James. If we are to assume a scale in pragmatic inquiries of religion, and if James and Dewey are to represent two different ends in that scale, I would argue that Rorty does not stand at one end together with Dewey, but occupies a place of his own in the middle, in equal proximity to the other two. Slater seems to overemphasize the Deweyan tendencies in Rorty to the point that he calls him a “neo-Deweyan” and underemphasize the Jamesian ones to the point that he never mentions them. Even the premise of his book is that “anti-naturalist religious views of philosophers such as William James and Charles Peirce provide a powerful alternative to the naturalism and secularism of later pragmatists such as John Dewey and Richard Rorty”.<sup>117</sup> The dichotomy portrayed here is very misleading in a lot of ways. It stands in the way of understanding the subtleties of Rorty’s attitude towards supernatural beliefs. Slater himself provides an example of a misdirected criticism due to this misleading portrayal: He criticizes Rorty and Dewey in the same sentence, for example, for taking up “the mantle of a secular Moses calling for the emancipation of religious faith from its bondage to religion; a call which most traditional religious believers are unlikely to heed and would very likely dispute”.<sup>118</sup> It is again true that both Rorty and Dewey wishes to emancipate religious faith from institutional religion, but the way they go about it makes a significant difference. Unlike Dewey, and very much like James, Rorty is willing to provide a space for all people to have their personal religious beliefs in the way they please. Rorty’s writings still allow “most traditional religious believers” to

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<sup>117</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, “Summary”.

<sup>118</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 138.



disagree with him on his strict naturalism but endorse his approach to religion nevertheless, whereas this does not seem to be possible for Dewey. Slater misses this subtlety, most likely due to the binary framework he operates within.

In the following then, I shall further clarify the middle ground Rorty occupies between James and Dewey. For this, I will invoke the distinction I have mentioned earlier, the distinction between (1) what Rorty personally believes is the better way to go about religion and (2) what the Rortian approach to religion allows or forbids when it comes to having religious beliefs. I will argue that the former is predominantly Deweyan whereas the latter is surely more Jamesian. That is to say, Rorty promotes a naturalized and secularized version of religious faith as Dewey does, yet his account of religion overall is flexible and Jamesian enough to accommodate supernatural religious belief in private.<sup>119</sup>

### 3.4.1 “Pragmatic Religion” and “Pragmatic Approach To Religion”

In this chapter, I propose that a distinction needs to be made between what we might call “a Rortian pragmatic religion” and “a Rortian pragmatic approach to religion”. Rorty, however, does not make this distinction clearly. His writings are often a medley of both perspectives and thus, at times, may cause confusion in the reader. He dreams of a secular utopia in which religious vocabulary completely disappears, for example, yet he also says things like “religion is unobjectionable as long as it is privatized”.<sup>120</sup> If private religion is unobjectionable, then why is it that

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<sup>119</sup> For this reason, I believe scholars like Jason Boffetti are being misleading when they identify Rorty’s pragmatism as characteristically atheistic; see: Boffetti, “How Richard Rorty Found Religion,” p. 605

Rorty is indeed an atheist. It is also true that he actively discourages people from turning to any supernatural, non-human powers for help. His pragmatism, however, is still broad enough to be able to accommodate Jamesian religion and many religious beliefs that assumes the existence of supernatural powers. The distinction I make in the following section between “Rorty’s pragmatic religion” and “Rortian pragmatic approach to religion” aims to shed light on how this reading is possible and plausible.

<sup>120</sup> Rorty, “Anticlericalism and Atheism,” p. 33.

he dislikes religious vocabulary so much? He advocates that we should understand religious faith as “a faith in the future possibilities of moral humans”,<sup>121</sup> and not as a faith in a personal transcendental God, but this position creates a tension, to say the least, with his account of private self-creation. What if people choose to believe in the existence of a supernatural transcendental entity called God as part of their private search for meaning? I believe Rorty’s account is rich and robust enough to come up with plausible answers to such questions. In order to coherently and charitably interpret his views on the subject, however, one needs to make the mentioned conceptual distinction between “pragmatic religion” and “pragmatic approach to religion”.

As a crude rule of thumb, Rorty’s “pragmatic religion” broadly matches to his views on religion being a form of romance. His “pragmatic approach to religion”, on the other hand, broadly matches to his discussions around the privatization of religion. These two views are brought about by two different concerns. They seek to answer two different questions. These two questions are, respectively:

1. What would be the better form of religiosity?
2. What would be the better framework to evaluate and judge various religious beliefs?

Rorty’s attempts to answer the first question constitute the fundamentals of the naturalist pragmatic religion he promotes, and his attempts to answer the second question sketch the outlines of his pluralist pragmatic approach to religion. When dealing with the first question, Rorty mostly reveals his personal, private romantic beliefs. Rorty’s account of pragmatic religion, i.e. “religion as romance”, is hardly a philosophical defence of a certain form of religiosity, but the articulation of his vision of an ideal religiosity. His answer to the second question, however, seeks to determine the public criteria for thinking and talking about religion. Rorty’s personal romantic beliefs play a lot less role here, if any.

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<sup>121</sup> Rorty, “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance,” p. 160.

This distinction is also very helpful in mapping Rorty between James and Dewey. Rorty sits in the middle, because his writings on the first question mostly follow Dewey's footsteps, yet his answer to the second question is characteristically Jamesian.

### 3.4.2 Rorty In Between James and Dewey

Now being a thorough naturalist, Dewey denies the existence of a personal transcendental God or any theory of creation that involves a higher, supernatural power. James' views, on the other hand, are less clear-cut on the subject. He believes in a higher, unseen order, and though it is difficult to say what he himself personally believes, he does not discourage the belief in a personal creator either. Yet it is important to remember that, in James, the question between naturalism and supernaturalism is consciously left open so that every individual can choose between the two to their passion's content. This renders James a supernaturalist and a theist (even if his theism is rather unconventional), but also an agnostic at the same time about the question between naturalism and supernaturalism. Dewey, on the other hand, is a naturalist through and through, and can be said to be an atheist (even if his atheism is rather unconventional).<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Dewey, however, does not call himself "atheist". Allan G. Phillips, Jr. argues that "one would be hard-pressed (...) to find a ringing endorsement of atheism in Dewey's work"; see: Phillips, A. G. (2002). John Dewey and his Religious Critics. *Religion & Education*, 29(1), 31-40, p. 32

Steven Rockefeller also writes that "Dewey never referred to himself as an atheist and did not like being labelled one. He felt that "atheism" carries negative connotations that do not accurately characterize his worldview"; see: Rockefeller, S. C. (1991). *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 519

Similarly, Raymond D. Boisvert argues that labelling Dewey as an atheist "could lead to an oversimplified interpretation of his position". He also says that "neither the word "theist" nor "atheist" in their full-blown connotations was suitable for Dewey"; see: Boisvert, R. D. (1998). *John Dewey: Rethinking Our Time*. Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 152, 153

I fully agree with these authors. Here I do not use these terms "in their full-blown connotations". I only argue that James can be called a theist and Dewey an atheist, as long as one is aware that their theism and atheism are quite unconventional and idiosyncratic.

Where does Rorty stand then? I would argue that Rorty is a naturalist and an atheist, rather like Dewey, yet he also leaves the question between naturalism and supernaturalism open, as James does. In other words: Naturalist in private, pluralist in public.

Rorty's attempt to provide an account for an ideal pragmatic religion very much resembles Dewey's attempt to save "the religious" from religion. Both are attempts to demystify religious vocabulary and reconstruct it in line with naturalism and secularism. Rorty's religious faith, described as a "fuzzy overlap of faith, hope and romance (...) in the future possibilities of moral humans"<sup>123</sup> aligns well with Dewey's description of religious belief, "the unification of the self through allegiance to inclusive ideal ends".<sup>124</sup> They both dream of a secular utopia in which religious faith is completely naturalized and secularized.

Having said that, there are also significant differences between Rorty and Dewey. Slater is also aware of these differences. He points out three crucial ones:

1. Rorty calls for the privatization of religious faith rather than the need for a common or social form of religious faith, operating on the assumption that society does not require religious faith as a unifying social force or a force for social change and that religious faith is best understood in terms of individual "romances".<sup>125</sup>
2. [U]nlike Dewey, Rorty did not clearly accept the conflict model between science and religion and instead seems to have endorsed something like Stephen Jay Gould's much discussed and often maligned "non-overlapping magisteria" (NOMA) model of that relationship.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," p. 60.

<sup>124</sup> Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 31.

<sup>125</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 136.

<sup>126</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 138.

3. Rorty's considered critique of traditional forms of religion has less to do with the supposedly untenable nature of supernatural religious beliefs and practices and the ways in which they siphon energy away from the realization of secular values and ideals than it does with the "conversation-stopping" character of certain religious institutions.<sup>127</sup>

Slater not only notes these differences, but also agrees that they "reflect an epistemically humbler version of atheism that is, if anything, even less hostile toward traditional religious belief and practice than Dewey's".<sup>128</sup> He does not trace, however, the reasons behind this divergence from Dewey. These differences, I argue, are mostly due to Rorty's distinction between private and public projects. By prioritizing this distinction, Rorty's approach takes a noticeably Jamesian turn even though Rorty's vision for a fully secularized religion is pretty much the same as that of Dewey.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> As Slater also mentions, however, Rorty later admits being a conversation-stopper is neither inherent nor unique to religion. Any comprehensive doctrine can be criticized in the same way when it refuses to give further supporting reasons for its claims; see: Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 137.

<sup>128</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 136.

<sup>129</sup> The following quote from Anton A. van Niekerk may help to understand the motives for both Jamesian and Deweyan tendencies in Rorty: "The worth of religion, for Rorty, therefore is located in its cultural desirability and potential contribution to human happiness; it embodies and articulates the hope for what we may become if we are able to embody and materialize the best that our imaginations can come up with. In this effort, we need to create optimal space for other people to pursue their ideals. But the very business of imaginative self-creation is as much a dialogical process in which we foster ourselves through the intersubjective self-formation that dialogue and interaction facilitates."; see: Van Niekerk, A. A. (2013). *Pragmatism and Religion*. A. Malachowski (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Pragmatism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 316

In the same vein, Nicholas Smith writes: "Given Rorty's philosophical pluralism, this will involve securing as much liberty – or "opportunities for variation" – for each individual as is consistent with the same liberty being available to all. The more people are able to pursue projects of self-creation and personal redemption the better. But the very goal of maximising the scope for individual variation entails a commitment to leaving individuals alone – in the sense of free from interference – to pursue such projects for themselves. In acting collectively to improve the quality of their democracy, citizens are better off not having to deal with whatever it is that they separately seek redemption from. In this sense, Rorty reconciles religion

The private-public distinction does three things to Rorty's approach that, in turn, makes it look more Jamesian: First, it makes Rorty's account of religion "individualist". That is to say, by saying that religion is or ought to be a private matter, Rorty agrees with James that religious beliefs are based upon the personal religious feelings or experiences of individuals and as such, they are private over-beliefs. Second, it makes it coherent for Rorty to be both a naturalist and leave the ultimate answer to the naturalism versus supernaturalism question open. Thanks to the private/public distinction, Rorty can coherently argue that (1) the choice between naturalism and supernaturalism would eventually qualify as a private over-belief, and (2) naturalism is the right/better approach to take for anything public. Thus, he can consider himself as a committed naturalist while at the same time have an open-minded view of supernaturalist private beliefs. And third, it makes Rorty think that the danger of religion does not lie in its epistemologically corrupt foundations or wildly erroneous ontology, but in its political outcomes.

All of these three views are well suited to the framework James provides on the subject. James is also an individualist, his approach makes the same distinction between one's own over-belief about naturalism or supernaturalism and the ultimately open nature of the question itself, and he also thinks that we would do better to focus on the outcomes of religious beliefs rather than criticizing the ways in which religious beliefs are acquired.

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with pragmatism by turning the former into a source of "private" hope –hope about what I (not we) may become – and he presents the "privatisation of religion" as if it were merely a corollary of the democratisation of politics (see Rorty, 1999a, p. 149). There is, however, one exception: democracy itself as the highest hope and the object of religious awe and devotion. Rorty envisages a civic religion of democracy that keeps social hope alive sitting alongside many private religions sustaining private hopes about what individuals may become.";Smith, "Rorty on Religion and Hope," p. 84

What both van Niekerk and Smith point out here is the two tendencies in Rorty I was calling Jamesian and Deweyan. In his more Jamesian moments Rorty's writings are more focused on creating the optimal space for individual self-creation and private hope. In his more Deweyan moments, he seeks to explore what Smith calls "a civic religion of democracy", a way of understanding religion that is not only in perfect accord with pragmatism, democratic values, and the idea of solidarity, but also actively promotes the very act of creating an optimal space for individual self-creation. These two tasks are different tasks, yet they are also complimentary.

This puts Rorty in a unique position between James and Dewey. It is not a stretch to say that Rorty has a dislike for religious vocabulary and supernaturalism. The Deweyan features of this unique position lets him to hold on to his dislike, yet also modulates this dislike into a conditional disinterest, the condition being the privatization of religion. And the Jamesian features lets him create a safe space for religious beliefs through which religious people can hold on to their own likes, dislikes, hopes, and beliefs without the need for justification or the fear of intellectual irresponsibility. That is to say, interestingly, the Rortian approach to religion provides a space for disliking Rorty's own theology. One may adopt the Rortian approach to religion, but still dislike the idea of fully naturalized and secularized religious beliefs. One can agree with Rorty on the need for the privatization of religion, but still refuse his suggestion that religion is best seen as romance. Rorty's philosophical approach and his theological suggestions are not mutually dependent. One can easily separate them if one wishes so.

Let us then remember again Slater's criticism of Rorty on taking up "the mantle of a secular Moses calling for the emancipation of religious faith from its bondage to religion".<sup>130</sup> This criticism, as I said earlier, is only partially right. Rorty indeed believes that traditional religions are misguided and misleading, and thus comes up with his notion of religion as romance, but unlike Dewey, he has a sense that his account of pragmatic religion mostly reflects his own overbeliefs. By virtue of his epistemic humility, he only thinks himself preaching for what he believes to be a better version of having religious faith, rather than taking up the task of emancipating religious faith from its traditional encumbrances.

Slater also criticizes Rorty for not offering philosophical arguments for his views on religion and eschewing the demands to do so.<sup>131</sup> This criticism is again due to Slater missing the distinction between "Rorty's pragmatic religion" and "Rorty's pragmatic approach to religion". Rorty does provide philosophical arguments for the latter. In fact, a good portion of this thesis is dedicated to clarify and discuss

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<sup>130</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 138.

<sup>131</sup> Slater, *Pragmatism and The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 138.

these arguments. It discusses his arguments about the plausibility and efficacy of private vs public distinction, aims to unearth the reasons behind his prioritization of democracy over religion, delves into his arguments around the legitimacy of private religious faith etc. It would be unfair to say that Rorty does not offer any philosophical arguments for his views there.

As for his account of pragmatic religion, on the other hand, I would argue that Rorty's refrainment from philosophical arguments is understandable. Rorty presents his account of pragmatic religion (religion as romance) not as an emancipatory account like Dewey's. But instead he offers a possibly edifying narrative that is easier to harmonize with naturalistic science and secular democracy. An analogy then could be made with an essayist. An essayist is hardly guilty of privileging the imagination over argumentation in her essays.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> In fact, the theme of privileging the imagination over argumentation is common in Rorty's writing. In an interview with E. P. Ragg, Rorty explicitly associates this theme with pragmatism: "In so far as pragmatism privileges the imagination over argumentation, it's on the side of the Romantics."; see: Ragg, E. P. (2002). *Worlds or Words Apart? The Consequences of Pragmatism for Literary Studies: An Interview with Richard Rorty*. *John Hopkins University Press*, 26(2), 369–396, p. 383.



# Chapter 4

## Religion In Public

The chapters so far have focused on the private aspects of religion and religious beliefs. This chapter, on the other hand, will shift the attention to Rorty's views on religion in public. It will particularly engage with Rorty's claim that "the secularization of public life" was "the Enlightenment's central achievement" and we should stick to "the happy, Jeffersonian compromise that the Enlightenment reached with the religious" which "consists in privatizing religion".<sup>1</sup>

In the context of Rorty's public versus private distinction and his suggestion that religion should be kept out of public, I will bring forth and investigate two questions:

1. Is it even possible for religious beliefs to be private beliefs, considering that they are, for the most part, intimately connected with a community and a tradition?
2. Does Rorty have good reasons to ask religion to be kept out of public, and if so, what are his reasons?

Let me also formulate two criticisms that arise from these questions:

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<sup>1</sup> Rorty, "Religion as Conversation-Stopper," pp. 168, 169.

1. Rorty fails to see the fact that religion is characteristically public and cannot be privatized without a crucial loss of meaning.
2. It is unfair and undemocratic to ask religious people to refrain from providing religious reasons in public debates.

I will argue that the first criticism, though it indicates a conceptual vagueness in Rorty's private versus public distinction, is ultimately due to a misinterpretation of Rorty's terminology and thus not a particularly strong criticism. The second criticism, however, reveals a more substantial weakness in Rorty's approach. Hence the larger portion of this chapter will focus on the second criticism.

## 4.1 Can Religion Be Private?

Religious beliefs typically do not stand on their own, but they have an intimately close relationship with a community of believers. And this community of believers has a history, literature, traditions, institutions, collective rituals and worship, a sense of belonging to each other etc. How it is possible then to appropriately consider such beliefs as private? What would it even mean to ask for the privatization of religious beliefs if religious beliefs are intrinsically public?

What does it mean for a Christian, for example, to consider her religious beliefs private when she feels belonging to a community with shared beliefs, rituals and history? Does Rorty ask her to isolate herself from her community and shave away the communitarian aspects in her beliefs? If not, what does Rorty's plea for privatization amount to? Does Rorty fail to understand the nature and the character of many religious beliefs?

Roger W. Stump is one example of an intellectual who sees religion as "inherently communal".<sup>2</sup> In *The Geography of Religion*, he defines religion as "a cultural system, an integrated complex of meanings, symbols, and behaviours articulated

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<sup>2</sup> Stump, R. W. (2008). *The Geography of Religion: Faith, Place, and Space*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, p. 9.

by a community of adherents". The book is not meant to be a criticism of the liberal political philosophy, but Stump's characterization of religion exemplifies this particular objection to Rorty well:

Like all of culture, religion is inherently communal, based on meanings and values collectively acknowledged by a group of believers. The religious experiences of all members of the group will not be identical, of course. Some individuals may be more devout than others or may adhere to mandated practices more precisely. Individuals may also develop their own idiosyncratic interpretations of group beliefs, or adopt elements of the beliefs of more than one religion. (...) As a cultural system, however, a religion is an expression of the community rather than of the individual, rooted in shared understandings and reproduced through social interaction. Consequently, religion involves at least an implicit sense of identity and membership in a distinct community of believers.<sup>3</sup>

Note that the objection here is a different one than the Cliffordian objection to private beliefs, which I have discussed in the second chapter. Clifford objects to the notion of private religious beliefs, because he claims that all beliefs, regardless of their kind, will produce a public effect. They will affect not only the believer herself, but everyone in the society. His objection is focused on the outcome. A belief can never be completely private because of its unavoidable public outreach, not because of its intrinsic properties.

Here, on the other hand, the objection is not about the results beliefs may produce, but about their nature and context. This objection says that religious beliefs are direct products of taking part in a community and they are intimately related with the collective beliefs and practices of that community. This is why they cannot be private.

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<sup>3</sup> Stump, *The Geography of Religion: Faith, Place, and Space*, p. 90.

What this objection does, I believe, is to disclose an idiosyncrasy in Rorty's use of the concepts private and public. This idiosyncrasy, in return, creates confusion and conceptual vagueness. Rorty deserves a criticism for not explaining his terms better. Having said that, however, if we were to examine and interpret Rorty's terms more closely and charitably, the objection from religion being inherently communal loses its grip on his approach.

The confusion, I believe, lies in the assumption that private must mean something solely individualistic, completely stripped away from community. As I have argued earlier,<sup>4</sup> the distinction between private and public can be understood in two different ways: (1) an ontological distinction (that is, a distinction intrinsic to the nature of the material discussed), or (2) a political/legal distinction. I also suggested that we should understand Rorty's distinction as a political/legal distinction. If we understand it as such, the term private does not have to refer to something solely individualistic. In this understanding of the term, religious beliefs can still be considered private even though they have intimately close relations with a community and a tradition.

Let me explain this point further by raising the following question: What is at stake, for Rorty, in calling religious beliefs private or public? What is the distinctive trait of a private belief? The answer, as I have argued earlier, has to do with the (either ethical or legal) duties associated with the belief in question. Rorty's terminology of private versus public is meant to be a conceptual/political tool to help with Mill's project of sketching out "the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual".<sup>5</sup> That is to say, what is at stake, for Rorty, in calling a belief private or public is the ethical duty one need or need not assume towards other people. Public beliefs bring about an ethical obligation to justification, because they have, or intend to have, a significant consequence for public. The political effects of a private belief, on the other hand, are miniscule enough and can be ignored. Once again, Rorty's distinction is not

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<sup>4</sup> See: §2.3.4. How To Understand Private/Public Distinction

<sup>5</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 7.

ontological, or even philosophical. It is political. Whether religious beliefs have an undeniable communal aspect to them is irrelevant to Rorty's argument. Unless, of course, being communal is synonymous with being political, which is not the case.

Here I propose we understand the privacy of religious beliefs through the model of societies/communities formed around recreational activities. Consider, for example, one of Rorty's favourite activities: Bird-watching. Bird-watchers have societies, books, events, a sense of community, and they may even share some rituals. Yet Rorty's beliefs about the importance and the value of bird-watching, about the aesthetic hierarchy among birds, about which bird is more beautiful or elegant, etc. are still his private beliefs, even if they are widely shared among his fellow bird-watchers. These beliefs have no relevance to the political questions. They might have a communal aspect to them, but they are political. Similarly, sci-fi or fantasy fans also form communities that resemble religious communities in certain respects. They have a common literature, shared terminology, conventions, events, sense of community etc. But Star Wars fans' beliefs on the nature of Ewoks (say if they are warm hearted creatures or vicious carnivores) have no relevance on public policy either.

There is no denying that such communities have their internal justificatory frameworks or processes. An unorthodox claim within the community may need to be justified with reference to common literature, other shared beliefs and practices etc. Some of these arguments may even refer to larger-scale public projects such as science. But these intra-community justifications are irrelevant for Rorty's purposes, for the exact reason that they do not bear any weight on the inter-community, political (or scientific) questions.

In calling these beliefs "private", Rorty does not mean to deny their communal aspect. What he denies is their ability to serve as reasons to justify a public policy.

## 4.2 Should Religion Be Private?

Is Rorty's denial of private beliefs from political arena justified? What are Rorty's reasons to ask for the privatization of religion and are these reasons any good?

These are the questions I would like to investigate in the second part of this chapter. These questions are of course not new. Critics of liberalism have asked similar questions. Particularly relevant for our discussion are two names: Jeffrey Stout and Nicholas Wolterstorff.

Jeffrey Stout is a fellow pragmatist who respects and admires Rorty.<sup>6</sup> In his *Democracy and Tradition*, however, he criticizes Rorty's position on the privatization of religion. His criticism is constructive and insightful. To achieve the conversational, pluralistic democracy Rorty champions, Stout argues, we should reject the policy of restraint Rorty endorses.<sup>7</sup>

Wolterstorff, on the other hand, is not a pragmatist. He disagrees with Rorty on many issues, including the place of religion in politics. His criticisms, however, are still very relevant for at least three reasons:

(1) Wolterstorff is not against liberal ideas or liberal democracy, but against the privatization of religion, or as he calls it "religious-reason restraint"<sup>8</sup> in a liberal democracy. Thus, his critique aims to improve the way we understand and interpret liberal democracy, not to discredit it. In that, Rorty and Wolterstorff share a common goal.

(2) Wolterstorff makes a distinction between "liberal democratic society" and "the liberal position" and criticizes the latter. I want to argue that Rorty's initial position falls within the family of positions Wolterstorff marks as the liberal position. Hence Wolterstorff's criticisms apply well to Rorty's views.

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<sup>6</sup> "No one, since Dewey, has done more to give the American philosophical tradition a voice in the conversation of humankind. No one, since Heidegger and Wittgenstein, has done more to provoke thought about the path that led modern philosophy from Descartes to Nietzsche. No recent philosopher has addressed a broader audience with less cant on the problems facing democracy. No American intellectual in his generation has behaved with more grace in responding to critics."; see: Stout, J. (2010). Rorty on Religion and Politics. R. K. Auxier & L. E. Hahn (Eds.), *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*. Chicago/Illinois: Open Court, p. 523.

<sup>7</sup> Stout, J. (2004). *Democracy and Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 90.

<sup>8</sup> Wolterstorff, N. (1997). The Role of Religion in Political Issues. *Religion in The Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate*. New York & London: Rowman & Littlefield, p. 75.

(3) Later in his career, Rorty changes his mind about his initial position. In “Religion in The Public Square: A Reconsideration”, Rorty credits Wolterstorff for convincing him that his initial position was problematic. He explicitly refers to Wolterstorff’s essay “Why We Should Reject What Liberalism Tells Us about Speaking and Acting in Public for Religious Reasons”<sup>9</sup> and says that he has been “impressed by Wolterstorff’s arguments” (and also by “some of Jeffrey Stout’s criticisms”). Thus, Rorty sets to “offer a chastened, and more cautious, restatement” of his views.<sup>10</sup> That is to say, Wolterstorff’s criticisms are demonstrably among the main reasons why Rorty seeks to revise his initial position.

In the following I shall explore two different positions Rorty had on the issue. I will call them “Rorty’s initial position” and “Rorty’s revised position.” I will agree with Wolterstorff and Stout that Rorty’s initial position is weak and will not hold. I will also agree with Rorty, however, that there might be some virtue still in insisting to keep religion as private as possible. Discussing Rorty’s revised position, I will aim to explore what that virtue might be and if Rorty is able to address his critics’ concerns.

### 4.2.1 Rorty’s Initial Position

The piece of writing that best articulates Rorty’s initial position on the place of religion in public is his 1994 article, “Religion as Conversation-Stopper”. In this article Rorty links up the secularization of public life and the privatization of religion with the Enlightenment. He argues that “the happy, Jeffersonian compromise that the Enlightenment reached with the religious”<sup>11</sup> in privatizing religion and keeping

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<sup>9</sup> Wolterstorff, N. (1997). Why We Should Reject What Liberalism Tells Us About Speaking and Acting in Public for Religious Reasons. P. J. Weithman (Ed.), *Religion and Contemporary Liberalism*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, p. 141; via Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” p. 141.

<sup>10</sup> Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” p. 141.

<sup>11</sup> Rorty, “Religion as Conversation-Stopper,” p. 141.

it out of the public square was “the Enlightenment’s central achievement”.<sup>12</sup> He then notes that there are intellectuals (such as Stephen L. Carter) who find this arrangement unfair. For the rest of the article, Rorty argues for the fairness of the arrangement.

In other words, Rorty already assumes that the privatization of religion is the norm in current Western societies and “the claims of religion need, if anything, to be pushed back still further”.<sup>13</sup> However, not everyone agrees with the norm. Some find the norm biased and challenge it. The question, for Rorty, then is not “should religion be made private?”, but instead “should religion be kept private?”. He identifies two main challenges against keeping religion private:

1. Privatization of religion trivializes religion.
2. The exclusion of religious arguments from public discussions is unjust to religious people.

Challenge 1 argues that supporters of the privatization think of religion as a lot less than what it actually is. They think of it “as a hobby, something done in privacy, something that mature, public-spirited adults do not use as the basis for politics.”<sup>14</sup> This thinking, in turn, trivializes religion. It makes belief in God no more important than sympathy for Gandalf.<sup>15</sup> Privatization supporters do not take religious beliefs seriously.

Rorty’s response is relatively brief, but, I believe, satisfactory: The “inference from privatization to trivialization is invalid”, he writes, “unless supplemented with

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<sup>12</sup> Rorty, “Religion as Conversation-Stopper,” p. 168.

<sup>13</sup> Rorty, “Religion as Conversation-Stopper,” p. 169.

<sup>14</sup> Carter, S. (1993). *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion*. New York: Basic Books, p. 54.

<sup>15</sup> Gandalf is a mighty wizard in the fictional worlds of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, two cult fantasy fictions by J. R. R. Tolkien.



the premise that the nonpolitical is always trivial".<sup>16</sup> The nonpolitical, however, is by no means trivial:

Our family or love lives are private, nonpolitical and nontrivial. The poems we atheists write, like the prayers our religious friends raise, are private, nonpolitical and non-trivial. Writing poems is, for many people, no mere hobby, even though they never show those poems to any save their intimates. The same goes for reading poems, and for lots of other private pursuits that both give meaning to individual human lives and are such that mature, public-spirited adults are quite right in not attempting to use them as a basis for politics. The search for private perfection, pursued by theists and atheists alike, is neither trivial nor, in a pluralistic democracy, relevant to public policy.<sup>17</sup>

His response to challenge 2, however, is a bit lengthier. Rorty acknowledges that privatization of religion limits religious people's involvement with politics to a certain degree, but he does not particularly understand why some religiously inclined intellectuals may find this arrangement unjust. He does not see how the arrangement could be more just. There are three reasons why Rorty thinks the exclusion of religion from public discussions is actually as just as it could be:

*(1) Religion is a conversation-stopper*

Perhaps the most famous sentence Rorty wrote on religion is the following one in which he declares religion as conversation-stopper:

The main reason religion needs to be privatized is that, in political discussion with those outside the relevant religious community, it is a

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<sup>16</sup> Rorty, "Religion as Conversation-Stopper," p. 170.

<sup>17</sup> Rorty, "Religion as Conversation-Stopper," p. 170.

conversation-stopper.<sup>18</sup>

Religion is a conversation-stopper in that making arguments with reference to one's own religious convictions tends to end the conversation rather than enhancing or furthering it. Rorty makes an analogy to bringing one's apparently private convictions to political discussions: Imagine saying things like "I would never have an abortion"<sup>19</sup> or "I dislike babies anyway" to support or protest a policy about an abortion. To most of us, it is apparent that one cannot (or should not) use such private convictions as an argument in a political discussion. Bringing such convictions as argument not only fails to contribute the conversation, but also makes it unhealthy and unfruitful.

Rorty thinks that using religious arguments like "God is pro-life" or "Homosexuality is sin" has the same effect on public discussions. These sentences do no more than stating one's own private conviction ("I believe in a God who forbids abortion/homosexuality"). They also impair the possibility of a healthy political discussion in the same way non-religious private convictions do. The proper response to such arguments, Rorty says, would be "So what? We weren't discussing your private life; we were discussing public policy. Don't bother us with matters that are not our concern."<sup>20</sup> Or one can also say: "OK, but since I don't think there is such a thing as the will of God, and since I doubt that we'll get anywhere arguing theism vs. atheism, let's see if we have some shared premises on the basis of which to continue our argument about abortion."<sup>21</sup>

*(2) Privatization of religion is required for religious liberty*

The way Rorty sees it, the privatization of religion is a concession religious people need to make to ensure their religious liberty. Thus, he calls it "a compro-

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<sup>18</sup> Rorty, "Religion as Conversation-Stopper," p. 171.

<sup>19</sup> Rorty, "Religion as Conversation-Stopper," p. 171.

<sup>20</sup> Rorty, "Religion as Conversation-Stopper," p. 171.

<sup>21</sup> Rorty, "Religion as Conversation-Stopper," p. 171.

mise”.<sup>22</sup> In democratic political communities, religious believers trade privatization of religion for a guarantee of religious liberty. Rorty thinks it would not be possible to keep a democratic political community going if its religious members were unwilling to make this trade.<sup>23</sup>

*(3) The political restraint on private convictions is not exclusive to religious citizens but equally applicable to non-religious citizens too*

To Rorty, the liberal arrangement is not unjust, because it is not exclusively for religious convictions. Liberal democracy demands the same compromise from its non-religious citizens as well. Just as religious members are expected to refrain from making public arguments based on their private religious convictions, non-religious members of the community are also asked to keep their private moral/ideological convictions out of public debates.

Religious critics of secularization, however, are not easily convinced with this answer. They claim that the demand for privatization is an attack on the integrity of religious self. It asks religious citizens to trim and reformulate their religious beliefs to be able to take part in public debates. For religious people, however, dividing their life into two compartments (private and public) and reformulating their private convictions to suit some arbitrary criteria provided by secular liberals is equal to destroying the integrity of their selves. On the other hand, the case is not the same for non-religious people. They are not expected to make a similar compromise, since they do not have similar, strongly held religious convictions. From the looks of it, then, the privatization demand does not apply to all members of society equally, but it is an unjust principle imposed by secular liberals to tame religion and limit religious citizens’ influence on politics.

Rorty’s answer to this argument is again brief and, I believe, satisfactory: Reformulating religious arguments to suit public criteria only means “dropping

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<sup>22</sup> Rorty, “Religion as Conversation-Stopper,” p. 169.

<sup>23</sup> Rorty, “Religion as Conversation-Stopper,” p. 170.

reference to the source of the premises of the arguments”.<sup>24</sup> And this demand equally applies to other kinds of non-religious political arguments. It is equally wrong, for example, to attempt to argue for a public policy by saying things like “my belief in Nietzsche dictates that redistribution of wealth should never be a state policy” or “religion should not be brought into public debates because my favourite philosopher Rawls says so”. This criticism also fails to see how influential non-religious private convictions can be in shaping one’s self-identity. Rorty ends his article by replying to Carter on this very point:

Carter thinks that ‘contemporary liberal philosophers (...) make demands on [the religion’s] moral conscience to reformulate that conscience—to destroy a vital aspect of the self—in order to gain the right to participate in the dialogue alongside other citizens’. But this requirement is no harsher, and no more a demand for self-destruction, than the requirement that we atheists, when we present our arguments, should claim no authority for our premises save the assent we hope they will gain from our audience. Carter seems to think that religious believers’ moral convictions are somehow more deeply interwoven with their self-identity than those of atheists with theirs. He seems unwilling to admit that the role of Enlightenment ideology in giving meaning to the lives of atheists is just as great as Christianity’s role in giving meaning to his own life.<sup>25</sup>

#### **4.2.2 Wolterstorff: Yes to “Liberal Democracy”, No to “The Liberal Position”**

Nicholas Wolterstorff has two important essays on the subject: “Why We Should Reject What Liberalism Tells Us about Speaking and Acting in Public for Reli-

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<sup>24</sup> Rorty, “Religion as Conversation-Stopper,” p. 170.

<sup>25</sup> Rorty, “Religion as Conversation-Stopper,” pp. 173, 174.

gious Reasons”<sup>26</sup> and “The Role of Religion In Decision and Discussion of Political Issues”.<sup>27</sup> These essays are quite similar in nature and they both discuss the following question: “How should citizens espouse their religiously-based political views in the public space and act thereon?”<sup>28</sup> According to Wolterstorff, “the most pervasive and influential answer”<sup>29</sup> to this question offered by what he calls “the liberal position”.<sup>30</sup> The essays criticize the liberal position and reject it.

Wolterstorff is careful, however, to not to sound like he criticizes liberal democracy. “Liberal democracy”, he says, “is that mode of governance that grants to all people within the territory of its governance equal protection under law, that grants to its citizens equal freedom in law to live out their lives as they see fit, and that requires of the state that it be neutral as among all the religions and comprehensive perspectives represented in society”.<sup>31</sup> At the core liberal democracy, then, lie three ideas: (1) Equal protection under law, (2) Equal freedom in law, (3) Neutrality of the state.<sup>32</sup> Wolterstorff has no quarrel whatsoever with liberal democracy on these three core ideas. On the contrary, he embraces them himself.

But to Wolterstorff, liberal democracy is an ideal type. Exemplification of this ideal type “requires decisions at a multitude of different points, and often it is not clear exactly what the decisions ought to be concerning the arrangements and practices necessary for equal protection, equal freedom, equal voice, and state

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<sup>26</sup> Wolterstorff, “Why We Should Reject What Liberalism Tells Us About Speaking and Acting in Public for Religious Reasons,” pp. 162–181.

<sup>27</sup> Wolterstorff, “The Role of Religion in Political Issues,” pp. 67–20.

<sup>28</sup> Wolterstorff, “Why We Should Reject What Liberalism Tells Us About Speaking and Acting in Public for Religious Reasons,” p. 163.

<sup>29</sup> Wolterstorff, “Why We Should Reject What Liberalism Tells Us About Speaking and Acting in Public for Religious Reasons,” p. 163.

<sup>30</sup> Wolterstorff, “The Role of Religion in Political Issues,” p. 72.

<sup>31</sup> Wolterstorff, “The Role of Religion in Political Issues,” p. 70.

<sup>32</sup> Wolterstorff, “The Role of Religion in Political Issues,” p. 70.

neutrality”.<sup>33</sup> Wolterstorff disagrees with many liberal political philosophers on how to exemplify liberal democracy best.

In fact, “the liberal position” is not a single political position, but a family of positions that represent a certain kind of attempt in the exemplification of the idea of liberal democracy. What unites these positions, Wolterstorff says, is “the neutrality postulate”.<sup>34</sup> The neutrality postulate consists of the following two theses:

*(1) The Independent-Basis Thesis (Religious-Reason Restraint)*

The independent-basis thesis postulates that, in order to achieve equality among citizens, it is necessary that members of a liberal democratic society base their decisions on reasons accessible to all. On this thesis, the proper basis of any political debate or public decision-making should be “the principles yielded by some source that is independent of any and all of the religious perspectives to be found in the society”.<sup>35</sup> Wolterstorff also calls this thesis “religious-reason restraint”<sup>36</sup> as it strictly forbids religious arguments being a promise in a public discussion.

*(2) The Separation View (Neutrality as Seperation)*

The separation view is a way of understanding state neutrality. In liberal democracies, the state is expected to be neutral in its treatment of the various religions found in the society. Wolterstorff argues that there are two possible ways to understand this neutrality: One is “the impartiality view” and the other is “the separation view”. The impartiality view says, “government and its agents

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<sup>33</sup> Wolterstorff, “The Role of Religion in Political Issues,” p. 70.

<sup>34</sup> Wolterstorff, “Why We Should Reject What Liberalism Tells Us About Speaking and Acting in Public for Religious Reasons,” p. 166.

<sup>35</sup> Wolterstorff, “Why We Should Reject What Liberalism Tells Us About Speaking and Acting in Public for Religious Reasons,” p. 166.

<sup>36</sup> Wolterstorff, “The Role of Religion in Political Issues,” p. 75.

ought to treat all religions impartially”. This is not the view the liberal position holds. According to Wolterstorff, the liberal position understands neutrality as “separation” and argues that “government is to do nothing to advance or hinder any religion”.<sup>37</sup> These two different interpretations can have significant effects on public policies. Wolterstorff gives the example of the state aid to schools: “The impartiality position says that if the state aids any school, it must aid all schools, and aid them all equitably —no matter what their religious orientation. The separation position says that the state is to aid no school whose orientation is religious”.<sup>38</sup>

“The independent-basis thesis” combined with “the separation view” constitutes what Wolterstorff calls “the neutrality postulate”. The liberal position, with its neutrality postulate, leaves no room for religion in public debates. Its religious-reason restraint argues that the ideal citizens of a liberal democracy would not even have religiously-based political views, let alone bringing them to the public space. And its interpretation of neutrality as separation precludes any healthy engagement between the state and its religious communities. Rorty’s initial position seems to fall within the family of positions Wolterstorff combines under the name of “the liberal position”. Thus Wolterstorff’s criticisms of the liberal position apply to Rorty’s initial position as well.

Wolterstorff finds the neutrality postulate arbitrary and unjustified. Why does the liberal position hold the independent-basis thesis? Why does it interpret neutrality as separation? What is it that demands something like the neutrality postulate? “What difference does it make”, Wolterstorff asks, “what reasons citizens use in making their decisions and conducting their debates, if the positions they advocate do not violate the idea of liberal democracy?”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Wolterstorff, “Why We Should Reject What Liberalism Tells Us About Speaking and Acting in Public for Religious Reasons,” p. 165.

<sup>38</sup> Wolterstorff, “Why We Should Reject What Liberalism Tells Us About Speaking and Acting in Public for Religious Reasons,” p. 165; Wolterstorff, “The Role of Religion in Political Issues,” p. 76.

<sup>39</sup> Wolterstorff, “The Role of Religion in Political Issues,” p. 77.

It is a ubiquitous worry, Wolterstorff acknowledges, that gives rise to the liberal position. The worry is that letting religious reasons enter into politics is too dangerous for the sustainability of the healthy liberal democracy in which equality among citizens and state neutrality can be achieved. He summarize it as the following: “Religion stirs up too many passions. The amity of society will be endangered and, thereby, the stability and endurance of the state”.<sup>40</sup> “The only way to forestall religious wars is to get people to stop invoking God and to stop invoking canonical scriptures when arguing and determining politics”.<sup>41</sup>

Wolterstorff thinks the plausibility of this worry depends on the time and the context. He argues that it might have been appropriate for a 17th century intellectual to see religion as a divisive force in politics, but the worry is unfounded in 20th century America. He writes that social peace in seventeenth century England “did depend on getting citizens to stop invoking God, canonical scriptures, and religious authorities when discussing politics in public”, but contemporary America has behind it “a long history of religious tolerance”.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the worry is not only unfounded, but it is also misguided. Religion is not the only thing that stirs up passions and wreaks havoc with democratic societies. Many different sorts of secular ideologies do exactly the same thing:

[S]o far as I can see, the slaughter, torture, and generalized brutality of our century has mainly been conducted in the name of one and another secularism: nationalisms of many sorts, communism, fascism, patriotisms of various sorts, economic hegemony. The common denominator is that human beings tend to kill and brutalize each other for what they care deeply about. In seventeenth-century Europe, human beings care deeply about religion. In our century, most seem to have cared much more deeply about one and another secular cause. Liberalism’s

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<sup>40</sup> Wolterstorff, “The Role of Religion in Political Issues,” p. 78.

<sup>41</sup> Wolterstorff, “The Role of Religion in Political Issues,” p. 78.

<sup>42</sup> Wolterstorff, “The Role of Religion in Political Issues,” p. 79.



myopic preoccupation with religious wars is outdated.<sup>43</sup>

If this is the case, then religious-reason restraint offered by the liberal position is unfair. The restraint, if there is to be one, should involve all anti-democratic reasons and arguments, be they religious kind or secular kind.

### 4.2.3 Stout: Yes to “Open Conversation”, No to “Common Principles”

Jeffrey Stout shares pretty much the same views with Wolterstorff on the place of religion in public. In *Democracy and Tradition*, Stout makes the case that the liberal restraint on religious reasons is not only arbitrary, but also inconsistent with the very idea of democracy championed by Rorty himself. In the book, Stout offers another pragmatist approach that “appropriates the most promising features of Rorty’s work while steering clear of its philosophical and stylistic excesses”.<sup>44</sup> That is to say, Stout criticizes Rorty for failing to be Rortian enough on this particular issue. He sees Rorty as fluctuating between two commitments: His commitment to pluralism and his commitment to secularism. “Like Rawls”, writes Stout,

Rorty tends to waver between a form of pluralism that in principle ought to welcome the expression of religious as well as secular outlooks in political contexts and a relatively aggressive form of secular liberalism that appears to exclude views unlike his own from public life.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Wolterstorff, “Why We Should Reject What Liberalism Tells Us About Speaking and Acting in Public for Religious Reasons,” p. 167.

<sup>44</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 296.

<sup>45</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 295.

Rorty's tendency for aggressive secularism, however, harms the better promises of his approach; such as the promise of a pluralistic democracy which involves "strangers and enemies, as well as fellow citizens, in the verbal process of holding one another responsible", or the promise of a democratic program that is able to cross "cultural boundaries" and draw "undemocratic individuals and groups into the exchange of reasons".<sup>46</sup>

To achieve these promises, Stout suggests a more modest pragmatism.<sup>47</sup> He proposes to discard Rawls' conception of justice and reasonableness, but retain the idea that we owe reasons to one another in politics.<sup>48</sup> He also recommends we follow "Rorty's ideal of conversation" and ditch "the quest for principles that no reasonable person could reasonably reject".<sup>49</sup> I believe Stout is very much aware that Rorty's approach has this modesty in the sense that Rorty also rejects the concept of reason as something that is common to all people. Rorty does not appeal to any universal notion of truth, or reason, or even justice, in his defence of the religious-reasons restraint. On these, Stout and Rorty are on the same page.

What bothers Stout is Rorty's affirmation of "the contractarian argument for restraint": the argument that religious liberty is achieved thanks to a social contract wherein religious people agree to keep their religious convictions private.<sup>50</sup> Stout does not fully associate Rorty with contractarianism: He acknowledges that there is a philosophical difference between the contractarians and Rorty in that "Rorty does not say that employing religious premises in public conversation violates a universally justifiable principle of respect".<sup>51</sup> Stout also says that they are different in their nature:

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<sup>46</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, pp. 13, 14.

<sup>47</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 251.

<sup>48</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 184.

<sup>49</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 10.

<sup>50</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 75.

<sup>51</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 86.

The contractarian program of restraint is a moralistic one. Richard Rorty's argument for restraint in "Religion as Conversation-Stopper" is pragmatic. He claims that the public expression of religious premises is likely to bring a potentially productive democratic conversation grinding to a halt.<sup>52</sup>

These differences, however, does not translate to their political program. "Rorty sounds a bit like a contractarian", Stout writes, "when he endorses what he calls the 'Jeffersonian compromise that the Enlightenment reached with the religious'."<sup>53</sup> This is because "the Jeffersonian compromise implies the same program of restraint that the social contract does without having the same purported epistemic status and without being expressed in the same moralistic tone."<sup>54</sup> They might be different positions with respect to their philosophical postulates, but in practice they advocate the same political program.

"The contractarian position" Stout criticizes sounds more or less the same with "the liberal position" Wolterstorff criticize. And although Rorty is not exactly a representative of either, he is still guilty of promoting the same religious restraint. That is to say, the epistemological criticisms Stout and Wolterstorff have against liberal/contractarian position do not apply to Rorty. But their political/pragmatic criticisms do.

Of these political criticisms, I have mentioned Wolterstorff's claim that it is unwarranted of liberals that they worry so much about the political dangers of religion. Their worry is outdated, because we have a long history of religious tolerance. Our democracy is not that fragile, allowing religious arguments in public debates will not lead to its demise. Thinking that just by allowing religious arguments in politics we are paving the way to religious violence is naive. It is also unjust that liberals' worry only extends to religion, because religious arguments

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<sup>52</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 85.

<sup>53</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 86.

<sup>54</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 86.

are just like any other political arguments. They are no more or less dangerous than their secular alternatives.

Stout's criticism is that religious restraint is not only based on improper assumptions, but it also does democracy a disservice. Contractarianism, argues Stout, describes democracy incorrectly and gives reasons to religious right to be the enemy of democracy. It alienates its religious citizens and causes a traditionalist backlash. The more liberals insist on keeping religion away from politics, the more disdainful religious right become of democracy:

The contractarian position has a descriptive component and a normative component. The descriptive component is an account of what the norms of democratic political culture involve. It distills a rigorist interpretation of the idea of public reason out of various commitments that are found in that culture. The normative component endorses a principle of restraint as a consequence of that interpretation. I worry that religious individuals who accept the descriptive component of contractarianism as a faithful reconstruction of what the norms of democratic political culture involve will, understandably, view this as a reason for withdrawing from that culture. Why should one identify with the democratic process of reason-exchange if the norms implicit in that process are what the contractarians say they are?<sup>55</sup>

This is partly because one of the major functions of religious traditions is “to confer order on highly important values and concerns.”<sup>56</sup> It is inevitable that some of these values and concerns will have political relevance. It is unrealistic to expect people's religious commitments to have no influence on their political decisions. If that is the case, then it turns out that what contractarians (and Rorty) ask of religious people is to hide their real motives and reasons when participating public debates. If the contrarian demand is that religious people only appeal to public

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<sup>55</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 75.

<sup>56</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 9.

reason in their political engagements, then this means that religious people should replace their genuine, religious reasons with other, fabricated reasons to comply with the religious reason restraint. This makes liberal democracy look hypocritical. Contractarians purport to value free religious expression but they forbid any and all meaningful expressions of people's religious identities in the public/political space. This hypocrisy causes religious intellectuals to be contemptuous of liberal democracy. It causes them to see liberalism as "a secularist ideology that masks a discriminatory program for policing what religious people can say in public".<sup>57</sup>

"The truth in contractarian argument for restraint", writes Stout, "is that it would indeed be ideal if we could resolve any given political controversy on the basis of reasons that none of us could reasonably reject".<sup>58</sup> The promise of common basic premises all of us will agree on is very appealing, Also appealing is the thought that our political controversies can be resolved with reference to these premises. But it is, at best, naïve to assume that there are such basic premises. Even if we miraculously were able to agree on them, there is no evidence that "all important controversies can be resolved on this sort of basis".<sup>59</sup> In fact, appeal to commonly accepted premises only rarely work. If we were to be limited with only the arguments from common premises, it would be impossible for us to make any meaningful progress on the majority of contemporary political issues ("welfare assistance, punishment, military policy, abortion, euthanasia, environmental policy" etc.). Thus, Stout concludes, "it seems unwise to treat the idea of public reason as if it entailed an all-purpose principle of restraint".<sup>60</sup> Public reason, to Stout, is not a formula to set the rules for political engagement, but it is a vague ideal. One should be able to pursue that ideal by arguing from universally justifiable premises when this seems "both wise and possible", but one should also be able to pursue

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<sup>57</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 76.

<sup>58</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 75.

<sup>59</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 75.

<sup>60</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 75.

other argumentative strategies when public reason seems limiting, unpromising or unwise.<sup>61</sup>

It is also of concern to Stout that citizens be encouraged to take honest and active participation in public debates. When a public/political question arises, citizens are faced with three options: (1) Remain silent, (2) support or argue against a policy by appealing to common principles, and (3) support or argue against a policy by stating your real reasons/motivations.<sup>62</sup> The contractarian restraint limits these options to the first two, as it does not allow private reasons in the public arena, especially when they are of religious nature. That, in turn, promotes citizens to be more and more silent, especially in cases where option (2) is either very difficult or even impossible to pursue. Stout agrees with Rorty that the expression of private reasons “sometimes leads to discursive impasse in political debate”. But considering that option (2) is often unavailable, we better not be so afraid of occurrences of such impasses, but rather aim to find a way to work around them when they arise.<sup>63</sup> If the reason for excluding private reasons from public debates is that they may create an impasse (i.e., they may temporarily stop the conversation), then that does not seem to be a good enough reason. The focus should not be on avoiding impasses, but rather on overcoming them. The former (contractarian/Rortian) approach would “leave a long list of important political issues both unresolved and, even more implausibly, unaddressed” and thus, harms democracy.<sup>64</sup>

Stout also agrees with Rorty’s assessment that “employing religious premises in public conversation” can be “in bad taste”.<sup>65</sup> But they disagree as to (1) the universality of this assessment, and (2) why it may be in bad taste to do so. Rorty thinks that it is always in bad taste to bring religion into public arena. Stout thinks it only sometimes is, and not for the reasons Rorty states:

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<sup>61</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 75.

<sup>62</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 88.

<sup>63</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 11.

<sup>64</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 89.

<sup>65</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 86.

There are in fact many situations in which the introduction of religious premises into a political argument seems a sign of bad taste or imprudence on the part of a speaker (...). The reason that relying on religious premises is often imprudent when debating matters of public policy is not, however, that it violates a compromise supposedly reached between "the Enlightenment" and "the religious." It is rather that, in a setting as religiously divided as ours is, one is unlikely to win support for one's political proposals on most issues simply by appealing to religious considerations.<sup>66</sup>

And finally, Stout has an issue with Rorty's famous claim that religion is a conversation-stopper. "Is it true that religion is essentially a conversation-stopper?", he asks, questioning the unpragmatic premises of this claim: "I would have thought that the pragmatic line should be that religion is not essentially anything, that the conversational utility of employing religious premises in political arguments depends on the situation."<sup>67</sup> Faith-claims (the claims where "one avows a cognitive commitment without claiming entitlement to that commitment, and then refuses to give additional reasons for accepting the claim in question")<sup>68</sup> can in fact cause the exchange of reasons to come grinding to a halt, but that is not a reason to single out religion as a conversation-stopper. It is neither the case that religious claims are always faith-claims ("It is possible to assert a premise that is religious in content and stand ready to demonstrate one's entitlement to it") nor that faith-claims are always religious claims ("Everyone holds some beliefs on nonreligious topics without claiming to know that they are true").<sup>69</sup>

"What makes some people religious is that the vocabularies in which they tell the stories of their lives—including their stories of our common political life—have

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<sup>66</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 86.

<sup>67</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 86.

<sup>68</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 86.

<sup>69</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 86.

religious content”.<sup>70</sup> More often than not, these people’s engagement with politics will include a form of religious reasoning, and their political arguments will have a degree of religious content. But that is not to say that these arguments will necessarily be conversation-stopping or anti-democratic. “Like Rorty”, says Stout, religious people “tend to be speechless when pressed for linear reasons for adopting their final vocabularies. But unless those vocabularies become severely problematical, what reason would they have for abandoning them?”<sup>71</sup> Why not forgo the rules of political engagement and let everyone state their genuine reasons, Stout asks:

There are many circumstances in which candor requires full articulation of one’s actual reasons. Even if it does lead to a momentary impasse, there is no reason to view this result as fatal to the discussion. One can always back up a few paces, and begin again, now with a broader conversational objective. It is precisely when we find ourselves in an impasse of this kind that it becomes most advisable for citizens representing various points of view to express their actual reasons in greater detail. For this is the only way we can pursue the objectives of understanding one another’s perspectives, learning from one another through open-minded listening, and subjecting each other’s premises to fair-minded immanent criticism.<sup>72</sup>

That is to say, Stout reminds Rorty the notion of “conversation” that holds a central place in Rorty’s philosophy:

Like the contractarians, when Rorty discusses the role of religion in politics, he completely neglects the potential benefits of ad hoc immanent criticism in overcoming momentary impasses. But he does, in

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<sup>70</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 89.

<sup>71</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 89.

<sup>72</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 90.



other contexts, recognize the value of carrying on a discussion at this level. His name for such discourse in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* was "conversation". (...) The role of edifying philosophy, as Rorty presented it in that book, is to keep discursive exchange going at those very points where "normal" discourse—that is, discourse on the basis of commonly accepted standards—cannot straightforwardly adjudicate between competing claims. Conversation is a good name for what is needed at those points where people employing different final vocabularies reach a momentary impasse. But if we do use the term "conversation" in this way, we shall have to conclude that conversation is the very thing that is not stopped when religious premises are introduced in a political argument. It is only the normal discourse of straightforward argument on the basis of commonly held premises that is stopped. The political discourse of a pluralistic democracy, as it turns out, needs to be a mixture of normal discourse and conversational improvisation. In the discussion of some issues, straightforward argument on the basis of commonly held standards carries us only so far. Beyond that, we must be either silent or conversational. But we can be conversational, in the spirit of Rorty's most edifying philosophical work, only by rejecting the policy of restraint he endorses.<sup>73</sup>

#### **4.2.4 Rorty, Wolterstorff and Stout: Where Does the Real Disagreement Lie?**

The criticisms from both Wolterstorff and Stout have a constructive influence on Rorty. They force Rorty to be more careful and precise about his views on religious reasons. Upon reflecting on them, Rorty no longer sweepingly consider all religious reasons the same.

He makes a distinction, for example, between Wolterstorff's use of Psalm 72 in support of a government-financed health insurance and a homophobe's use of

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<sup>73</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 90.

Leviticus 18:22 against same-sex marriage. He admits that there is no reason the former should not be legal and acceptable:

The fact that Psalm 72 belongs to a set of Scriptures claimed by various ecclesiastical organizations which I regard as politically dangerous is not a good reason to hinder Wolterstorff from citing this Psalm, any more than the fact that many people regard Mill's utilitarianism as morally dangerous is a good reason to stop me citing *On Liberty*. Neither law nor custom should stop either of us from bringing our favorite texts with us into the public square.<sup>74</sup>

On the other hand, he insists that the latter should not be acceptable. "Suppose", he writes,

that someone says that his reason for opposing legislation that permits same-sex marriage (...) is his commitment to the belief that Scripture, and in particular, the familiar homophobic passages in Leviticus and Paul, trump all the arguments in favor of such legislation. Here I cannot help feeling that, though the law should not forbid someone from citing such texts in support of a political position, custom should forbid it. Citing such passages should be deemed not just in bad taste, but as heartlessly cruel, as reckless persecution, as incitement to violence. Religious people who claim a right to express their homophobia in public because it is a result of their religious convictions should, I think, be ashamed of themselves, and should be made to feel ashamed. Such citation should count as hate speech, and be treated as such.<sup>75</sup>

What is it then that differentiates Wolterstorff's appeal to religious reasons in a public debate from that of the hypothetical homophobe's? Rorty thinks his

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<sup>74</sup> Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration," p. 143.

<sup>75</sup> Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration," p. 143.

response “would come pretty close to doing what Carter and Wolterstorff think should not be done: excluding certain appeals to religious conviction from the public square”.<sup>76</sup> But what constitutes this category of “certain appeals to religious conviction” that Rorty wants to exclude? What are the criteria or the principles that differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate appeals to religion? Rorty openly admits that he does not have any criteria or principle.<sup>77</sup> I believe this admission is important in at least two respects:

(1) Rorty makes it clear that he does not think there is something inherently wrong in appealing to religious reasons in public. One’s reasons may refer to all kind of sources, religious ones as well as secular ones. And if they refer to religious sources, such as Bible or Koran, that by itself is no good reason to say that these reasons are politically illegitimate. What makes certain religious reasons politically illegitimate is not the kind of sources they refer to, but the kind of arguments they make when referring to these sources: Arguments that seek to convince the different parties involved in the discussion and thus, to reach a consensus about the best possible outcome are politically legitimate. Arguments that seek to end the conversation by authoritatively dictating what ought to be the outcome, however, are not.

(2) If there is not (and may never be) any adequate philosophical grounds to distinguish illegitimate appeals to religious convictions in public from the legitimate ones, then there are not good enough philosophical reasons to insist on the religious-reason restraint either. This is a clear parting of ways between Rorty and the liberal/contractarian argument for restraint. It also allows Rorty to be able to remedy the majority of Stout’s and Wolterstorff’s concerns. Having said that, however, Rorty still wants to argue that there are historical and empirical reasons to ask for the privatization of religion and the secularization of public.

The following passage from Rorty clearly marks the main point of disagreement between these intellectuals:

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<sup>76</sup> Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” p. 143.

<sup>77</sup> Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” p. 143.

The extent of my agreement with Wolterstorff on philosophical questions leads me to think that my deepest disagreement with him is on empirical matters. We disagree about how much harm is being done in our own day by ecclesiastical organizations.<sup>78</sup>

What is said in this quote is also true for Rorty and Stout. The two mostly agree on the philosophical questions about the matter. That is to say, the disagreement between Rorty and his two critics is not epistemological in essence. What makes them disagree with each other is that they have different fears: Rorty worries that allowing religious arguments in politics will cripple democracy. Wolterstorff is very dismissive of this worry. He calls it “liberalism’s myopic preoccupation with religious wars”.<sup>79</sup> Stout, on the other hand, is not as dismissive of it as Wolterstorff. But he still seems to think that it should not have the role it has in the way we arrange our public/political life. The contractarian fixation (which Rorty seems to share) on this worry is unhealthy exactly because it leads to the religious-reason restraint. Both Wolterstorff and Stout fears that the religious-reason restraint itself is causing democracy a great deal of harm by silencing and alienating religious communities.

Rorty is not convinced. To him, the worry is still very relevant and significant today as it were in 17th century. Wolterstorff is mistaken to think that the real worry is about the possibility of religious wars starting again.<sup>80</sup> “Nowadays the problem”, Rorty writes, “is the sort of everyday peacetime sadism that uses religion to excuse cruelty”.<sup>81</sup> Rorty sees a correlation between this sort of everyday cruelty and public appearances of religion. Allowing religion in public, he presumes, is

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<sup>78</sup> Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” p. 144.

<sup>79</sup> Wolterstorff, “Why We Should Reject What Liberalism Tells Us About Speaking and Acting in Public for Religious Reasons,” p. 167.

<sup>80</sup> The possibility of religious wars starting again is still a legitimate worry to Rorty “because of what is happening in, for example, Northern Ireland or Uttar Pradesh”, but it is not the primary reason. See Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” p. 145.

<sup>81</sup> Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” p. 145.

likely to increase the cruelty while privatizing religion is likely to decrease it. On this, Rorty gives the example of homosexuals in the United States:

[H]omosexuals in the United States (...) find themselves confronting two main enemies: ministers of the Christian religion who cite Leviticus 18:22 and gay-bashers. The former are, unfortunately, considered respectable members of the community. Indeed, they exert very considerable political influence, even at the national level. These ministers sometimes try to distinguish themselves from the gay-bashers by saying that even though sodomy is an abomination, Christians must be kind and merciful even to the most disgusting and shameless sinners. The gays and lesbians, however, persist in thinking that if the churches would stop quoting Leviticus and Paul on the subject of sodomy, would stop saying that tolerance for homosexuals is a mark of moral decline, and would stop using tax-exempt funds to campaign for repeal of pro-gay ordinances and statutes, there would be fewer gay-bashers around.<sup>82</sup>

Just after this paragraph, Rorty also points out that “religious reasons are now pretty much the only reasons brought forward in treating [homosexuals] with contempt.”<sup>83</sup> These passages give a clear insight into why Rorty still insists on the privatization of religion. The way Rorty sees it, the contemporary America (and most likely many other contemporary Western democracies too) faces a *Kulturkampf*, a clash and competition of two cultures, between “a sizable body of opinion that treats gays and lesbians as contemptible and despicable and another body of opinion that treats those who quote Leviticus 18:22 as contemptible and despicable.”<sup>84</sup> Agreeing with his critics, Stout and Wolterstorff, he says that attempts “to draw up rules of engagement for the *Kulturkampf*” and “to find neutral

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<sup>82</sup> Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” p. 146.

<sup>83</sup> Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” p. 146.

<sup>84</sup> Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” p. 146.

rules between the two sides” are hopeless.<sup>85</sup> His insistence on privatization is not an epistemological and/or ethical stand motivated by his philosophical considerations, but it is a political call motivated by pragmatic considerations.

#### 4.2.5 Rorty’s Revised Position

In his revised position, Rorty forgoes his arguments for the religious-reasons restraint, but still calls for the privatization of religion and secularization of public space. In “the secularist utopia” he envisages, the role of religion is still purely private: It helps individuals to find meaning in their lives and serves them as a help in their times of trouble. Yet it does not go beyond “the parish level”.<sup>86</sup>

He wishes for a purely private religion, not because religion is intrinsically wrong or categorically different than other human phenomena, but because it is politically dangerous to bring religion into public debates: “[P]utting political convictions in religious terms gives aid and comfort to ecclesiastical organizations, and thus to religious exclusivism, contempt for people who should be accorded the same respect as the rest of their fellow-citizens.”<sup>87</sup> To Rorty, history suggests that religiously oriented political organizations always do more harm than good; “the occasional Gustavo Gutierrez or Martin Luther King does not compensate for the ubiquitous Joseph Ratzingers and Jerry Falwells”.<sup>88</sup>

But Rorty eventually agrees with pretty much all the points Stout makes: He admits that religion is not essentially a conversation-stopper, but only certain

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<sup>85</sup> Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” p. 148.

<sup>86</sup> Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” p. 142.

<sup>87</sup> Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” 142. This is Rorty’s view, but Rorty does not provide much in the way of argument to support this claim. It seems to be that he thinks it is rather an obvious claim to make. But this view is of course open to challenge. And it is open to challenge precisely on historical and political grounds. On the other hand, however, the very fact that it is open to challenge supports Rorty’s fundamental view, that this is a historical, political debate, not an a priori, philosophical debate.

<sup>88</sup> Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” p. 142.

expressions of religious beliefs are. These conversation-stopping beliefs are defined by their sole appeal to authority.

It is one thing to explain how a given political stance is bound up with one's religious belief, and another to think that it is enough, when defending a political view, simply to cite authority, scriptural or otherwise.

It is OK for Christian believers to have Christian reasons for supporting redistribution of wealth or opposing same-sex marriage, but I am not sure it counts as having such reasons if the person who finds such marriage inconceivable is unwilling or unable even to discuss, for example, the seeming tension between Leviticus 22:18 and I Corinthians 13. The believer's fellow citizens should not take her as offering a reason unless she can say a lot more than that a certain ecclesiastical institution holds a certain view, or that such an institution insists that a given Scriptural passage be taken seriously, and at face value.<sup>89</sup>

If something should not be allowed in liberal democracies, then, it should be "a mere appeal to authority".<sup>90</sup> This mere appeal to authority is what stops the conversation. Stout is right in pointing out that these conversation-stopping attitudes are not exclusive to religious people. It is not uncommon that non-religious citizens appeal to the sources they hold dear in the same authoritative way. Granting Stout's point, Rorty writes: "instead of saying that religion was a conversation-stopper, I should have simply said that citizens of a democracy should try to put off invoking conversation-stoppers as long as possible."<sup>91</sup>

What then, in the end, does Rorty's revised position come down to? What does it say about the legitimacy of using religious reasons in public debates? Does

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<sup>89</sup> Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration," p. 147.

<sup>90</sup> Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration," p. 147.

<sup>91</sup> Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration," p. 148.

it allow some forms of religious arguments and forbids others, or does it still ask that we should keep politics free of any religious arguments in the same way the liberal/contractarian position does?

Correspondingly, if it allows some forms of religious reasons in public debates, then what are the consequences of this revised view on Rorty's private-public distinction? If private convictions can be brought into public as political arguments, then what is the point in insisting on this distinction in the first place? Does Rorty contradict himself by allowing private beliefs to appear in public discourse?

I believe the first set of questions is already answered: The kind of religious arguments that do not seek to stop the conversation by a mere appeal to authority should be allowed, both by law and by custom, in public debates. Rorty, however, cannot help but put a caveat on this: It would still be better, he says, for the sake of democracy and solidarity, if religious people would restrain themselves from using religious arguments and language in politics, for no other reason than to avoid unintentionally empowering harmful ecclesiastical organizations.

The second set of questions, on the other hand, is a result of a misunderstanding: In his revised position, Rorty agrees with both Stout and Wolterstorff that religious people may rightfully have religious reasons to support certain public policies. This, however, does not mean that Rorty concedes to the view that private convictions can serve as proper political reasons. All Rorty concedes is that religious people should be allowed to refer to their private religious reasons to express and explain their support for a public policy. If there is a debate on that policy, however, and if they are to argue for their public/political stance, then their private religious convictions are inadequate to serve as legitimate public/political reasons.

To make this point more clear, let me refer to an example Wolterstorff gives in both of his articles:

Recently a group of Christians, organized as the Christian Environment Council, appeared in Washington D.C. Addressing the national



media and the congressional leadership, they spoke up in support of endangered species, declaring themselves opposed to "any Congressional action that would weaken, hamper, reduce or end the protection, recovery, and preservation of God's creatures, including their habitats, especially as accomplished under the Endangered Species Act." The heart of the reason they offered was that "according to the Scriptures, the earth is the Lord's and all that dwells within it (Psalm 24:1), and the Lord shows concern for every creature (Matthew 6:26)".<sup>92</sup>

Wolterstorff then argues that the liberal position, with its religious-reason restraint, wants to silence such appeals. It unfairly demands the Christian Environmental Council to leave their religious terminology and reasons at home. When in Washington, it asks them to speak on an independent basis. Wolterstorff cannot see why this demand even exists:

Instead of forbidding the Christian Environment Council to offer its religious reasons in the public space, why not invite them to continue saying with civility what they do believe for such reasons as they do in fact have for their beliefs—which in this case are religious reasons? Why not invite others to do the same? And why not invite and urge all of them then to listen to each other, genuinely to listen, changing their minds as they feel the force of the testimony and argumentation of others, in this way slowly coming to so much agreement as is necessary for the task at hand? (...) Why not let people say what they want, but insist that they say it with civility?<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Wolterstorff, "The Role of Religion in Political Issues," p. 112; (and almost with the same words) Wolterstorff, "Why We Should Reject What Liberalism Tells Us About Speaking and Acting in Public for Religious Reasons," p. 189.

<sup>93</sup> Wolterstorff, "Why We Should Reject What Liberalism Tells Us About Speaking and Acting in Public for Religious Reasons," p. 180.

What does this civility entail here? If it entails a concern for one's fellow humans, or a concern for the equality among citizens, then, in his revised position, Rorty seems to agree completely with Wolterstorff. Members of the council should be free to cite Psalm 24:1, Matthew 6:26 or any other part of Scripture in Washington, since (1) these are the passages that moved them to support their cause, and (2) they do not seek to discriminate or degrade other citizens of the society by citing such passages.

But, one can imagine, Rorty would also argue that citing Scripture does not count as providing reasons for the said policy. Such citations may do their job in explaining why one holds the position one holds, but they do not say much about why others should also consider holding the same position, or supporting the same policy. It is in this sense Rorty still can argue that private religious convictions are not fit to be public reasons. Wolterstorff seems to acknowledge this point too. He writes:

Let it be added that if they [Members of the Christian Environmental Council] want to persuade those who do not accept the Hebrew or Christian Bible as authoritative, they will of course have to find and offer other, additional reasons for their positions. Whether or not a reason for a position is appropriate depends not only on the position but on one's purpose. Reasons are used for doing different things.<sup>94</sup>

Inadvertently or not, I want to argue, Wolterstorff takes a completely pragmatic view here, which is also very much in line with Rorty's private versus public distinction: One can have all kinds of private reasons to hold a position, but if one is seeking to persuade one's fellow citizens, then one needs to use reasons that are not just based on private convictions, but also conveyable and justifiable to others. Saying that "[r]easons are used for doing different things", Wolterstorff acknowledges that certain reasons can be appropriate or inappropriate for certain purposes. The purpose of political/public debates is to create a space in which

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<sup>94</sup> Wolterstorff, "The Role of Religion in Political Issues," p. 112.

citizens can seek to persuade their fellow citizens to agree with what they think is the best way forward with civility. Iterating private convictions, Rorty says in his revised position, seems rather inappropriate for this purpose.

Lastly, there is one more issue I would like to discuss. I have mentioned that Stout repeatedly criticizes Rorty for adopting a “relatively aggressive form of secular liberalism” on the matter, “that appears to exclude views unlike his own from public life”.<sup>95</sup> The form of liberalism Rorty adopts is not only against the spirit of pluralism, but also “unwittingly fuel[s] the resentment of the secular” among the religious.<sup>96</sup> In “An Engagement with Rorty”, Wolterstorff goes one step further and accuses Rorty for being antidemocratic, and even menacing towards democracy. He quotes a passage in which Rorty praises Dewey on his vision of the socialization and education of American children:

For Dewey, this socialization [the socialization American children should receive] consisted in acquiring an image of themselves as heirs to a tradition of increasing liberty and rising hope. Updating Dewey a bit, we can think of him as wanting the children to come to think of themselves as proud and loyal citizens of a country that, slowly and painfully, threw off a foreign yoke, freed its slaves, enfranchised its women, restrained its robber barons and licensed its trade unions, liberalized its religious practices, broadened its religious and moral tolerance, and built colleges in which 50 per cent of its population could enroll — a country that numbered Jefferson, Thoreau, Susan B. Anthony, Eugene Debs, Woodrow Wilson, Walter Reuther, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Rosa Parks and James Baldwin among its citizens. Dewey wanted the inculcation of this narrative of freedom and hope to be the core of the socializing process.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 295.

<sup>96</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 92.

<sup>97</sup> Rorty, R. (1999). Education as Socialization and Individualization. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin Books, pp. 121–122.

Wolterstorff finds this passage, and Rorty's writings on privatization of religion in general, rather threatening and thus unacceptable. He writes:

Do you understand why I as a religious person find this menacing—why it sounds to me like yet one more example of Big Brother trying to get us all to shape up, not this time around to get us all to shape up into becoming good compliant Nazis or good compliant Communists or good compliant nationalists, rather, to get us all to shape up into becoming good compliant Darwinian pragmatists? I am opposed to a government and a state school system that tries to make us all good Darwinian pragmatists, because I am opposed to a government and a state school system that tries to make us good adherents of any comprehensive perspective whatsoever. I do not want the Darwinian pragmatist telling me that my religion should not be expressed in institutional and public form; I will make up my own mind about that. It was for everybody to be free from all such governmental intrusion that the ideal of a liberal democracy emerged from the seedbed of the religious wars of Europe in the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth. It was to be free from such governmental intrusion that religious people fought alongside others for liberal democracy. It was for such freedom that their blood was spilled.<sup>98</sup>

I want to argue that this is an unfair characterization of Rorty's views even for his initial position, but it is certainly very unfair for his revised position. It should be clear by now, at this point in this thesis, that Rorty cares very much about the freedom of individuals in their private self-creation projects, which includes their religious beliefs. It takes a particularly uncharitable reading to interpret the above passage as Rorty attempting to be another "Big Brother trying to get us all to shape up into (...) becoming good compliant Darwinian pragmatists". Rorty does not mean this passage to serve as the instructions for proper government intrusion

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<sup>98</sup> Wolterstorff, N. (2003). An Engagement with Rorty. *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, (13), 138, p. 138.

to school education. He does not suggest that the privatization of religion should be realized by the hand of a government, as a top-down policy implementation. But he sees it as a move in cultural politics. This move is to be achieved by convincing more and more people in seeing religion and religious beliefs in the way Darwinian pragmatist do.

Wolterstorff is right: “If Rorty had his way the elementary and secondary schools of American society would socialize their students into the American Sublime”.<sup>99</sup> This statement is only true, however, because if Rorty had his way, a dominant portion of the society would be so convinced that Darwinian pragmatism is the way to go, not because Rorty would promote an antidemocratic policy that would allow governmental intrusion to individual’s religious freedoms. Rorty is not a politician. For him to have his way means to find more venues to express his views and to have a better, stronger, more effective outreach. Thus, in an imaginary society where he fully had his way, the majority of teachers and lecturers would be naturally inclined to socialize the children into Rorty’s vision. There would be no Big Brother-like governmental intrusions, but rather a culture which is highly influenced by certain powerful ideas and thus seeks to organize itself around those ideas. In the actual American society, where Rorty does not have his way, what he can do, at best, is taking an intellectual side in a *Kulturkampf*.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Wolterstorff, “An Engagement with Rorty,” p. 138. “The American Sublime” is a phrase Rorty borrows from Wallace Stevens and Harold Bloom. Wolterstorff here refers to the phrase as indicating Rorty’s (and Dewey’s) vision of democracy in which “democratic institutions are good for making possible the invention of new forms of human freedom, taking liberties never taken before”; see: Rorty, “Education as Socialization and Individualization,” p. 126 This Rortian (and Deweyan) characterization of democracy is different than Wolterstorff’s account of democracy, which argues that “it is the genius of liberal democracy to guarantee certain basic rights and liberties to its citizens and resident aliens, and to assure access by all normal adults to fair voting procedures”; see: Wolterstorff, “An Engagement with Rorty,” p. 137

<sup>100</sup> Rorty sees his contemporary America as having “a standoff between a sizable body of opinion that treats gays and lesbians as contemptible and despicable and another body of opinion that treats those who quote Leviticus 18:22 as contemptible and despicable”. He argues that “the former say that the latter are offensive to religious sensibilities. The latter say that the former are merely hiding sadistic grins behind sanctimonious masks. They are two sides of a *Kulturkampf*.” And then, later on in the same article, he says “when I am told by Stout that opponents of humility such as Hauerwas, MacIntyre and Milbank are now favored over Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr by students in Protestant seminaries, I fear for the republic. This bad news leads me to

Equating this to an antidemocratic stance in which Rorty's views appear as rather totalitarian seems to me an unfair characterization.

In fact, the following passage from Rorty's article on the contemporary state of English departments in America provides a great example to illustrate his aversion towards any such totalitarian tendencies. In the article, Rorty mentions that he finds the rise of "cultural studies" in English departments dangerous. But then, he writes:

"If cultural studies achieves the hegemony currently being predicted, this will have been achieved not by violence or by fraud, but by persuasion; it will have employed the same honorable means which analytic philosophy employed when it rose to hegemony. Just as it would have been a disaster for the universities to have frozen analytic philosophy out (...), so it would be a disaster for universities to try to suppress cultural studies. Analogously, it would have been a disaster for the American left to have manned the barricades in November of 1980, in an effort to set aside the free election, by the citizens of a great republic, of a disastrous first magistrate. Sometimes, even in a free and open encounter —an encounter of words rather than blows— the barbarian candidate wins."<sup>101</sup>

This, I believe, is a great example, since Rorty here openly encourages a free and open encounter of words (rather than blows), even when the odds are against him, in a matter he sees highly important for the future of university education. Even if we were to overlook Rorty's insistence on the significance of individual freedom, this passage itself would be enough reason to resist Wolterstorff's reading of Rorty.

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return to the Kulturkampf with redoubled vigor"; see: Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration," pp. 146, 148.

<sup>101</sup> Rorty, R. (1994). Tales of Two Disciplines. *Callaloo*, 17(2), pp. 583–584.

## Chapter 5

# Democracy Before Religion

In one of his articles, Rorty argues that our commitment to democracy should always come before our philosophical/metaphysical commitments. The article is named, unsurprisingly, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy”. We might rephrase this priority as “the priority of democracy to religion”, as Rorty thinks the commitment to democracy should come before any religious commitments as well. Or we might put this claim in broader terms: the public has to have a certain priority over private.

It is one thing to claim that religious belief can be blamelessly privatized: It can be thought of as unjustified yet still legitimate personal faith and it can still carry a lot of significance and importance as it helps individuals to find meaning and value in their lives. I believe Rorty has a robust case for this claim. In chapters 2 and 3, I explained, and discussed this claim by comparing it to James and Dewey’s positions on the matter. I also defended Rorty’s stance on unjustified private faith against W. K. Clifford who I take to be its strongest critic to this date.

A further claim can be made that not just our personal, incommunicable beliefs can be privatized, but also religion, in the more communal, interpersonal sense, can still be thought of as a private project, as far as politics is concerned. I discussed this claim in chapter 4. I suggested that Rorty makes this claim in his later, revised position and provided a charitable reading of it.

It is very different, however, to claim that our public commitments should come before our private beliefs. Religious faith, regardless of its significance to one's identity or worldview, should in no circumstances overrule democratic processes. That is to say, when (public) democracy and (private) religion clash, (public) democracy should take precedence. My intuitive response to this claim is to agree with it. I presume, in Western democratic societies, the majority of people would have the same intuitive response. However, there are different ways to make this claim and not everyone is happy with the way Rorty makes it.

This chapter will discuss questions such as: what the priority of public means and entails, can it be justified, and what are the implications of this discussion on the place of religion in democratic societies. In the former half I will focus on articulating Rorty's position on the matter, that is how and why Rorty makes and defends the priority of democracy over religion. And in the latter half, I will engage with his critics, Paul Wheatman and Robert Talisse.

## 5.1 The Priority of Public to Private

As discussed in the fourth chapter, Rorty's revised position is accepting towards both religious and non-religious contributions to politics, as long as they are not "mere appeals to authority", at least in principle.<sup>1</sup> In "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy", he makes a similar point by defining a category of citizens as "fanatical". Fanaticism, to Rorty, is the inability to abandon or modify one's private opinions if/when these opinions entail public actions that cannot be justified to most of their fellow citizens. When confronted with such a conflict, citizens must abandon or modify their private opinions, says Rorty, even if these opinions are "on matters of ultimate of importance" and "may hitherto have given sense and point to their lives".<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I say, in principle, since Rorty is still not very enthusiastic about using a religious language in political discussions as he worries that it might have the unintended side effect of empowering harmful ecclesiastical organizations.

<sup>2</sup> Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," p. 381.



To avoid fanaticism, Rorty believes it is necessary for the citizens to make a compromise. This compromise consists in giving up on following further spiritual perfection when the actions and beliefs leading to such individual perfection conflict with public policy and cannot be reasonably thought of as a new policy proposal that society may agree upon. A policy proposal that favors a particular group within the society exclusively, for example, and causes unjust disadvantages to others, cannot be thought as a reasonable proposal.

Rorty refers to this compromise in several places and calls it “the Jeffersonian compromise”<sup>3</sup> or “the Enlightenment compromise”.<sup>4</sup> But what is the justification for it? On what grounds, can liberal democracy ask its citizens to make such a compromise? Rorty says that, historically, there have been two ways to go about arguing for this compromise. He calls them “absolutist” and “pragmatic”. The absolutist argument, he writes, “says that every human being, without the benefit of special revelation, has all the beliefs necessary for civic virtue. These beliefs spring from a universal human faculty, conscience —possession of which constitutes the specifically human essence of each human being. This is the faculty that gives the individual human dignity and rights.”<sup>5</sup> The pragmatic argument, on the other hand, focuses on public expediency. It says that “when the individual finds in her conscience beliefs that are relevant to public policy but incapable of defense on the basis of beliefs common to her fellow citizens, she must sacrifice her conscience on the altar of public expediency” for this seems “a reasonable price to pay for religious liberty”.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the justification for the compromise is that, without it, we risk ending up in religious wars and the oppression by the powerful or the majority.

Rorty also mentions the attempt to bring these two arguments together. The attempt, as he summarizes it, goes as following:

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<sup>3</sup> Rorty, “Religion as Conversation-Stopper,” p. 169.

<sup>4</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 386.

<sup>5</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 381.

<sup>6</sup> Rorty, “Religion as Conversation-Stopper,” p. 123.

[T]here is a relation between the ahistorical essence of the human soul and moral truth, a relation which ensures that free and open discussion will produce “one right answer” to moral as well as to scientific questions. [...] [A] moral belief that cannot be justified to the mass of mankind is “irrational,” and thus is not really a product of our moral faculty at all. Rather, it is a “prejudice,” a belief that comes from some other part of the soul than “reason.” It does not share in the sanctity of conscience, for it is the product of a sort of pseudoconscience —something whose loss is no sacrifice, but a purgation.<sup>7</sup>

Rorty thinks that, in our century, this theory is largely discredited. He himself also argues not only against this theory, but also against the attempts to construct any such theories, for the reasons I have discussed in the second chapter of this thesis. There are, however, consequences to not having an accommodating theory. For Rorty’s purposes, the two most significant results are (1) the rupture between truth and justification in politics, and (2) the polarization of the liberal social theory into two camps on the notion of “rights” —particularly, human rights. Rorty writes that:

If we stay on the absolutist side, we shall talk about inalienable “human rights” and about “one right answer” to moral and political dilemmas without trying to back up such talk with a theory of human nature. We shall abandon metaphysical accounts of what a right is while nevertheless insisting that everywhere, in all times and cultures, members of our species have had the same rights.<sup>8</sup>

But if we were to abandon this sort of absolutism, and adopt a fully pragmatic attitude, we may as well “consider talk of ‘rights’ an attempt to enjoy the benefits of metaphysics without assuming the appropriate responsibilities.” This, however,

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<sup>7</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” pp. 381, 382.

<sup>8</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 382.

will require us to find a criteria “to distinguish the sort of individual conscience we respect from the sort we condemn as ‘fanatical’“.<sup>9</sup> Here lies the difficult question for Rorty: How can one possibly come up with such a criteria without either referring to a universal, narrative-transcendent truth, or being totally arbitrary? Rorty’s answer does not come across as fully satisfactory and raises new questions:

This can only be something relatively local and ethnocentric —the tradition of a particular community, the consensus of a particular culture. According to this view, what counts as rational or as fanatical is relative to the group to which we think it necessary to justify ourselves —to the body of shared belief that determines the reference of the word “we.”<sup>10</sup>

What Rorty argues, then, comes close to this: The pragmatist justification for the Enlightenment compromise comes down to the following sentiment: “Because we, the heirs of Western intellectual tradition, came to think/believe so”. To put it in a more charitable way, Rorty seems to argue that the reasons as to why we should accept and adopt the Enlightenment compromise are less philosophical, and more historical. They are more to do with the fact that Europe has experienced religious wars and that experience has led the Western intellectual tradition to a consensus. The consensus was that to achieve the most optimal society for all participants, the Enlightenment compromise is necessary.

It is not clear, however, even if that is the case, why one should accept this historical consensus as the best possible solution there is. What if there are better ways to achieve better societies? I do not think Rorty would be closed to the possibility of a future intellectual offering better solutions to the question. Yet it seems like he thinks a better option has not been offered so far. The Enlightenment compromise, he seems to think, is the best idea we currently have.

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<sup>9</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 382.

<sup>10</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 382.

Any further “why” questions, however, do not seem to be answerable for Rorty, at least on this relatively meta-level. The question “why should we believe that what we have come to believe is the best there is”, for example, is a question of this unanswerable kind. Rorty does not think one can properly address this, since there is no point of reference when discussing “the best there is, period”. The good, the better, the best... They always require references to a particular tradition. Thus, Rorty insists, they can only be something “relatively local and ethnocentric”.

To sum up, apart from the arguments about the nature and limits of private and public which I have already discussed in earlier chapters, Rorty has a couple of additional claims about this distinction. He argues (1) that the public has a priority over private, in that, when the two clash, what’s good for public should take precedence, (2) this priority neither can nor should be justified philosophically, in the sense that it cannot be justified with reference to an ahistorical, universal rationality. But the reasons for accepting and adopting this view may be articulated pragmatically, with reference to the history and the shared ideals of one’s own society.

Rorty develops this view with reference to Rawls. Throughout the rest of the chapter, I aim to engage with these claims and the criticisms they encountered. There are two criticisms I will particularly focus on: One is the criticism that Rorty misunderstands and misinterprets Rawls. Paul Wheatman, a political philosophy professor and a pupil of Rawls himself, makes this claim in his most recent book *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*.<sup>11</sup> The other criticism says that Rorty’s characterization of democracy, and particularly his political antifoundationalism, is problematic and hopeless. This criticism is made by a fellow pragmatist intellectual, Robert Talisse. His short essay on the subject is aptly named as “A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty’s Hopeless Pragmatism”.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Wheatman, P. (2016). *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Talisse, R. B. (2001). A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty’s Hopeless Politics. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 39, 611–626.

Before delving into the details of these criticisms, however, I will spend a few pages on how Rorty further explains and better articulates his position while arguing for it against a type of social theory often referred to as “communitarianism”. According to Rorty, communitarian “theorists include Robert Bellah, Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, early Roberto Unger, and many others” and their view is “the view that liberal institutions and culture either should not or cannot survive the collapse of the philosophical justification that the Enlightenment provided for them”.<sup>13</sup> According to this view, pragmatism is not enough to back up liberal democratic institutions. Without the philosophical foundations Enlightenment provided for liberal democracy, neither the culture nor the institutions can (or should) survive. In relation to this view, Rorty identifies three core claims in these intellectuals’ writings, only one of which he believes holds force and needs to be addressed properly.

The first is an empirical/sociological prediction. It argues that societies cannot survive without the idea of an ahistorical truth. Rorty passingly mentions Adorno and Horkheimer suspecting “that you cannot have a moral community in a disenchanted world because toleration leads to pragmatism, and it is not clear how we can prevent, ‘blindly pragmatized thought’ from losing ‘its transcending quality and its relation to truth.’”<sup>14</sup>

The second is a moral judgment. It claims that liberal democratic societies produce undesirable, inferior kinds of people. According to this view, “the advantages of contemporary liberal democracy are outweighed by the disadvantages, by the ignoble and sordid character of the culture and the individual human beings that it produces”.<sup>15</sup> Rorty names MacIntyre here as someone who holds this view,

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<sup>13</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 383.

<sup>14</sup> Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T. W. (1972). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Seabury Press, p. 383.

<sup>15</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 383.

and though he does not explicitly refer to any of his work, one can presume he implicitly refers to *After Virtue*.<sup>16</sup>

And the third is a philosophical claim. It asserts that “political institutions ‘presuppose’ a doctrine about the nature of human beings”.<sup>17</sup> To that assertion, it also adds “such a doctrine must, unlike Enlightenment rationalism, make clear the essentially historical character of the self”. Thus, Rorty says, “we find writers like Taylor and Sandel saying that we need a theory of the self that incorporates Hegel’s and Heidegger’s sense of the self’s historicity”.<sup>18</sup>

These three claims, of course, require thorough engagement to be properly understood and discussed. The breadth and depth of analysis required to thoroughly engage with them, however, is too vast and slightly tangential for the purposes of this chapter. Thus, I will refrain from a critical engagement with communitarianism. Here, my focus and interest will be limited to the extent to which Rorty himself engages with these claims. I will aim to investigate what this engagement reveals about his original view, i.e. the priority of public to private. As for the criticisms of this view, I will turn to Talisse and Wheatman later in this chapter.

## 5.2 Justification of Democracy vs. Articulation of Democracy

Of these three communitarian claims, Rorty finds the third most interesting. The first and second claims are quite “straightforward”, he writes, “[t]he third claim, however, is the most puzzling and complex”.<sup>19</sup> Thus, he spends the majority of his article dissecting and arguing against this third claim and only talks briefly

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<sup>16</sup> MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.

<sup>17</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 383.

<sup>18</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 383.

<sup>19</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 383.

about the other two. The third claim argues that political institutions presuppose a doctrine about the nature of human beings. Communitarian philosophers also offer such a doctrine. Faced with this claim, Rorty suggests asking two questions:

1. Is there “any sense in which liberal democracy ‘needs’ philosophical justification at all”?<sup>20</sup>
2. Is the communitarian doctrine about the nature of human beings indeed the best doctrine we have? Or, to put it in Rorty’s words, “whether a conception of the self that (...) makes ‘the community constitutive of the individual’ does in fact comport better with liberal democracy than does the Enlightenment conception of the self”.<sup>21</sup>

Rorty has no problem answering the second question with a “yes”. He likes the communitarian conception of the self: a less individualistic conception of what it is to be properly human—one that puts less emphasis on autonomy and more on interdependence. He believes that this conception is indeed better than the Enlightenment conception, but he also says that whether it is better or not is not that important at the end. He writes:

I shall also argue that communitarians like Taylor are right in saying that a conception of the self that makes the community constitutive of the self does comport well with liberal democracy. That is, if we want to flesh out our self-image as citizens of such a democracy with a philosophical view of the self, Taylor gives us pretty much the right view. But this sort of philosophical fleshing-out does not have the importance that writers like Horkheimer and Adorno, or Heidegger, have attributed to it.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 383.

<sup>21</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 384.

<sup>22</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 384.

This is because Rorty thinks that coming up with a well-articulated notion of a self and a detailed doctrine on the nature of human beings is not that important for political purposes. One may wish to have a conception of the self for personal and philosophical reasons, but one does not have to for political reasons. This brings us to the first question.

Answering the first question, Rorty makes an interesting distinction between philosophical articulation and philosophical justification. Though he never fully explains what this distinction entails, I believe this distinction is still significant for understanding and interpreting many Rortian ideas. The following passage is where Rorty makes the distinction:

Those who share Dewey's pragmatism will say that although it may need philosophical articulation, it does not need philosophical backup. On this view, the philosopher of liberal democracy may wish to develop a theory of the human self that comports with the institutions he or she admires. But such a philosopher is not thereby justifying these institutions by reference to more fundamental premises, but the reverse: He or she is putting politics first and tailoring a philosophy to suit. Communitarians, by contrast, often speak as though political institutions were no better than their philosophical foundations.<sup>23</sup>

That is to say, one is free to develop a theory of the self. Such a theory can explain in detail how liberal theory comports the best with the nature of human beings. Rorty likes to use the word "inclination" for these kinds of situations. If one is "inclined to philosophize"<sup>24</sup> then one shall want to have such a theory, because one shall want to bring together one's thoughts about the self and about the community. On the other hand, however, Rorty insists that liberal theory does not necessarily need such a theory. Presumably, this is for two reasons:

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<sup>23</sup> Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," p. 384.

<sup>24</sup> Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," p. 390.



1. Rorty does not believe that political institutions' worth relies on the strength of their philosophical foundations. It instead lies on the effectiveness of them achieving certain commonly shared goals: living in harmony, solidarity, peace etc.
2. Rorty does not believe that there is a natural hierarchy between philosophical theories about human nature and political suggestions about how to best organize a society. There is no good reason to assume that the former is more fundamental than the latter, or that the latter needs to be built on top of the former. To him, the former sounds like a private project and the latter sounds like a public one. The former is, at its core, individual's own attempt to make sense of who we are, and what kind of beings we are as humans. The latter, on the other hand, is a collective discussion about the best practices to organize our society so that we can live in the most peaceful and harmonious way.

Rorty admits that these two can be brought together for philosophical reasons. This is what he means by philosophical articulation. One may wish to weave these two projects together for one's own peace of mind. One may find peace in knowing that one's private projects comport perfectly with the public projects one partakes. What Rorty denies is the necessity of such integration.

Here I want to point out an issue to which I will return later: Rorty assumes that the goal of any political thought is to achieve a society in which people live in peace and harmony. This creates a difficult problem for Rorty when confronted with anti-democratic ideas, such as "why living together in peace is something we strive to achieve in the first place? Why not let only one kind of people (the right kind of people) thrive even if it is at the expense of others?" Rorty is very well aware of this problem, but it seems like his way to deal with it is to brush off the anti-democratic arguments as crazy views. He seems to think that there is no way one can win or lose in a philosophical argument about what virtues are the chief virtues. This is where Rorty becomes ethnocentric. This is also where Rorty and Talisse disagree the most. I will say more on this point later.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See: §5.2. Political Problems with Rorty's Politics  
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There is also another problem worth flagging: Throughout the thesis I have argued that Rorty is content with private projects going unjustified but he wants us to justify our claims and beliefs about anything that is relevant to public policy. But what is more relevant to public policy than the system of governance itself under which all the policies and laws will take shape? How come Rorty can argue that democracy does not require justification, since the claim to democracy is by its nature a public claim? Paul O'Grady, my supervisor, brought up this question in one of our thesis discussion sessions and I am not aware of any other philosopher making this criticism against Rorty in this particular form. I will say more on this question/criticism later as well.

Rorty's position, then, can be summarized with one sentence: Liberal democracy may as well accord with various doctrines about the nature of human beings, but it does not require any such doctrine to be justified. I am also inclined to reformulate this sentence and argue that Rorty would say the same thing about the priority of public projects to private projects: We may as well explain and articulate the sensibility of this priority by weaving it together with a doctrine about what kind of beings we humans are, but this priority is neither founded upon nor relies on such a doctrine. The priority of public comes first, the doctrine about the nature of human beings comes later.

Rorty refuses to take credit for these views. He argues that these are not novel views he himself came up with, but what he does is simply expound on the ideas of other philosophers, the chief among them being John Rawls. Thus, his strategy to further develop and defend his position is simply to go back to Rawls. He reads and interprets Rawls in such a way that Rawls also argues for the priority of democracy to philosophy (and consequently, for the priority of public to private). Therefore, in the following section, I will focus on Rorty's interpretation of Rawls on this particular issue.

### 5.3 Rawls According to Rorty

In the context of the third communitarian claim, namely that political institutions presuppose philosophical foundations, or more specifically, they require a doctrine of human nature, Rorty finds a comrade in Rawls. He argues that Rawls also strongly disagreed with this claim. Rawls was not interested in supplying philosophical foundations for democratic institutions, Rorty says, but he was “simply trying to systematize the principles and intuitions typical of American liberals”.<sup>26</sup> Rorty summarizes the dominant motive behind Rawls’ political philosophy as an attempt “to stay on the surface, philosophically speaking” when discussing with politics, and contrasts it with what he calls “the traditional attempt to dig down to philosophical foundations of democracy”.<sup>27</sup> That is to say, he contrasts Rawls’ way of approaching politics with communitarians’ way of approaching politics (which he equates with traditional way of approaching politics).

Here, Rorty associates Rawls with Dewey and pragmatism. He argues that for a pragmatic social theory, “the question of whether justifiability to the community with which we identify entails truth is simply irrelevant”.<sup>28</sup> For Rorty, this is equal to “staying on the surface, philosophically speaking”. Both Dewey and Rawls serve as examples of this way of thinking.<sup>29</sup>

Rorty also thinks Rawls links his position to Jefferson and his ideal of religious toleration too. He quotes the following passage from Rawls to argue that in Rawls’ political thought, the principle of religious toleration precedes any topics of theological or philosophical inquiry. This principle itself finds its justification not in a philosophical foundation, but in the shared histories and intuitions among members of modern democratic societies:

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<sup>26</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 390.

<sup>27</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 389.

<sup>28</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 382.

<sup>29</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 383.

[A]s a practical political matter no general moral conception can provide the basis for a public conception of justice in a modern democratic society. The social and historical conditions of such a society have their origins in the Wars of Religion following the Reformation and the development of the principle of toleration, and in the growth of constitutional government and the institutions of large market economies.<sup>30</sup>

What Rorty says here comes to this: With the Enlightenment, it became common sense among the citizens of modern democracies that matters of religion and theology should be bracketed when discussing public policy, and Rawls argues that the same goes for many standard topics of philosophy. We can bracket topics such as ahistorical human nature, the nature of selfhood, the motive of moral behavior, the meaning of human life etc. when discussing public policy as easily as we bracket the nature of Trinity or transubstantiation, because neither are relevant to politics.

Why though? Why did Jefferson and Rawls think that the common history and the intuitions of modern democratic societies suggest that substantive theological and philosophical discussions are irrelevant to the making of public policy? The answer to this question, for Rorty, lies in how religion and philosophy is understood by these thinkers. Rorty believes that both religion and philosophy are "vague umbrella terms" that "are subject to persuasive redefinition", and when they are broadly defined everybody can be said to have religious or philosophical presuppositions and this would defeat the purpose of understanding either Jefferson or Rawls.<sup>31</sup> Thus, Rorty proposes narrower definitions for these terms. He proposes to understand religion as "disputes about the nature and the true name of God —and even about his existence" and philosophy as "disputes about the nature of human beings and even about whether there is such a thing as 'human nature'".<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," pp. 384, 385.

<sup>31</sup> Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," p. 386.

<sup>32</sup> Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," p. 386.

Thus understood, it becomes clearer why Rorty would think neither religion nor philosophy has a determining place in politics: They are both private projects. They are about individuals' own attempts of making sense of themselves and the world around them. Politics, on the other hand, is a public matter. It is about finding better and better ways of living together in a harmonious, peaceful manner. They seek to achieve different purposes and thus do not depend on one another. Rorty reads Rawls making essentially the same point. He writes, "Rawls wants views about man's nature and purpose to be detached from politics. [...] So presumably, he wants questions about the point of human existence, or the meaning of human life, to be reserved for private life".<sup>33</sup>

By detaching the views about man's nature and purpose from politics, Rawls also gives up from the notion of a philosophical foundation for democracy. Democracy, for Rorty's Rawls, is founded on the basic intuitive ideas and principles of a certain political tradition that emerged out of a particular political history. Rorty quotes the following passage from Rawls:

[S]ince justice as fairness is intended as a political conception of justice for a democratic society, it tries to draw solely upon basic intuitive ideas that are embedded in the political institutions of a democratic society and the public traditions of their interpretation. Justice as fairness is a political conception in part because it starts from within a certain political tradition. We hope that this political conception of justice may be at least supported by what we may call "overlapping consensus," that is, by a consensus that includes all the opposing philosophical and religious doctrines likely to persist and gain adherents in a more or less just constitutional democratic society.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," p. 386.

<sup>34</sup> Rawls, J. (1985). Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 14 (3), 223–251, pp. 225, 226; Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," p. 385.

The second part of this quote might be enlightening in relation to one of the problems I have flagged earlier. Let us remember O’Grady’s question about the two seemingly inconsistent claims of Rorty: On the one hand, Rorty wants public projects to be justified, but on the other hand, he argues that democracy does not need justification. One way to interpret Rorty here is to go back to the distinction between two types of justifications. A philosophical justification, though Rorty never explicitly describes what it is, refers to something like a valid Aristotelian syllogism: It is achieved through a series of sound logical inferences from undisputed principles/premises. These inferences eventually yield a necessary conclusion and that conclusion serves as a justification. A philosophical justification requires a metatheory about how inferences work, what constitutes knowledge, what separates it from simply belief etc. In Rorty’s mind, then, philosophical justification is tightly connected with the notion of foundationalism: An assertion can only be as valid as its premises. If we cannot track a claim down to a sound foundational premises/principles, then we have more than enough reasons to suspect its validity. The other kind of justification, the one with which Rorty sympathizes, is simply an interpersonal agreement. What differentiates it from the former is the lack of metatheory. In this kind of justification, all one can hope and expect is a consensus between the different parties. Or, to put in Rawlsian terminology, an “overlapping consensus” that “includes all the opposing philosophical and religious doctrines likely to persist and gain adherents in a more or less just constitutional democratic society”.

When interpreted this way, what Rorty says comes down to this: Democracy needs a consensus among its participants, and it is in this sense it needs justification. Yet it does not need a philosophical foundation, and it is in this sense it does not need to be justified. That is to say, democracy does not necessarily need a metatheory, be it ontological (as in a theory about human nature), metaphysical (as in a theory about goodness) or epistemological (as in a theory about reason).

The way Rorty sees it, the Rawlsian understanding of liberal democracy is very careful and compliant with this latter understanding of justification, i.e. justification as consensus. Rawls aims to provide “a workable and shared basis for a political conception of justice in a democratic society” and the process is the following:

1. There already exists a democratic society or democratic societies.
2. Rawls goes on to collect settled convictions in these societies, such as the belief in religious toleration and the rejection of slavery.<sup>35</sup>
3. Finally, he tries “to organize the basic intuitive ideas and principles implicit in these convictions into a coherent conception of justice.”<sup>36</sup>

Now it becomes more apparent why Rorty overlooks the question “democracy being a public project how should the democratic intellectual present and justify it to the society in which she lives?”. Rorty writes in the context of democratic societies to an audience who already embraced democratic principles at large, so justification in the sense of achieving a consensus over the basic ideas and principles is not even an issue. The consensus is already there. Justification is already achieved by means of historical progress. What Rawls does is to start from that consensus and “articulate” a coherent conception of justice around these basic ideas and intuitions.<sup>37</sup> Certainly Rawls will have to persuade others that his articulation is the right kind of articulation. But that is, of course, another issue. That is why Rawls, as any other public intellectual, goes on to writing essays and books: To justify himself to other members of his society, to convince them that his articulation is on point. The basic constitutive convictions, principles and ideas of democracy, such as religious toleration, rejection of slavery, equality among citizens etc. are there, widely agreed upon and thus justified already. Rorty agrees that “this attitude is thoroughly historicist and anti-universalist”.<sup>38</sup> He would also agree that it is ethnocentric too. But he does not see it as relativistic. In fact,

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<sup>35</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 385.

<sup>36</sup> Rawls, “Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical,” p. 230; via Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 385.

<sup>37</sup> And certainly Rawls needs convincing others that it is the right kind of articulation. But that is, of course, another issue. That is why Rawls spends his time writing essays and books: To justify his views to other members of his society, to convince them that his articulation is on point.

<sup>38</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 385.

what he sees Rawls doing is to stake out “middle ground between relativism and a theory of the moral subject —a theory that is not about, for example, religious tolerance and large market economies, but about human beings as such, viewed ahistorically.”<sup>39</sup>

The contentious question then turns out to be the following: Is this kind of justification enough, or do we need something more robust? Rorty seems to suggest that we make peace with the fact that such a middle ground is the best we have, whereas his critics, even the pragmatist ones like Talisse, do not find this historicist, ethnocentric attitude satisfying enough. I will discuss why Talisse is not impressed by this Rortian position, but first I want to focus on the criticism that Rorty misunderstood, misinterpreted and thus misrepresented Rawls. For this, I will turn to Paul Wheatman and his book, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*.

## 5.4 Wheatman on Rorty on Rawls

A chapter of Wheatman’s book is named “Rawlsian liberalism and the privatization of religion” and there Wheatman argues that Rorty’s interpretation of Rawls was (and still is) quite influential among moral theologians and religious ethics, but not necessarily accurate. He mentions three objections to Rawls’ work by religious ethicists “that are prominent in the critical literature and that are associated with the charge of privatization”.<sup>40</sup> According to Wheatman, these criticisms, or at least two of them, are due to a misconception of Rawls’ theory. And he blames Rorty, and specifically his article “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy”, for this misconception. These three objections are:

1. Christians cannot accept Rawls’s theory because there are no religious grounds or arguments for the two principles of justice by which he thinks society’s basic structure should be well ordered.

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<sup>39</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” pp. 388, 389.

<sup>40</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 41.



2. Rawls does not allow religious argument a place in political discourse even about matters less fundamental than the principles of justice.
3. Rawls privatizes religion (...) because he accepts the mistaken view that religion can only prove divisive if accorded a role in politics. He thus ignores the real possibility of using religion, religious symbols, religious narratives and religious arguments to achieve social unity or build political coalitions.<sup>41</sup>

Wheatman then goes on to say, “[t]he first two of these objections are heavily indebted to the interpretation of Rawlsian liberalism offered by Richard Rorty”.<sup>42</sup> But he thinks this interpretation was faulty. Rorty “is mistaken in thinking that Rawls claims that no further justification is necessary beyond showing that justice as fairness is reasonable”.<sup>43</sup>

I have engaged with similar, but not the same, objections to the three objections above in the previous chapter of this thesis in the context of Wolterstorff’s criticisms. Towards the end of that chapter, I have argued that there is a revised and refined version of Rorty and if we interpret him focusing on his revised views, we can arrive at a Rortian position that even Wolterstorff can be content with. In a similar vein, here, I want to argue that when Wheatman thinks of Rorty he thinks of something like his original position, but in his revised position, the gap between Rorty’s and Wheatman’s interpretations of Rawls is not that large. They still do read and interpret Rawls somewhat differently, especially when it comes to what kind of justification Rawls thought democracy requires, but they do not disagree much on the nature and limits of the privatization of religion in Rawlsian liberal democracies. Wheatman seems to think, for example, that Rorty’s Rawls is in favour of a complete prohibition of religion from public/political discussions

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<sup>41</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 41.

<sup>42</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 41.

<sup>43</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 70.

and refuses to acknowledge its value as a possible public intellectual resource.<sup>44</sup> Wheatman argues, on the other hand, that religion “is not (...) to be completely privatized, in Rawls view. Religion can serve as an intellectual resource in political argument, but its use is constrained.”<sup>45</sup> In the previous chapter, however, I have argued that the refined and revised views of Rorty’s later works would not champion a complete prohibition of religion from public space, but he would instead ask for its use in politics to be constrained. So, presumably, later Rorty, with his revised views, would not interpret Rawls in the way Wheatman criticizes. If we were to interpret the Rortian approach to religion in a charitable way, we can argue that Rorty’s revised position is his better position and represents the overall tone of his approach more accurately.

#### 5.4.1 A Case Against the Priority of Democracy: Timothy Jackson

In *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, Wheatman defends Rawls against the accusations that his liberalism unduly privatizes religion. Particularly relevant for our purposes here is his engagement with Timothy Jackson. I would argue that Wheatman’s defence of Rawls against Jackson is not only in the same spirit with Rorty’s defence of Jefferson against Carter,<sup>46</sup> but also helps to make Rorty’s case for privatization stronger. Though there are some differences in how Wheatman and Rorty argues for privatization, there are also a lot of similarities in how they understand Rawls’ case for privatization. I will note both the similarities and the differences through my exposition of Wheatman’s arguments.

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<sup>44</sup> Wheatman does not make this claim explicitly, but in the third chapter of his book, it is very clear that he implicitly makes it. There, Wheatman argues against a certain interpretation of Rawls, an interpretation that reads him propounding a complete prohibition of religion from public space. Wheatman says that this interpretation is in no small measure due to the Rorty’s influence; see: Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 41.

<sup>45</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 58.

<sup>46</sup> See: §4.1.2. Rorty’s Initial Position.

As Wheatman rightly notes “critics of liberalism rarely make precise exactly what they mean by ‘privatization’ and its cognates. What unifies the various objections that have gone by that name is therefore not immediately clear.”<sup>47</sup> What unifies Carter’s and Jackson’s criticisms is that both of these intellectuals believe that there is a connection between privatization of religion and trivialization/undermining of religion. Carter thinks that Rawlsian liberalism is “unsatisfying and even demeaning” to religious people since it trivializes their faith by forcing them “to restructure their arguments in purely secular terms before they can be presented”.<sup>48</sup> And Jackson seems to think that privatization, both in Rorty and Rawls, is due to a trivialization of religion, or to put it more accurately, a trivialization of ethics. He argues that later Rawls, and most certainly Rorty too, stands in an “unintentionally deconstructive” relation to both classical liberalism and classical theism. “Justice within the limits of Rawlsian politics alone”, writes Jackson, “is no more recognizable to a traditional democrat than religion within the limits of Kantian reason alone was recognizable to a traditional believer”.<sup>49</sup>

Jackson has a number of criticisms for both Rawls and Rorty, but his main objection is based on a distinction between what he considers to be the two strands in liberalism: The Enlightenment strand, which Jackson calls “liberalism-as-morally-basic”, and the postmodern strand, which he calls “liberalism-as-morally-empty”:

The first Enlightenment strand (“liberalism-as-morally-basic”) founds the case for democratic equality and cultural pluralism on fundamental truths about human nature and moral obligation, i.e., on a substantive conception of the good. Liberal conceptions of justice must here be validated by a standard higher than majority opinion or corporate self-interest, even if lower than the fully articulated worldview of

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<sup>47</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, pp. 42, 43.

<sup>48</sup> Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion*, p. 216.

<sup>49</sup> Jackson, T. (1991). To Bedlam and Part Way Back: John Rawls and Christian Justice. *Faith and Philosophy*, 8(4), 423–447, p. 441.

any one moral-cultural tradition. The second Enlightenment strand ("liberalism-as-morally-empty"), fearing the theoretical and/or practical implications of the first option, goes radically minimalist and seeks at most to be neutral on the question of the good, relying instead on such nonmoral notions as self-interest and social contract.<sup>50</sup>

Early Rawls, Jackson argues, "although already minimalist, [...] still supports [his] conception of justice as fairness with a morally significant ontology. [His] Kantian commitment to the freedom and equality of persons in the original position is at least partially founded on a perception of attributes intrinsic to human nature. [...] The "basis of equality" is the "natural attributes" of "moral persons" (the capacity for a rational life-plan and for a desire to act upon principles of right)".<sup>51</sup> In his later works, however, Rawls seem to give up from any such ontological/philosophical groundings and move in a much more pragmatic, post-modern direction. Freedom and equality of people becomes an assumption rather than a moral truth. The justification for this assumption is no longer its truth or its plausibility, but is practicality. "Willing cooperation is not sensible because people are in fact free and equal, rather people are considered to be free and equal in order to secure such cooperation". Thus, claims Jackson, Rawls "evacuates justice as fairness of any recognizably *moral* motivation".<sup>52</sup> And thus, Rawls completes the shift from "liberalism-as-morally-basic" to "liberalism-as-morally-empty":

It is a transition from looking for fundamental moral truths about which rational people might agree (a version of what used to be called "natural justice") to giving up on moral truth claims altogether in favor of a radical pragmatism, at least in the political sphere. To be sure, Rawls nowhere argues that religious or moral truth claims are false or

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<sup>50</sup> Jackson, "To Bedlam and Part Way Back: John Rawls and Christian Justice," pp. 426, 427.

<sup>51</sup> Jackson, "To Bedlam and Part Way Back: John Rawls and Christian Justice," pp. 425, 426.

<sup>52</sup> Jackson, "To Bedlam and Part Way Back: John Rawls and Christian Justice," p. 426.

unimportant as such —quite the contrary— but in this article he does systematically exclude them as (at best) unnecessary to his theory of justice.<sup>53</sup>

So far so good. Both Wheatman and Rorty would agree that later Rawls indeed excludes the truth or falsity of religious/moral claims as unnecessary to his theory of justice. I do not think they would take issue with the way Jackson characterizes the shift in Rawls' views. They strongly disagree, however, with Jackson's claim that the politically minimal, morally empty approach of later Rawls is "morally unsupportable".<sup>54</sup>

The reason why Jackson thinks Rawls' theory is morally unsupportable is because "it seeks to ground social ethics on the amoral".<sup>55</sup> That is to say, it attempts to justify ethical attitudes with pragmatic reasons. Once pragmatic considerations replace the ethical principles or ontological/metaphysical beliefs, Jackson argues, "any number of conflicting and even tyrannical positions [become] compatible with justice as fairness".<sup>56</sup> But more so, once you ask religious people to act from pragmatic considerations rather than their ethical/metaphysical beliefs, you are asking them to act in a way that would violate their integrity. According to Jackson, this is particularly true for Christians:

[W]ithout commitment to moral truth —however fallibly worked out and narratively, rather than deductively, formulated— it is impossible to do justice to Christian emphases on the person of Christ as the Truth Incarnate. If Rawls's script requires Christians to surrender love as the touchstone of political decision-making, then he is not extending to them the kind of respect that he seeks to exact from them. In a word, he is being tyrannical.

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<sup>53</sup> Jackson, "To Bedlam and Part Way Back: John Rawls and Christian Justice," p. 426.

<sup>54</sup> Jackson, "To Bedlam and Part Way Back: John Rawls and Christian Justice," p. 427.

<sup>55</sup> Jackson, "To Bedlam and Part Way Back: John Rawls and Christian Justice," p. 427.

<sup>56</sup> Jackson, "To Bedlam and Part Way Back: John Rawls and Christian Justice," p. 427.

Christians need not demand that others accept a particular political arrangement out of love, but they themselves must do so or they have violated their own integrity.<sup>57</sup>

“It is impossible, therefore”, Jackson concludes, “for Christians to found distributive justice on personal prudence, social cooperation, and/or the thin sense of the good allowed by the political Rawls in the original position.”

### 5.4.2 A Defense of Rawls, A Defense of Rorty

As I have previously stated, both Wheatman and Rorty disagree with Jackson—Wheatman explicitly, Rorty implicitly. That is to say, Wheatman engages with Jackson’s criticisms in writing, Rorty does not. It is no secret, however, Rorty and Jackson hold opposite views in the matter. Wheatman resolves that Jackson’s objections to Rawls (and to Rorty too) rest upon two crucial premises:

One is that Christians must always “accept a particular political arrangement out of love”; Christians, [Jackson] remarks enigmatically, ought not “surrender love as the touchstone of political decision-making” [...] The other premise is that the reasons Rawls offers in support of political arrangements—that justice as fairness provides a fair basis for social cooperation, that it is founded on ideas drawn from the public culture, and the like—cannot be accepted out of Christian love.<sup>58</sup>

So, reason number one is that Christians have to base politics on ethics (i.e., democracy on theology/philosophy) not the other way around. And reason number two is that Rawls only offers pragmatic reasons for his political suggestions, which is unacceptable for Christians (because of reason number one). A quick note

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<sup>57</sup> Jackson, “To Bedlam and Part Way Back: John Rawls and Christian Justice,” p. 443.

<sup>58</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 46.

here: Though Jackson is only interested to argue his case for Christianity, we can also imagine this criticism being made for Islam or Judaism or other religions that, traditionally, are understood as based on or revolving around absolute moral and/or metaphysical truths.

Wheatman is very skeptical about the first reason. He notes that it “is likely to encounter strong resistance from natural law theorists”<sup>59</sup> but decides not to pursue it and instead focuses on Jackson’s second reason. I would like to speculate that this is because Jackson’s first claim is primarily a theological claim. It is about what counts as a properly Christian attitude. Jackson also does not support his reasons behind his first claim. Wheatman seems not interested in proposing an alternative theological position to Jackson here. Rorty, I would argue, would be similarly inclined. Neither Wheatman nor Rawls, and certainly not Rorty, is interested in talking about what would be a properly Christian thing to do. They are not theologians and they do not aspire to be theologians either. As far as I can see, they are only interested in presenting their views in such a way that these views will look reasonable/plausible to some, not all, theological/religious positions, positions they consider reasonable/plausible in return. Having said that, I believe, they are also interested to sound reasonable/plausible to the widest range of religious positions possible without compromising what they think is the core of their political stance. So it is of interest to Wheatman (and it would be of interest to Rorty too) to show that, even if we assume that Jackson’s first reason is valid, Christians can still adopt Rawls’ views without compromising their integrity.

I also believe here lies a key difference between Wheatman’s reading of Rorty and mine. Wheatman seems to read Rorty as dismissing anything Jackson has to say on politics. This is because Jackson holds that there are moral/metaphysical truths Christians have to prioritize over any pragmatic considerations, whereas Rorty believes “truth (...) is simply not relevant to democratic politics”.<sup>60</sup> I, on the other hand, read Rorty as still having interest in accommodating Jackson even

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<sup>59</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 46.

<sup>60</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 69; Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 392.

though he strongly disagrees with his first claim. As I read him, Rorty argues for a political arrangement in which truth is indeed not relevant to democratic processes of deciding a public policy, while at the same time trying to sketch out a consistent and inclusive political approach which can also be adopted by religious people who want to hold onto their private moral/metaphysical truths.

Against Jackson, Wheatman suggests a reading of Rawls that does not violate religious people's integrity. In his eyes, this reading is an alternative to Rorty's reading, which, Wheatman seems to think, does in fact violate said integrity. Wheatman's Rorty, however, is different from the Rorty I presented in the previous chapter. I believe Wheatman does a good job in defending Rawls against Jackson. What I do not believe is that his reading constitutes an alternative to Rorty's. I think they are, for the most part, complimentary. Jackson criticizes Rorty as well as Rawls in his article on similar points. As far as I am concerned, Wheatman ends up elaborating on the Rortian approach I sketch out in this thesis when he is defending Rawls. His dissatisfaction with Rorty helps to underline the differences between the tendencies of initial, early Rorty and the considerations of the revised, later Rorty. It helps to make clear which tendencies of Rorty need to be highlighted and which ones need to be left behind in order to construe his approach in the most charitable and robust way.

Back to Jackson's criticism: Rawls only offers pragmatic reasons for his political suggestions and that will not do for Christians. Christians must accept political arrangements out of religious principles, or to put it more precisely, out of Christian love. "The issue is one of ethics, not merely psychology" writes Jackson, in a passage Wheatman finds enigmatic, "while it may sometimes be permissible to submit to a cognitive impoverishment and act on the basis of less information than one could in fact command, it is never right to submit to a moral impoverishment and act with less virtue".<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Jackson, "To Bedlam and Part Way Back: John Rawls and Christian Justice," p. 443.



Wheatman is not impressed with this criticism. “Is it not at least logically possible that someone might accept the propositions on which Rawls’ view rests because God tells her to do so?” he asks. If the person in question accepts divine commands out of Christian love (...), then it seems that it is out of Christian love that she accepts the claims about freedom and equality that Rawls offers for his view.”<sup>62</sup> And even more importantly, why one should assume that the reasons Rawls offer for his views are the only reasons there are to adopt his views? Wheatman says:

Rawls may offer only pragmatic arguments in favor of his conception of justice or in favor of conditions defining the original position. Surely it does not follow that these are the only reasons there are or that someone could not adopt justice as fairness for different reasons than Rawls offers. Indeed Rawls himself says that in an overlapping consensus participants accept justice as fairness ”from within [their] own point of view”; participants in such a consensus, he says, can see that ”the political conception is derived from [their] comprehensive doctrine”.<sup>63</sup>

That is to say, Wheatman agrees (with Rorty and with Jackson) that later Rawls only offers pragmatic reasons for his views, but he argues that these pragmatic reasons are not the only reasons for individuals to adopt the Rawlsian political conception. The whole notion of overlapping consensus is there to explain that the participants of a democracy can and do adopt the principal democratic notions from within their own comprehensive doctrines.

According to Wheatman, Jackson fails to see the above points, because Jackson’s reading of Rawls is mostly due to a particular interpretation. This interpretation has Rawls arguing that “participants in an overlapping consensus would accept

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<sup>62</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 46.

<sup>63</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, pp. 46, 47.

justice as fairness only on pragmatic grounds”.<sup>64</sup> Wheatman traces the prevalence of this interpretation to Rorty and argues that Rorty “claims this explicitly”.<sup>65</sup> I disagree.

It is not immediately clear why Wheatman blames Rorty for this interpretation. In the relevant footnote, Wheatman gives us page 264 of Rorty’s “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy” as the proof of his claim. Supposedly it is there Rorty “explicitly” asserts this interpretation. It seems to me that the only relevant passage on the page Wheatman may be referring to is the following lengthy passage:

Insofar as one thinks that political conclusions require extrapolitical grounding—that is, insofar as one thinks Rawls’s method of reflective equilibrium is not good enough—one will want an account of the “authority” of those general principles.

If one feels a need for such legitimation, one will want either a religious or a philosophical preface to politics. One will be likely to share Horkheimer and Adorno’s fear that pragmatism is not strong enough to hold a free society together. But Rawls echoes Dewey in suggesting that insofar as justice becomes the first virtue of a society, the need for such legitimation may gradually cease to be felt. Such a society will become accustomed to the thought that social policy needs no more authority than successful accommodation among individuals, individuals who find themselves heir to the same historical traditions and faced with the same problems. It will be a society that encourages the “end of ideology,” that takes reflective equilibrium as the only method needed in discussing social policy. When such a society deliberates, when it collects the principles and intuitions to be brought into equilibrium, it will tend to discard those drawn from philosophical accounts of the self or of rationality. For such a society will view such accounts not as

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<sup>64</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 47.

<sup>65</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 47.

the foundations of political institutions, but as, at worst, philosophical mumbo jumbo, or, at best, relevant to private searches for perfection, but not to social policy.<sup>66</sup>

I am not convinced that this passage says the same thing Wheatman makes it to say, not even implicitly, let alone explicitly. It does not say that, in a Rawlsian society, “participants in an overlapping consensus would accept justice as fairness only on pragmatic grounds”. But it rather says that “the foundations of political institutions in a democratic society, or the political principles that will shape social policies cannot be based on any particular comprehensive doctrine”. The two claims, though sound somewhat similar, are in fact very different. In the context of our discussion, the most significant difference is that the second claim does not exclude the possibility of individual citizens accepting a Rawlsian political arrangement from within their comprehensive views.

It is also worth noting that this passage is less about how to read Rawls correctly and more about how Rorty imagines a utopian society in which Rawls’ ideals are fully achieved. That is to say, it might be ideal for Rorty if the individuals within a democratic society come to accept justice as fairness “only on pragmatic reasons” but it certainly is not necessary or mandatory. The distinction here reminds me of the distinction I made in chapter three<sup>67</sup> between Rorty’s vision of what an ideal religion would be like, and his pragmatic approach to engaging with the existing forms of religions and real religious people around us. Similarly, Rorty, in the above passage, presents his vision of what an ideal democratic society would be. Yet there is nothing in the passage that necessarily excludes him having a more inclusive, pragmatic political approach that is open to individuals coming to adopt democracy on their private notions of what is good and right. It is true

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<sup>66</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 387; Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 47. (Wheatman uses a different edition than the edition I cite in my bibliography: Richard Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy” in *the Virginia Statue for Religious Freedom*, ed. M. Peterson and R. Vaughn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Page 264 of this edition appears as page 387 in the edition I cite in my bibliography.)

<sup>67</sup> See §3.4.1. “Pragmatic Religion” and “Pragmatic Approach To Religion”

that, in the passage above and in the mentioned article in general, Rorty is against the idea of having “a philosophical or theological preface” to liberal democracy, but that basically means that he thinks one should resist the temptation of offering a grounding, foundational and final comprehensive theory as the ultimate justification for liberal democracy. That, Rorty believes, would be offering democracy “a poisoned gift”.<sup>68</sup> But it would be against the spirit of the later Rorty I discussed in the last chapter to forbid individuals to have their own private reasons, be it philosophical or theological, to adopt Rawls’ suggestions and to have their own story as to why they hold democracy dear to their heart. That is to say, the citizens in a democracy can indeed accept democratic principles on their own moral grounds, though the democratic principles themselves do not ultimately rest on any particular comprehensive moral theory, but only on pragmatic/historic grounds.

If I am right in reading Rorty this way, then Wheatman’s reply to Jackson might as well be Rorty’s. And it is a robust and efficient reply. There is, however, a significant objection Jackson may raise here and it is about the talk of priority. “Jackson’s response, I believe,” writes Wheatman, “would be that the possibilities raised are inconsistent with some of Rawls’s central views”:

If someone did accept the basic intuitive ideas on the basis of a divine command, did regard the principles of justice as based on theological truths, or did accept and act on them for any other reason associated with Christian love, her reasons for accepting them would derive their force from her conception of the good. Claims about the right would then be derived from and accepted on the basis of claims about the good. This, Jackson would conclude, is contrary to Rawls’s claim that his is a theory of justice in which the right is prior to the good.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 390. I will come back to this metaphor of “offering a poisoned gift” later when discussing Talisse’s criticisms.

<sup>69</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 48.

Jackson himself put the objection as follows:

Rawls continues to insist that our inability to arrive at agreement on a thick conception of the good life requires treating the right (i.e., his political conception of justice) as having "priority." But there can be no priority if principles of justice are grounded on claims, however basic, about human nature and political virtue. Indeed, if elemental anthropological and axiological truths are included as ingredients in reflective equilibrium, then the very idea of a (purely) political conception of justice becomes highly suspect. Rawls claims that political liberalism "consists in a conception of politics, not of the whole of life," but this is either a truism or false. Of course, a pluralistic Catholic will not want to interject all the vagaries of soteriology, Christology, Mariology, etc. into public discourse about who gets to vote. But such obvious cases aside, politics and the good life will be so inextricably linked for such an individual that suggesting an either/or between them is absurd. Rawls himself writes that "a political conception must draw upon various ideas of the good," adding that "[t]he question is: subject to what restriction." But the point is that if the restriction must itself be motivated by (or at least be compatible with) comprehensive moral commitments, then talk of "priority" is misplaced and talk of "neutrality" is highly misleading.<sup>70</sup>

The question ahead of us, then, is how to make sense of this talk of priority: The priority of right to good in Rawls, and the priority of public (democracy) to the private (philosophy/theology) in Rorty. Is Jackson right in saying that talk of priority is completely misplaced? Or is there a way to interpret it in such a way that it would still be meaningful for Rawls to insist on the priority of right (and for Rorty to insist on the priority of public)? Wheatman provides just that interpretation. And though his interpretation is meant to clarify Rawls' talk of priority, I believe it helps to clarify Rorty's talk of priority as well.

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<sup>70</sup> Jackson, "To Bedlam and Part Way Back: John Rawls and Christian Justice," p. 440.

Wheatman makes a distinction between the kinds of priorities and he says he is “prepared to concede” that Jackson might be right to observe that in certain cases there might not be an epistemic or motivational priority of the right to the good. It may as well be the opposite. It may as well be that “the agent accepts the truth of and acts upon claims about the right on the basis of claims about the good”.<sup>71</sup> He does not concede that, however, this necessarily compromises Rawls’ talk about priority. “The priority of the right may, after all, be other than motivational or epistemic”.<sup>72</sup> It could be justificatory.

That is to say, citizens may see their understanding of the good as the primary reason why they accept the basic ideas of liberal democracy (they see their philosophy/theology motivationally and epistemically prior to their political position) but they may still adhere to the notion that for a well-ordered society there needs to be some restraints on the political discourse. They may come to accept and appreciate that various public demands of the citizens (which are mostly based on their private comprehensive doctrines, i.e. their own understanding of the good) need to be constrained by certain criteria. This is where the justificatory priority of the right comes into play:

Those constraints must themselves, Rawls might say, be specified by justice as fairness; they are therefore constraints grounded in the right rather than the good. For example, claims to certain primary goods in the well-ordered society must be claims that are just by the criteria justice as fairness specifies. Anyone asserting such a claim must be prepared to justify it as such. The demands of justice as specified by justice as fairness thus constrain the claims that can be advanced in the well-ordered society and provide the terms in which such claims are to be justified. Even if someone is ultimately motivated to respect those constraints by considerations drawn from her theological views,

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<sup>71</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 48.

<sup>72</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 48.

there is at least one important sense in which she will accord the right priority.<sup>73</sup>

The same thing can be said about the priority of public to private, that is the priority is justificatory. Individuals are likely to think and act within their own private comprehensive philosophies/theologies regardless of the subject matter of their thinking and acting. And it is in this sense private might be motivationally (and maybe even epistemically) prior to public. Yet it is also likely, at least in the context of contemporary Western societies, citizens will understand and respect the plurality of philosophies/theologies and they come to accord a justificatory priority to public to ensure justice and equality within the society they live in. The decision to commit to the priority of public is essentially a private decision, because it is made through individuals' own sense of what is good and right. Its result, however, is public: Making the decision prepares the individual to be ready to sacrifice her private beliefs "at the altar of public expediency" when these private beliefs "are relevant to public policy", yet "incapable of defense on the basis of beliefs common to her fellow citizens".<sup>74</sup>

### 5.4.3 Where Wheatman Disagrees With Rorty

Another distinction Wheatman reminds us of with respect to Rawls' project is the distinction between prima facie and ultima facie justifications. Wheatman admits that Rawls only provides prima facie justifications for the kind of liberal democracy he promotes. In "The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus", Rawls writes the following:

[P]olitical philosophy assumes the role Kant gave to philosophy generally: the defense of reasonable faith. In our case this becomes the

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<sup>73</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 49.

<sup>74</sup> Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," p. 381.

defense of reasonable faith in the real possibility of a just constitutional regime.<sup>75</sup>

Wheatman believes this phrase defines what Rawls thought his task was: “Defending reasonable faith in the possibility of a just democratic regime”.<sup>76</sup> To Wheatman, Rawls’ political project aims only to show that justice as fairness is a reasonable conception of justice. Once this is shown, Wheatman argues, “members of a democratic society have prima facie moral reason to adopt” the kind of just democratic political theory Rawls puts forward.<sup>77</sup> This is, however, is the furthest Rawls’ political project goes: It shows that justice as fairness is reasonable and it provides prima facie moral justification for the members of democratic society to adopt it. “Rawls explicitly denies”, Wheatman writes, “that he tries to demonstrate the truth of justice as fairness”. In other words, Rawls refrains from the attempt to provide ultima facie justifications for his political theory.

Rorty would agree with Wheatman’s assessment of Rawls’ motivations so far. Rorty also thinks Rawls did not aim to demonstrate the truth of justice as fairness or the priority of public. And this was rightly so, since the attempt to demonstrate the truth of such political attitudes are not only futile, but also misconstrued and misguided. This is where Rorty and Wheatman seem to disagree. Rorty assumes that Rawls also believed, as Rorty did, the futility of trying to demonstrate the truth of political stances. Wheatman, on the other hand, argues that Rawls was aware and conscious of the real need of a further, ultima facie justification, but he was only setting limits to his own political project to make it focused and maintainable. To Wheatman, what Rorty sees in Rawls is “the politicization of political philosophy and the denial of political philosophy’s traditional ambitions”.<sup>78</sup> Wheatman thinks this is a misinterpretation:

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<sup>75</sup> Rawls, J. (1999). The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus. S. Freeman (Ed.), *Collected Papers*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, p. 448.

<sup>76</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 68.

<sup>77</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 68.

<sup>78</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 69.



Rawls's refusal to consider the question of truth does not have the strong implications Rorty believes. Rawls is engaged in what I have called "political theory", which is a part of moral theory. And it is characteristic of moral theory generally, Rawls says, to postpone questions about the truth of a moral structure. Political theory thus takes from moral theory the more limited ambition of laying out and studying workable and reasonable conceptions. It does not limit its aims because there is no moral truth or because, as Rorty believes, "truth . . . is simply not relevant to democratic politics." It does so because the tasks of political theory are difficult enough and because determining which conception of justice is true first requires determining which conceptions are workable and reasonable. Metaphysical questions are not dismissed. They are left to those working within religious and philosophical traditions.<sup>79</sup>

In the light of this quote and the discussions I had earlier, Wheatman's main concern with Rorty seems to be the reluctance Rorty shows in taking metaphysical questions seriously. Dismissing metaphysical questions completely, to Wheatman, does not seem either right or beneficial. Wheatman here joins Talisse by insisting that the truth of justice as fairness needs to be demonstrated and Rorty is wrong in dismissing this demand as misguided and futile. I will come back to this criticism to explore it in more detail, but first I want to note here that this does not mean Rorty reads Rawls any differently than Wheatman on the inner-workings of a well-ordered democratic society and especially on the place of religion in such society. Wheatman writes that "philosophy and theology will not have a place in the public justification of the Rawlsian society's public policies". Policies, judicial decisions, and even justice as fairness itself will be "publicly justified only by pointing to its reasonability for a society that is heir to democratic tradition and accepts its fundamental political values".<sup>80</sup> This is completely in sync with what Rorty understands as the place of religion on a Rawlsian (and Rortian) democratic society.

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<sup>79</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 69.

<sup>80</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 75.

It is once again the broader implications of this theory Rorty and Wheatman fail to agree on. Wheatman writes:

Rorty thinks that the prevalence of this public conception of justification will lead citizens to forswear the need for any deeper foundations, that philosophy and religion will wither under pressure from the public culture of a liberal society. (...) It citizens will inhabit what he calls a “disenchanted” world.<sup>81</sup>

Wheatman has two issues with this assumption: First, he does not think a Rawlsian democracy necessarily has to encourage the sort of disenchantment Rorty has in mind. Second, there is no empirical evidence to support Rorty’s sociological forecasts, and in fact the empirical evidence suggests the opposite.

It is not clear what parts of Rawls’ theory would actively encourage people to give up of the notion of truth in their private search for meaning. This assumption seems to stem from a different, not Rawlsian but Rortian line of thought which is less political and more philosophical. Skepticism about traditional ways of doing philosophy/theology and seeing a value in the disenchantment of the world is, at the end, rather private commitments. They aren’t particularly relevant to politics even in Rorty’s own admission. Then it is on what basis Rorty assumes that by simply being part of a just liberal democracy citizens would feel less inclined to look for any deeper foundations?

It is also not clear what kind of empirical evidence there is to support these sociological forecasts. If Rorty was right, should not the need for philosophical or religious justification already be fading away in extant liberal democracies? Wheatman says this is demonstrably not true. He writes:

Rorty’s conjecture about the demise of philosophy under the pressure of a liberal culture is reminiscent of Thomas Jefferson’s prediction about

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<sup>81</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 75.

the demise of religion: “I trust there is not a young man now living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian.” Jefferson made this prediction in 1822; subsequent events have, of course, shown him wrong.<sup>82</sup>

I believe Wheatman is right in pointing out that Rorty assumes more than what Rawls provided when forecasting what the outcome of achieving a fully Rawlsian society might be. Wheatman is also right to point out that Rorty’s predictions do not appear to be accurate or realistic. It is the Deweyan tendencies, I would argue, that lead Rorty to make such predictions. It is the same tendencies that lead him to articulate a better form of religion and to hope that maybe other people will come to see the beauty and value in a relatively disenchanted worldview. It is worthwhile to remember, however, these tendencies belong to what I called Rorty’s pragmatic religion, and not necessarily to what I called Rortian pragmatic approach to religion. A person may disagree with the former and the motivations behind it, as Wheatman seem to do, but still may be convinced by the latter.

As for Wheatman’s concern that Rorty dismisses metaphysical questions whereas Rawls does not, this concern may take two forms: It may mean that Rorty dismisses the private metaphysical concerns of individual citizens as fictitious and invalid. Or it may mean that Rorty dismisses the demand that comes from some of his fellow, albeit critical, intellectuals to justify liberal democracy more robustly by demonstrating the truth of it. It seems to me only the latter is accurate, as Rorty does aim to accommodate all kinds of private beliefs/concerns in his political framework as long as they do not cause harm to public projects.

As far as individual metaphysical concerns go, Rorty may personally regard many of them with disfavor, or even encourage his readers to break away from them, but his politics does not dismiss them completely. It only privatizes them. Rorty does not argue that these concerns do not matter because they are not real

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<sup>82</sup> Wheatman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*, p. 75 (footnote 27).

concerns,<sup>83</sup> but he does argue that metaphysical concerns should not have a place in determining public matters. That is to say, Rorty does not dismiss Jackson or the people who hold similar views to Jackson because they are religious and they believe in metaphysical entities like God. He insists, however, that their political arguments and claims need not rely on their metaphysical commitments or otherwise these claims do not have a place in a Rawlsian liberal democracy. Considering that they themselves are arguing for similar arrangements, neither Wheatman nor Rawls himself would consider Rorty's privatization here as a dismissal of individual metaphysical concerns.

As for the intellectual demand for demonstrating the truth of democracy, I want now to turn to Talisse to discuss it in more detail.

## 5.5 Talisse on Rorty on the Justification of Democracy

Robert B. Talisse is the current chair of Vanderbilt University's philosophy department. He specializes in contemporary political philosophy. He is a pragmatist philosopher and has written extensively on how pragmatism does and should play out in political theories. And some of his writings, especially the article "A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty's Hopeless Politics", is dedicated to rebut Rorty.

In this article, Talisse characterizes Rorty's view on political philosophy, that is the view I have outlined above, as "political antifoundationalism". He argues that Rorty develops this view mainly in two essays, "'The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy" and "Idealizations, Foundations, and Social Practices".<sup>84</sup> Though there are some commendable aspects in these essays, such as their ability to move and inspire their readers, Talisse holds that Rorty's main underlying political story

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<sup>83</sup> He often suggests, however, that we would be better off by getting rid of certain metaphysical jargons because they are not helpful in achieving the collective goals we seek to achieve.

<sup>84</sup> Rorty, R. (1996). *Idealizations, Foundations, and Social Practices*. S. Benhabib (Ed.), *Democracy and Difference*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

suffers rather serious difficulties. “Rorty’s antifoundational politics”, he writes, “is insufficient to address social realities and moreover unable to foster the kind of pragmatic social hope he seeks to inspire.”<sup>85</sup>

The way Talisse reads Rorty is that Rorty promotes the view “democracy is best served by an ‘antifoundationalist’ vocabulary and self-image”.<sup>86</sup> To better explain this political antifoundationalism, Talisse suggests that we look first into what being foundationalist about democracy means.

Political foundationalists, according to Talisse’s classification, are the people who seek to provide philosophical proofs for democracy. They want to establish the superiority of democracy by appealing to self-evident truths or unavoidable premises. These supposedly self-evident or unavoidable facts tend to refer to concepts like human nature, rationality, morality etc. And the driving motivation behind such foundationalism is the need to refute the anti-democrat. Political foundationalists seek to separate democracy from other forms of governance as “demonstrably the most just” through philosophical argumentations. Thus, they seek to show that their belief in democracy and their struggle against the enemies of it is well justified.<sup>87</sup>

Talisse, however, is not very clear on the following point: Do the political foundationalists seek philosophical proofs in order to demonstrate to themselves that they are indeed right in what they pursue, or is it a matter of having the intellectual upper hand in the dispute between democrats and antidemocrats? That is to say, is the matter here more about the intellectual responsibility of the self to itself, or is it about laying out the philosophical robustness of an intellectual position for the opponent to see? We may assume, however, for Talisse’s political foundationalist, it must be about both since they are not easily separable from each other. Intellectual responsibility requires one to adopt the position that one

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<sup>85</sup> Talisse, “A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty’s Hopeless Politics,” p. 612.

<sup>86</sup> Talisse, “A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty’s Hopeless Politics,” p. 612.

<sup>87</sup> Talisse, “A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty’s Hopeless Politics,” p. 612.

considers philosophically the most robust. And if one knows why a position is the most robust then one can demonstrate it to others as well.

Let us quickly note here then, for someone like Rorty, these two matters are separable from each other. Rorty has his reasons to be suspicious about the concepts like intellectual responsibility and the need for philosophical proofs, as I explained in the second chapter of this thesis. On the other hand, he may also argue that the philosophical robustness of a position rarely points to something more than the dialectical skills and mastery of the philosophers who defend that position. A Rortian may find some value in such skills as they are useful when playing the game of cultural politics, but he may also discredit them seeing the efficiency of such skills highly limited to the elite circles of academia to have any significant impact on the society as a whole.

As for political antifoundationalists, Talisse reports that they embrace the idea that democrats need not (and in fact, cannot) refute antidemocrats.<sup>88</sup> "On the antifoundationalist view," Talisse writes, "political philosophy is not the search for foundations, but simply a contest between different "idealizations" of existing social practices".<sup>89</sup> Instead of seeking philosophical proofs, antifoundationalists find it sufficient to offer a circular justification for their political views and vision: They refer to one or another existing feature of their culture/society to make their proposed idealizations look good. Talisse also points out that there is an inherent ethnocentrism to this approach. When an idealization is promoted or a critique of a certain other idealization is offered, the reference point is always one's own culture and one's own standards. And lastly, Talisse adds that, for political antifoundationalists, it is not only futile to search for philosophical foundations for one's political stand, but this search also functions as a distraction from what is important: It would be better to spend that energy to debate, discuss and decide what is the best among the competing idealizations.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Talisse, "A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty's Hopeless Politics," p. 613.

<sup>89</sup> Talisse, "A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty's Hopeless Politics," p. 613.

<sup>90</sup> Talisse, "A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty's Hopeless Politics," p. 614.

This summary by Talisse mostly relies on Rorty's very brief (only three-page long) essay, "Idealizations, Foundations, and Social Practices". I think it is a more or less accurate characterization of Rorty's view, but it is not necessarily a sympathetic introduction to Rorty's political philosophy, and thus tends to downplay the motivations and the context behind Rorty's antifoundationalist views.

The context in which Rorty writes both of the mentioned essays, as I have explained earlier in this chapter, is the question "does democracy need foundations?"<sup>91</sup> These essays, thus, do not aim to provide a broad alternative democratic theory named "political antifoundationalism", but rather seek to answer this particular question in the particular context it is asked.

This is not to say that Talisse reads Rorty inaccurately or inappropriately, I do not think that he does. But attention to the context in which Rorty develops his aforementioned views may help us to read him in a more positive light. It may help us to narrow the scope of Rorty's writings and thus softens the blow of Talisse's critique.

Rorty seems to believe, for example, the distinction between "seeking for foundations" and "focusing on the competing idealizations" is relevant when we are presented with the questions such as: What should we do when we engage with politics in an intellectual level? How should we see and treat the political principles presented to us? Rorty sees two ways to go about these questions: We can treat the political principles as foundations, or we can treat them as idealizations. In his own words, he puts the distinction as the following:

Idealizations answer the question "How can we make our present practices more coherent?" by downplaying some of the things we do and emphasizing others. Political debate at high levels of abstraction is, typically, debate between competing idealizations, and thus between competing visions of the utopian future of our community.

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<sup>91</sup> Benhabib, S. (1996). Introduction. *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 14.

Foundations, by contrast, are supposed to answer the question "Should we be engaging in our present practices at all?" Foundationalists think that intuition pumps are not enough. They think that we not only must adjust our practices so as to render them more coherent but also must have regard to something that exists independently of those practices.<sup>92</sup>

If we read Rorty with an emphasis on his context as I have suggested above, we may argue that these two questions set limits on the scope of Rorty's comments. The political antifoundationalism Rorty promotes in this essay is only there as a conceptual tool to distinguish between two different attitudes towards political principles. Hence, Talisse's description of political antifoundationalism may not be very relevant when Talisse engages with Rorty not particularly in the context of this discussion, but in different contexts, such as "how one can argue against anti-democrats?"

It is important for me to stress this point, because I agree with Rorty's political antifoundationalism in the context of this particular discussion: Namely, I agree with Rorty that we do not need more than "intuition pumps" (a term Rorty borrows from Daniel Dennett)<sup>93</sup> to answer the question "should we be engaging in our present practices at all" as long as our practices do not present us with moral dilemmas. But I also agree with Talisse in many aspects of his criticism of Rorty's views on politics. In the following sections I will focus on these criticisms and try to make it more clear where and how I agree and disagree with Talisse. I will then argue that what can be salvaged from Talisse's criticisms is enough to keep Rorty's approach to religion intact and still plausible.

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<sup>92</sup> Rorty, "Idealizations, Foundations, and Social Practices," p. 333.

<sup>93</sup> Dennett, D. (2013). *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.



### 5.5.1 Philosophical Problems with Rorty's Politics

Talisse's major criticism on the philosophical status of Rorty's political antifoundationalism is that it is not a proper political philosophy but Rorty is only "proferring liberal propaganda".<sup>94</sup> I will argue, at the end of this section, that though this may as well be true, it is not particularly a significant criticism for Rorty.

But first, let us return again to how Talisse understands Rorty's political antifoundationalism. Upon attempting to understand 'the kind of case Rorty is making, the status of his claims', Talisse writes the following:

Rorty is committed to a few central ideas:

(a) One cannot achieve a proof of democracy of the sort the foundationalist wants.

(b) Once the foundationalist project is abandoned, all that is left for political philosophy is the antifoundationalist enterprise of offering idealizations of current practices.

(c) Democracy is best served by antifoundationalism.<sup>95</sup>

Talisse has three issues with these commitments. I will start by discussing the first two: (1) Rorty is making a straw man when attacking foundationalism since there is pretty much no one in the contemporary philosophy scene that holds the strict foundationalist views Rorty so adamantly criticizes. (2) Rorty creates a false dichotomy between being a strict foundationalist and a strict antifoundationalist as if there is no middle ground between. "Why should we think that Rorty's disjunction between 'foundations' and 'idealizations' is exclusive?" asks Talisse, given that Rorty did not explicitly show "the only alternative to Enlightenment dreams

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<sup>94</sup> Talisse, "A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty's Hopeless Politics," p. 618.

<sup>95</sup> Talisse, "A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty's Hopeless Politics," p. 615.

of a deductive science of politics is his brand of hopeful antifoundationalism”.<sup>96</sup> I believe both of these criticisms are very valid and I tend to agree with Talisse about them. I also think, however, they only point out the weaknesses in Rorty’s views rather than contradicting them. They expose the areas that need revision and improvement.

It may indeed be correct that the foundationalism Rorty keeps criticizing is now marginalized, but it is not clear how much of the less marginal, contemporary forms of foundationalism can address Rorty’s criticisms still. It is not clear, for example, if one can achieve a proof of democracy on any foundational grounds that Rorty cannot criticize in the usual way he criticizes foundationalism. It is not clear, that is, if the contemporary forms of political foundationalism has differed so much from the “Enlightenment dreams of a deductive science of politics” so that Rorty’s critiques of them are completely irrelevant. Consequently, I do not think Rorty explicitly argues that foundationalist politics and strict antifoundationalism are the only two options we have. The assumption is rather implicit. Rorty operates as if the landscape of political philosophy of his time offers only these two options. Considering that Talisse himself embarks on the challenge of offering a third option, Rorty’s assumption does not seem entirely wrong.

The third issue Talisse raises here is less of a direct criticism and more of an analysis on the philosophical consequences of Rorty’s position: (3) Talisse thinks that, by committing to the aforementioned claims, Rorty is presented with a dilemma and both horns of this dilemma are doomed to fail Rorty. He argues that if Rorty is to make a philosophical argument for his antifoundationalist politics, it would run as follows:

1. The attempt to get beyond idealizations to foundations will necessarily evoke some theory of human nature.
2. A theory of “human nature” as something distinct from existing social conditions is incoherent because there is no “human nature” in this sense.

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<sup>96</sup> Talisse, “A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty’s Hopeless Politics,” p. 615.

3. As there is no point external to the contingencies of our society from which to launch a political philosophy, all political philosophy can be is the exercise of promoting various idealizations of current social practices.
4. Therefore, there are only idealizations and no foundations.<sup>97</sup>

But if that is in fact Rorty's argument, then Rorty fails to comply with his own antifoundationalism, since the second premise of his argument "rests upon his own philosophical account of the metaphysical implications of the theory of evolution".<sup>98</sup> This is the first horn of Talisse's dilemma: If Rorty were to make an argument like this, he would contradict himself. And the second horn is that if Rorty were to avoid providing an argument like this, then what he suggests is no more than proffering a liberal agenda.

To come up with a dilemma here is, however, a slightly odd thing to do because Talisse is very aware that Rorty wouldn't take the first horn the way it is presented. Talisse admits, "Rorty will undoubtedly resist this reading of his position".<sup>99</sup> At least in the context of politics and political philosophy, Rorty would instead characterize his position as such: that he is not attempting to prove the truth of antifoundationalism but simply trying to persuade similar minded people that "democracy is best served by antifoundationalism" by articulating the virtues of antifoundationalism and the vices of foundationalism.

Even if he were to take the first horn, however, as he sometimes does in other contexts, I do not think Talisse's characterization above would do Rorty justice. Talisse writes:

[I]t is not enough for Rorty to simply announce that he has not employed a foundation. It is not enough for him to simply drop the vocabulary associated with foundationalism or "Enlightenment rationalism,"

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<sup>97</sup> Talisse, "A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty's Hopeless Politics," p. 616.

<sup>98</sup> Talisse, "A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty's Hopeless Politics," p. 617.

<sup>99</sup> Talisse, "A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty's Hopeless Politics," p. 617.

for the issue is not simply terminological. To deflect the charge that he has simply placed the Enlightenment wine in Postmodern Ironist bottles, Rorty rather must show that his reading of Darwin does not function as a foundational premise in his argument against foundationalist accounts of democracy.

It seems to me, however, the real driving force behind Rorty's distrust of the theories of human nature was never any one particular theory, let alone Darwin's. The driving force was his conviction that no theories of human nature so far were able to achieve an explanation of human nature in a foundationalist way that would not beg further foundations in and of itself. Rorty does not dismiss foundationalist accounts because of his Darwinian understanding of human nature, he dismisses them because of his distrust in foundationalism per se. That is to say that Rorty's antifoundationalism is not founded upon a particular reading of Darwin but is driven by the desire to reject all forms of foundationalism. Metaphorically speaking, his antifoundationalism exists in the space cleared by his rejection of all foundationalisms. It does not exist in a positively constructed space.

Talissee's criticism of Rorty is also confusing on a very similar point: Talissee seems to believe that Rorty presents his antifoundationalism as the final, ultimate philosophical position. Based on this interpretation, he suggests that Rorty's politics is in tension with his democratic commitments. The argument, in its core, goes like this:

1. "Once the antifoundationalist acknowledges that everything is contingent, he must concede that his antifoundationalist liberalism is tentative; Big Questions regarding whether democracy can be given foundations, whether there is an ahistorical human nature, and whether reason has a structure remain open questions."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Talissee, "A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty's Hopeless Politics," p. 618.

2. “[I]t is the mark of an antidemocratic and oppressive regime to adopt and impose some set of Big Answers. (...) A democratic regime, by contrast, allows Big Questions to remain open questions”<sup>101</sup>
3. Thus, democracy better be comprehensively experimental. It should concede that “someday we might discover some Big Answer that would require that we abandon our commitments to equality, liberty, and even democracy; a Platonic philosopher king may at some future point emerge to whom we should submit” and that “democracy itself is a working hypothesis—a best answer, not a Big Answer”.<sup>102</sup>

Talissee’s criticism is confusing precisely because he thinks “Rorty will no doubt resist the move from antifoundationalism to experimentalism. He will want to say that it is precisely the move from antifoundationalism to experimentalism that the liberal ironist should avoid.”<sup>103</sup> I, on the other hand, see no reason why Rorty would resist the kind of experimentalism Talissee suggests here. I believe Rorty would agree with all three points of Talissee. In fact, Rorty’s writings are full of encouragements for treating politics (together with pretty much all other aspects of our collective life) as an experiment. He considers his pragmatism as an expression of “hopeful, melioristic, experimental frame of mind”.<sup>104</sup> He writes that he does not claim “any superior rationality” but only “experimental success” for the political position he holds.<sup>105</sup> He narrates the story of Western progress as one that goes “from religion to rationalism to experimentalism”.<sup>106</sup> He admits, “experimentalist

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<sup>101</sup> Talissee, “A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty’s Hopeless Politics,” p. 619.

<sup>102</sup> Talissee, “A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty’s Hopeless Politics,” p. 620.

<sup>103</sup> Talissee, “A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty’s Hopeless Politics,” p. 620.

<sup>104</sup> Rorty, R. (1999). Truth Without Correspondance to Reality. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin Books, p. 24.

<sup>105</sup> Rorty, R. (1999). Afterwords: Pragmatism, Pluralism and Postmodernism. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin Books, p. 273.

<sup>106</sup> Rorty, “Education as Socialization and Individualization,” p. 116.

tinkering is all we shall ever manage”.<sup>107</sup> And maybe most apparently, in the following quote, he explicitly and positively calls his political judgements (as well as other people’s) as “experimental and fallible”:

All inquiry –in ethics as well as physics, in politics as well as logic– is a matter of reweaving our webs of beliefs and desires in such a way as to give ourselves more happiness and richer and freer lives. All our judgements are experimental and fallible. Unconditionality and absolutes are not things we should strive for.<sup>108</sup>

As far as I can see, Rorty offers his political antifoundationalism completely within the experimentalist framework Talisse wants him to submit to. Reading Rorty as if he is offering some Big Answer is reading him in bad faith. Talisse may argue that Rorty is not aware that he is offering Big Answers. He may argue that Rorty professes to be an experimentalist but in fact his philosophy reads otherwise. But I fail to see again why this has to be the case. One may as well admit that antifoundationalism is not a final answer and that Big Questions are indeed still open, yet continue to think that Big Questions are neither relevant nor interesting to the public/political challenges we are presented. Such a position would be sufficiently Rortian and it would not have any apparent contradictions with either pragmatism or democracy.

As for the second horn of the dilemma, Talisse seems to suggest that if Rorty’s political position does not rely on a philosophical argumentation, then Rorty is only proffering a liberal agenda and not offering a proper liberal theory. Talisse thinks by not positively arguing for antifoundationalism, what Rorty ends up doing is to shift the conversation “from philosophical arguments about the impossibility of escaping contingency to pragmatic talk about how he thinks we might improve politics”:

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<sup>107</sup> Rorty, R. (2007). Grandeur, Profundity and Finitude. *Philosophy and Cultural Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 86.

<sup>108</sup> Rorty, R. (2007). Kant vs Dewey. *Philosophy and Cultural Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 188.

In this way, his antifoundationalism consists in nothing more than the attempt to "deflect attention from all questions other than 'what sort of compromise might we be able to freely agree upon?'" . Rorty's liberalism is thus not properly a liberal theory at all but rather a plea for doing politics without engaging what Bruce Ackerman has called "Big Questions". An antifoundationalist politics is thus an antiphilosophical politics; accordingly, Rorty is not proposing a political philosophy but proffering liberal propaganda. He aims to promote and inspire liberal democracy among those already well-disposed to it rather than prove it to antidemocrats.<sup>109</sup>

Talisso apparently means this as a serious criticism, but I am not sure if it would strike Rorty as one. As Talisso also mentions earlier in his article, it is not easy to get under Rorty's skin:

Rorty's many critics have charged that his account is relativist, irrationalist, emotivist, ethnocentric, self-defeating, and nonprogressive. Rorty is not bothered by such criticisms; he insists that such labels will offend only those who are still practicing the kind of philosophy he has abandoned.<sup>110</sup>

This being the case, if Rorty is not bothered with all the above charges because they stem from a kind of philosophy he professes to have left behind, I cannot see why should he be bothered by Talisso's characterization that Rorty's political antifoundationalism is not actually a liberal theory but only a plea for doing politics without any metaphysics. At the end of the day, Rorty is openly and explicitly saying that he is not interested in doing what Talisso wants him to do. He explicitly admits that he has no interest in proving democracy to antidemocrats for he does not think it is even possible. As he is comfortable shrugging away the charges of

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<sup>109</sup> Talisso, "A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty's Hopeless Politics," p. 618.

<sup>110</sup> Talisso, "A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty's Hopeless Politics," p. 618.

relativism, irrationality etc., Rorty would be equally comfortable with shrugging away Talisse's charge that he does not propose a proper liberal theory but only "aims to promote and inspire liberal democracy among those already well-disposed to it". That is to say, Talisse has to say more on why it is wrong to adopt this attitude so that his criticism can actually concern Rorty. Consequently, the second half of Talisse's article is aimed at exposing some of the practical problems that may stem from adopting Rorty's political attitude.

### 5.5.2 Political Problems with Rorty's Politics

The way Talisse sees it, Rorty's political antifoundationalism is not only philosophically weak but also politically ineffective. His criticisms on the practical consequences of Rorty's attitude can be summarized in two points: (1) "Rorty's view is insufficient to deal with certain political realities that threaten contemporary democracy", and (2) "it is unable to inspire the kind of social hope that Rorty takes to be the principle objective of political theory".<sup>111</sup>

I believe both of Talisse's points here are very valid and they make powerful criticisms. And I believe they can help modifying, reforming and improving Rorty's understanding of democracy, just like Wolterstorff's and Stout's criticisms helped revising and rehabilitating Rorty's understanding of privatization. However, I do not think they are as destructive as Talisse seems to believe. In the following pages, I will inquire into them with an intention to separate what I think is the fair and valid criticisms from the ones that are unfair.

Let me start with the first criticism then: "According to Rorty", Talisse writes, "to be an antifoundationalist is to understand philosophical debates about democracy as dialectical competitions between different idealizations of existing social practices". If that is the case, Talisse argues, antifoundationalism promises very little, if any, hope in the way of resolving our contemporary political issues.

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<sup>111</sup> Talisse, "A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty's Hopeless Politics," p. 621.



Rorty's antifoundationalist picture of alternative idealizations makes sense only if we restrict our analyses to congenial disputes between professional academics [...] The picture breaks down when we consider the more fundamental disputes that arise outside the academy. Consider, for example, Stalin's claim that his brutal regime is democratic "in a higher sense." Does it make sense to say that Stalinism is just another idealization of democracy?

Talissee's point here is that the debates about democracy cannot be reduced to competitions between different idealizations of existing practices, since "there is much more at stake in some disputes".<sup>112</sup> Confronted with the fact that we are living in a world in which anti-democratic forces (white supremacists, religious fundamentalists, neo-fascists etc.) constitute a real threat to democracy, one needs to take such disputes much more seriously than Rorty does. Antifoundationalism leaves Rorty's political theory impotent to respond to the opponents of democracy.<sup>113</sup> Rorty cannot even make a distinction between "real democracy" and "tyranny disguised as democracy" if he is to remain faithful to his antifoundationalism.<sup>114</sup>

Talissee also points out, more often than not, these forces come from within the community. That is to say, Rorty's ethnocentric approach of referring to "our beliefs/practices" as a criteria would not work, since these views would be part of "our beliefs/practices". Rorty can scratch out Stalin and refuses to engage him "because there is no way to see [him] as [a] fellow citizen of our constitutional democracy (...) whose life plans might (...) be fitted in with those of other citizens", but he cannot do the same when it comes to his fellow citizens who happen to adopt neo-fascist, racist, exclusivist etc. views. Rorty's attitude

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<sup>112</sup> Talissee, "A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty's Hopeless Politics," p. 622.

<sup>113</sup> Talissee, "A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty's Hopeless Politics," p. 622.

<sup>114</sup> Talissee, "A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty's Hopeless Politics," p. 621.

does not only seem “shockingly ethnocentric”,<sup>115</sup> it also seems counter-productive. “Rorty’s strategy of dismissing democracy’s enemies rather than attempting to engage them” writes Talisse, “is likely to strengthen the antidemocratic tendencies that are already operative within our society.”<sup>116</sup>

I agree with Talisse that Rorty cannot provide good enough criteria when distinguishing democratic practices from tyrannical practices. I also find Talisse right in that refusing to engage with antidemocratic views does seem counter-productive indeed. I do not think, however, Talisse’s characterization of Rorty as an ethnocentric intellectual who is apathetic towards antidemocratic threats is charitable enough.

Rorty’s ethnocentrism can be read as nothing more than his skepticism of universal truths. Since he does not agree with “the idea that anybody who is willing to listen to reason—to hear out all the arguments—can be brought around to the truth”, he believes that “the limits of sanity [or, one might say, the limits of reason, S.N.] are set by what we can take seriously. This, in turn, is determined by our upbringing, our historical situation”.<sup>117</sup> This is only a very mildly ethnocentric claim. And it certainly does not imply that our culture/beliefs/practices are faultless or do not require challenging. Talisse’s criticism still stands though: It is not clear why Rorty thinks we cannot or should not take some antidemocratic views seriously, especially if they belong to people we otherwise consider reasonable and respectable. On this, Rorty says that “the typical inhabitant of [a constitutional] democracy would regard [these antidemocratic views] as crazy”,<sup>118</sup> but this is at best an evasive answer. Assuming a “typical inhabitant” for Western democracies and postulating her views is problematic in itself, but even if there were such across the board views in democracies, would not Rortian irony require

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<sup>115</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 389.

<sup>116</sup> Talisse, “A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty’s Hopeless Politics,” p. 623.

<sup>117</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 389.

<sup>118</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 390.

us to challenge our own views/beliefs/practices with alien views/beliefs/practices? Why does Rorty suspend his own beloved notion of irony here?

Paying attention to the context in which Rorty makes these ethnocentric-sounding comments can help to make a more charitable interpretation. In the passages Talisse refers to, where Rorty suggests dismissing antidemocrats as crazy, Rorty also admits that he is faced with a dilemma:

To refuse to argue about what human beings should be like seems to show a contempt for the spirit of accommodation and tolerance, which is essential to democracy. But it is not clear how to argue for the claim that human beings ought to be liberals rather than fanatics without being driven back on a theory of human nature, on philosophy.<sup>119</sup>

It is plausible to say what Rorty actually refuses here is not to take antidemocratic views seriously or to engage with antidemocrats, but to offer an alternative theory of human nature. And if we keep in mind that this whole discussion occurs in the context of Rawls and the justification of democracy, we may also further argue that what Rorty refuses is not even to offer an alternative theory of human nature but to offer it as a philosophical justification of democracy. In fact, Rorty explicitly admits that some theories of human nature can indeed work as a powerful completion to democracy, or particularly, to Rawls' theory of justice as fairness. "But", he cautions, "to suggest such a powerful completion to Rawls is to offer him a poisoned gift. It is like offering Jefferson an argument for religious tolerance based on exegesis of the Christian scriptures."<sup>120</sup> The idea here is that even though it could be a good thing if particular religions can support the principle of religious tolerance from within, it may not be wise to claim that the principle itself is based on any particular religious view. The same goes for the justification of democracy: Communities of different philosophical/theological doctrines can argue for democracy from within their theories of human nature but

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<sup>119</sup> Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," pp. 390, 391.

<sup>120</sup> Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," p. 390.

one needs always to remember and recognize that democracy is prior to all the theories offered. Offering a theory of human nature to an antidemocrat as the justification of democracy is thus wrong-headed.

Towards the end of his article, after discussing all the things that are wrong with Rorty's approach, Talisse offers an alternative pragmatic approach:

The racists believe that their racism follows from some Big Answer about human nature that they have adopted; they believe that their racist views are true in a philosophically robust sense. The pragmatist criticizes the antidemocrat's Big Answer by showing that it is most likely a false answer.<sup>121</sup>

Talisse thus suggests that when engaged with an antidemocrat, the approach a pragmatist philosopher should adopt is to show why anti-democrats' Big Answer is not really the Big Answer. That is to say, the pragmatist should be destructive rather than constructive. He should destruct the antidemocratic view and explain what is wrong with it rather than positively seeking to justify democracy by an alternative Big Answer. In the light of above discussion, I do not see anything in this suggested approach that Rorty would take issue with. In fact, as a philosopher who spent a significant amount of his time and energy on arguing against Big Answers and ultimate truths, I would argue that throughout his intellectual career Rorty actively did what Talisse suggests pragmatists should do. The one dispute Rorty and Talisse may have on this particular subject is that Rorty believes philosophy is rather ineffective in transforming antidemocrats, especially when compared to literature and arts. Though, admittedly, Rorty's distrust in the transformative power of philosophy and his preference for literature instead does not come across any more than his own unjustified private beliefs.

Talisse, however, is still not happy with the way Rorty describes political views as the idealization of existing social practices for another reason. In the picture

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<sup>121</sup> Talisse, "A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty's Hopeless Politics," pp. 623, 624.

Rorty draws, the only kind of justification possible for these idealizations is a circular justification: “a justification which makes one feature of our culture look good by citing still another, or comparing our culture invidiously with others by reference to our own standards”.<sup>122</sup> Talisse takes issue with this picture because he thinks it “places liberal democracy on a philosophical par with tyranny”.<sup>123</sup> A consequence of this is that we lose the ability to provide any real reasons for adopting and promoting democracy. Talisse’s argument is summarized in the following passage:

[A]n essential component of hope is the confidence that what is hoped for is in some relevant way *worth* achieving and *better* than the other things that might develop. Yet Rorty’s antifoundationalism does not allow one to maintain that democracy is in any relevant way *better* than, say, tyranny. Hence Rorty’s “social hope” must be, as he says, “ironic” —we must hope to achieve that which we no longer can think is *worth* achieving, we must draw inspiration from that which we contend is essentially not inspiring. To put it mildly, this seems incoherent. If there is anything inspiring in the works of a Whitman and a Dewey (and I say there is), it is precisely the sense that the visions of democracy they present are in a non-ironic sense *worth* trying for and *worth* hoping to achieve. This can be maintained only if one can point to some aspect of democracy that relevantly distinguishes it from tyranny.<sup>124</sup>

What stands out for me in this passage initially is the phrase “in some/any relevant way”. One can surely point out to many different aspects of democracy that distinguish it from tyranny, but which ones would Talisse consider relevant and why? Now and then Rorty casually mentions some of the things that are

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<sup>122</sup> Rorty, R. (1989). The Contingency of A Liberal Community. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 57.

<sup>123</sup> Talisse, “A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty’s Hopeless Politics,” p. 624.

<sup>124</sup> Talisse, “A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty’s Hopeless Politics,” p. 624.

essential to democracy that can help to distinguish it from tyranny, such as “the spirit of accommodation and tolerance”.<sup>125</sup> It is not clear why Talisse does not consider them relevant. Is it because they sound rather arbitrary? But that cannot be the reason, since in the following paragraph Talisse himself gives his own arbitrary-sounding distinction:

The essence of democracy lies within the citizens’ willingness to openly and critically engage questions of political justification, their openness to new possibilities, and their commitment to experimenting with alternative proposals. I contend that this is an appropriate source of hope, not only because the processes of open public deliberation can be inspiring, but because a society committed to continuing and continual experimental political discourse alone holds the promise of growing even better.<sup>126</sup>

What is even more confusing here is that Talisse’s distinction is essentially no different than that of Rorty’s: The essence of democracy is “the spirit of accommodation and tolerance”. They both seem to say the same thing, but just, maybe, Talisse articulates it better. So it is not clear to me what exactly Talisse is arguing against. Why does he think that Rorty’s politics does not allow for genuine social hope? Why does he think being ironic about a certain belief cancels that belief’s possibility of being a real source of inspiration or hope?

Talisse seems to assume that being ironic about a belief is equal to not taking that belief seriously. Let us remember, however, Rortian irony is an intellectual attitude not towards any individual belief in particular, but towards the totality of one’s beliefs and the framework in which they occur. This intellectual attitude requires a radical doubt towards what Rorty calls one’s “final vocabulary”.<sup>127</sup> That

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<sup>125</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 391.

<sup>126</sup> Talisse, “A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty’s Hopeless Politics,” pp. 624, 625.

<sup>127</sup> Rorty, R. (1989). *Private Irony and Liberal Hope. Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 73.

is to say, it requires awareness that one's final vocabulary is actually not final at all. It is instead historically contingent and continuously open to redescription. Rorty uses the term ironist "to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires —someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance".<sup>128</sup> Needless to say, this radical doubt is not the same thing as crippling self-doubt, nor does it call to apathy or inaction. Rorty is very firm in his belief that an ironist can still be as enthusiastic about her beliefs as the next person. He argue that "a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance".<sup>129</sup>

If Rortian irony is holistic, that is if Rorty promotes being ironic about one's all beliefs and not only the ones about politics, then an ironist's faith in democracy can be as powerful and as inspiring as any other belief she holds. Talisse's criticism, then, has to take a similarly holistic form to make sense. Talisse should argue that the sort of irony Rorty promotes is impossible. It should be impossible, or at least incredibly difficult, to both hold a belief/faith/hope ironically and at the same time be genuinely inspired by it.

If it is impossible to hold a belief ironically and still think of it as a belief worth having, to have a faith or hope ironically and still believe they are worth achieving, as Talisse seems to suggest, then Rorty cannot be inspired by anything. But that seems to be factually incorrect: Rorty is apparently very enthusiastic about a lot of his beliefs and hopes and desires. Does Talisse then end up suggesting Rorty lies to himself about his own irony? That Rorty does not treat all of his own beliefs as contingent but actually, maybe without knowing, assumes that the beliefs he holds dear are founded on a transhistorical truth? That even Rorty fails at being

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<sup>128</sup> Rorty, R. (1989). Introduction. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. xv.

<sup>129</sup> Rorty, R. (1989). Solidarity. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 189.

an ironist? Being a pragmatist himself, I doubt if Talisse would make a claim of this sort. But even if such a claim is to be made, it is difficult for me to see how an argument for it would differ from an argument against pragmatism in general.

## 5.6 Conclusion

How do all the above discussions about democracy weigh on Rorty's approach to religion then? In the context of religion, and particularly in the context of Rorty's suggestion that religion should be privatized, what difference does it make if one can justify democracy or not?

In the very beginning of this section, I have mentioned that Rorty's commitment to the priority of democracy to philosophy also means a commitment to the priority of democracy to religion. He suggests not only to privatize religion but also to always prioritize the outcome of a democratic process to the outcome of a private religious belief when the two conflict. It is in this context, the discussions around the justification of democracy matters to Rorty's pragmatic approach to religion. Rorty seems to argue that even if we cannot prove the truth of democracy we can still have a genuine faith and hope in it. Consequently, even if we cannot prove the priority of democracy to religion, we can still argue for the Enlightenment compromise and the privatization of religion for pragmatic reasons.

But then, this brings us back to O'Grady's question I have mentioned earlier: If politics is a public project and if suggestions about how to arrange public matters need justification, then how come Rorty can argue that it is acceptable not to be able to justify democracy? I believe Rorty does not have a very good answer to this question and this indicates what I consider to be the most confusing part in Rorty's private/public distinction: The nature and role of justification.

Clearly, Rorty sees justification as nothing more than interpersonal agreement. Justifying a public suggestion is equal to providing reasons for it to convince other members of the public and thus achieve interpersonal agreement. It is in this sense that he asks for justification in suggestions relating to public projects. When he argues against the attempts of justifying democracy, however, he argues



against the attempts to find a foundation for democracy in a supposedly more substantive philosophical or theological theory, namely a theory of human nature. This is where Rorty's approach gets a bit confusing. Because if it is not through philosophical or theological theories of human nature, then through what means one can make a case for democracy to convince other people to the truth/priority of it?

Rorty's writings suggest that he might want to address this question from two different angles, neither of which is robust enough on its own, but together they might constitute a solid enough answer: The first angle is about how justification of democracy differs from, say, justification for same-sex marriage. This angle eventually makes the former an exception, a characteristically different kind of demand, and goes on to say that not every demand for justification needs to be met.

This angle follows Rawls' theory that justice as fairness is not a philosophical concept, but a political one. It sees liberal democracy not as a political arrangement born out of a particular philosophical/theological view, but as the systematization and articulation of the principles and intuitions common to the members of a particular historical community.<sup>130</sup> And as such, it argues that democracy is already justified within western societies since the members of these societies already achieved a widely shared interpersonal agreement on the matter.

Furthering this line of thinking, Rorty can argue that democracy needs no justification from the democrat intellectuals, because democrat intellectuals are under no pressure to convince their fellow citizens to the truth/priority of democracy. Fellow citizens are already convinced. Justification of democracy, thus, is not a real issue.

As for people like Hitler or Stalin, they can be discarded, for they are not part of "our" public project. Democrats do not need to justify democracy to anti-democrats, because they do not even share the same vocabulary with them. They

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<sup>130</sup> Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," pp. 390, 391.

could not do it even if they tried it. Anti-democrats, in this view, do not count as “fellow citizens” and thus, one is not obliged to justify one’s public suggestions to them.

In certain passages Rorty seems to adopt this approach. At times he suggests that democrats can sometimes dismiss anti-democratic people and their anti-democratic views, and refuse to meet their demand for justification.<sup>131</sup>

[I]t is not clear how to argue for the claim that human beings ought to be liberals rather than fanatics without being driven back on a theory of human nature, on philosophy. (...) We have to insist that not every argument need to be met in the terms in which it is presented. Accommodation and tolerance must stop short of a willingness to work within any vocabulary that one’s interlocutor wishes to use, to take seriously any topic that he puts forward for discussion. To take this view is of a piece with dropping the idea that a single moral vocabulary and a single set of moral beliefs are appropriate for every human community everywhere, and to grant that historical developments may lead us to simply drop questions and the vocabulary in which those questions are posed.<sup>132</sup>

This answer, of course, invites Talisse’s criticisms again, especially the one that says contemporary western societies are not that homogenous and there are many anti-democratic forces at work within what Rorty calls “us”. Agreeing with Talisse, I believe this answer of Rorty is particularly unconvincing. But it is still consistent with Rorty’s overall framework of thinking, because it goes to show that, for Rorty, when democracy itself is challenged, what anti-democrat demands is not a standard, run-of-the-mill justification public projects require. It is instead a special kind of justification. The disagreement between democrat and anti-democrat is a disagreement not about how to better organize our society, but

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<sup>131</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” pp. 390, 391.

<sup>132</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 391.

about what final vocabulary to use to understand the world and the life in it. About final vocabularies, Rorty says that “if doubt is cast on the worth of [them], their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse”.<sup>133</sup>

What is not convincing for me here is the seemingly naïve implication that democrats have one common final vocabulary among them and it is entirely different than that of anti-democrats. The implication that there is a radically different final vocabulary “we” democrats use is problematic, because democratic societies are much more heterogeneous than Rorty seems to assume. Thus, Talisse rightly argues that Rorty’s “we” can at best refer “to a very small sector of the democratic community”.<sup>134</sup>

What can help making Rorty’s case a bit stronger is the second angle. This is a rather less visible angle in Rorty’s writings and supported mostly by his later works. This angle puts the emphasis back on the notion of irony and, hence, on the intersectionalities between different final vocabularies. Rorty sees the ironist as someone who continuously challenges and expands her own final vocabulary by contrasting and comparing it with that of others. Because a vocabulary (and only a vocabulary) can serve as a criticism of another vocabulary.<sup>135</sup> By arguing that, Rorty ends up admitting the intersectionalities between different vocabularies, such as the vocabulary of a democrat and an anti-democrat. For if final vocabularies were to be radically different from each other, no comparison between them would be possible, nor could they serve as a criticism of each other. Rorty not only admits, but also encourages finding these intersections. In the face of a moral and/or political controversy, Rorty believes that “we should seek common ground in the hope of attaining agreement” with our opponents. The reason why he thinks that it is neither possible nor worthy to try to convince an anti-democrat to the truth of democracy is actually far from being philosophical: He just thinks that “after extensive attempts at an exchange of political views” we have realized that

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<sup>133</sup> Rorty, “Private Irony and Liberal Hope,” p. 73.

<sup>134</sup> Talisse, “A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty’s Hopeless Politics,” p. 622.

<sup>135</sup> Rorty, “Private Irony and Liberal Hope,” p. 80.

it is not working, “that we are not going anywhere”.<sup>136</sup> In another words, it is not a philosophical point Rorty is making here, it is a political suggestion based on a personal observation. He might have as well said “oh do not bother wasting your time trying to convert anti-democrats! They are just impossible to talk to”. I believe Talisse is right about the dangers of giving up on reaching out to anti-democrats especially because anti-democratic tendencies and forces exist within democratic communities. I also feel Rorty’s conclusion here is at best empirically dubious. History is not clear on the statistics. It is not clear if the attempts to reason with anti-democrats always (or almost always) failed or not.

Having said that, I believe I showed that this “don’t bother” attitude is not a built-in feature to Rorty’s politics. Rorty’s political antifoundationalism does not necessarily require avoiding anti-democratic people and/or anti-democratic views. It instead provides room for conversation, debate and seeking common ground with the critics of democracy. It is Rorty himself that recommends avoiding such attempts altogether due to his personal despair. Talisse says, “Rorty’s political vision is quite literally hopeless”.<sup>137</sup> I argue that this is only true in a narrow sense: Rorty does not seem to have any hope on converting anti-democrats. But it is not true in the sense Talisse means it: Rorty’s politics still have more than enough room for hope both in democracy itself and in the process with which we can improve our democratic institutions and practices.

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<sup>136</sup> Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” p. 392.

<sup>137</sup> Talisse, “A Pragmatist Critique of Richard Rorty’s Hopeless Politics,” p. 612.

## Chapter 6

# Against the Apologetics of Theism and Atheism

The chapters so far were mainly interested in providing an extensive exposition of Rorty's approach to religion, coupled with an assessment of its internal robustness. Now that the exposition and the assessment is done, this final chapter will examine how well Rorty's approach may fare against what are currently out there, in the contemporary scene of religion, as its popular, more established alternatives. To be more specific, this chapter will focus on two antagonistic positions, that of Richard Dawkins and Alvin Plantinga, arguably the two most popular, vocal and influential intellectuals in the "theism versus atheism" debate over the past decade or so. It will map Rorty's views within the contemporary battle between militant atheists and religious apologetics. It will then examine the possibly problematic points in Rorty's views from the perspectives of both his religiously affiliated readers and strictly atheist ones. What would prove problematic to accept in Rorty for the religiously affiliated, and what would be difficult to assent for the passionate atheist? In doing so, the chapter aims to achieve two purposes:

1. To show if Rorty's approach is still plausible for people who consider themselves theists or atheist and take their religious affiliation (or lack of it) rather seriously,

2. To provide insights into the advantages and disadvantages of Rorty's approach over its competition.

### Rorty and Atheism

Rorty, "decidedly and very openly",<sup>1</sup> identifies himself as an atheist.<sup>2</sup> His atheism is also well known among his fellow scholars and readers. Habermas, for example, in his obituary for Rorty, describes him as "strict atheist" and says that "nothing is sacred to Rorty the ironist".<sup>3</sup>

Yet his attitude towards religion is significantly different than that of today's most famous champions of atheism, a family of intellectuals known as "New Atheists" or "Militant Atheists".<sup>4</sup> When reviewing Rorty's book, *An Ethics for Today*, Roman Madzia writes that "Rorty's atheism definitely does not fall into the same category as the atheism of Richard Dawkins or Daniel Dennett. Rorty seems to perfectly understand the broadness of religious experience and its various contexts,

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<sup>1</sup> Postel, D. (2007). High Flyer: Richard Rorty Obituary. *New Humanist*. Accessed at 14.05.2017. Retrieved from <https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/1440/high-flyer-richard-rorty-obituary>.

<sup>2</sup> Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration," p. 148; Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," p. 163; Rorty, "Religion as Conversation-Stopper," pp. 169, 170, 171, 172, 173.

<sup>3</sup> Habermas, J. (2007). Philosopher, Poet and Friend. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Accessed at 28.01.2017. Retrieved from <http://www.signandsight.com/features/1386.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Danny Postel, borrowing the term from Anthony Appiah, describes Rorty's religious position as "boring atheism", by which he means an atheism that finds religious claims "too obviously unconvincing to merit a great deal of intellectual energy". For such atheists, "the question of the existence of God simply doesn't register as a serious matter of philosophical dispute anymore". Postel then contrasts this atheism with the unboring variety, i.e. the atheism of "a Voltaire, a Marx, a Nietzsche, a Freud, a Russell: volcanic intellectual confrontations that regard religion as mendacious, narcotic, slavish, illusory, pernicious". The New Atheists clearly falls into this latter, unboring category. Assuming that the adjectives "boring" and "unboring" were only meant as a playful names, and not implications of merit, I tend to agree with Pastel's categorization here; see: Postel, "High Flyer: Richard Rorty Obituary."

although, for himself, religion is not a live option.”<sup>5</sup> In a similar manner, Elijah Dann writes:

[D]espite Rorty’s extensive criticism of ecclesiastical institutions and their mucking about in the public square, I doubt that he would have sided with the new atheists, and not just for the reason (...) that they erect inadvertently ”a double or surrogate for God on the basis of a philosophical foundationalism.” Rorty would have also disagreed with them, because, while he had little difficulty with a philosophical or cultural fidelity to atheism, he had the worldly sophistication to understand that evil comes in many forms. Even if religious belief did not exist in our world, corruption, deviousness, xenophobia, racism, and sexism still would.<sup>6</sup>

I believe this is an accurate and important observation. Not only Rorty’s atheism is significantly different than that of New Atheists, he has in common with his pragmatic predecessors, James and Dewey, a dislike towards the type of atheism Dawkins advocates. This dislike creates a radical break between Rorty and New Atheists. Rorty’s pragmatic approach, if not his pragmatic religion, is a lot more accommodating and respectful to people of faith. It actually converses with them and offers something to them rather than dismissing them as completely wrong and delusional as New Atheists seem to do.

The term “atheist” means more than one thing in Rorty’s writings. To be able to understand what exactly Rorty means when he calls himself atheist, the various meanings that are attached to this term should be spelled out. It may refer to, for example, a category of intellectuals “who still think that belief in the divine is an empirical hypothesis and that modern science has given better explanations of

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<sup>5</sup> Madzia, R. (2012). Book Review: Richard Rorty. *An Ethics For Today: Finding Common Ground Between Philosophy and Religion*. *Pragmatism Today*, 3(1), p. 174.

<sup>6</sup> Dann, E. (2010). *Philosophy, Religion, and Religious Belief After Rorty*. *An Ethics For Today*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 44.

the phenomena God was once used to explain”.<sup>7</sup> Rorty disassociates himself from this group. He is not an atheist in this sense. He holds that religious beliefs do not have much to do with empirical evidence. This description, however, seems to fit well to the intellectuals like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens etc. These intellectuals tend to see religious beliefs on par with incorrect or highly improbable empirical hypotheses. It is safe to say that they are atheists in this sense. Rorty thinks this type of atheism is itself a dogmatic faith and its criticisms of religious faith bear equally on itself, because “[n]either those who affirm nor those who deny the existence of God can plausibly claim that they have evidence for their views”.<sup>8</sup> Regardless whether Rorty makes a straw man out of New Atheism or not, it is very clear that he does not approve this particular, aggressive type of atheism. There are, however, three other uses of atheism one may come across reading Rorty’s works and in all of them Rorty can safely be called as an atheist.

In “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre”, Rorty defines religion (“in its pure form, undiluted by philosophy”) as “a relation to a non-human person”.<sup>9</sup> An atheist in this sense is someone who has no such relations. It is evident that Rorty does not have any relation to a non-human person for he repeatedly states that his hopes and faith lie nowhere but in his fellow humans.

The term atheist may also be understood as “religiously unmusical”: an expression Rorty borrowed from Max Weber to describe a sort of people “who find themselves quite unable to take an interest in the question of whether God exists”.<sup>10</sup> As one may be oblivious to the charms of music, these people, whom Rorty also seems to be associating himself with, are oblivious to the matters of religion. They think that the dispute between people who believe in God’s existence and the ones who deny it is pointless. Yet Rorty also remarks here that

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<sup>7</sup> Rorty, “Anticlericalism and Atheism,” p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Rorty, “Anticlericalism and Atheism,” p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> Rorty, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre,” p. 92.

<sup>10</sup> Rorty, “Anticlericalism and Atheism,” p. 30.



neither religiously unmusical atheists nor people who consider religion as a matter of utmost importance have a right to be contemptuous of each other.<sup>11</sup>

Both of these two senses are mainly about how people position themselves concerning the religious matters in their private lives. The third sense, however, is fundamentally public. In one of his later essays, “Atheism and Anticlericalism”, Rorty expresses his regrets for not using the term “anticlericalism” instead of “atheism” when he was characterizing his own views. In that essay, he defines anticlericalism as “the view that ecclesiastical institutions, despite all the good they do—despite all the comfort they provide to those in need or in despair—are dangerous to the health of democratic societies”.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, atheists are against religious institutions not because religious claims have no empirical back-up but because they are socially and politically dangerous in general.

To summarize, one may say that Rorty makes a distinction between three types of atheism: (1) atheism as anti-theism on the epistemological and/or metaphysical grounds; (2) atheism as a life-style and vocabulary preference; and (3) atheism as a political view, which equates to anti-clericalism.<sup>13</sup> Rorty is only an atheist in the 2nd and 3rd sense. Dawkins, on the other hand, is an atheist in all three senses.

### **Rorty and Theism**

What is even clearer than Rorty being an atheist, is that he is not a theist. He neither follows any religion nor believes in any God. Although his grandfather, Walter Rauschenbusch, was an important Christian theologian and played an active part in the social gospel movement,<sup>14</sup> Rorty was not brought up as a religious person. The closest thing he had to a religion was his belief in socialism. In an interview, he says that “I was just brought up a Trotskyite, the way people are

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<sup>11</sup> Rorty, “Anticlericalism and Atheism,” pp. 30, 31.

<sup>12</sup> Rorty, “Anticlericalism and Atheism,” p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> Rorty, “Anticlericalism and Atheism,” pp. 32, 33.

<sup>14</sup> Gross, N. (2008). *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, p. 64.

brought up Methodists or Jews or something like that. It was just the faith of the household.”<sup>15</sup> He also recounts his unsuccessful attempts to get religion in his college years:

Like many of my classmates at Chicago, I knew lots of T. S. Eliot by heart. I was attracted by Eliot’s suggestions that only committed Christians (and perhaps only Anglo-Catholics) could overcome their unhealthy preoccupation with their private obsessions, and so serve their fellow humans with proper humility. But a prideful inability to believe what I was saying when I recited the General Confession gradually led me to give up on my awkward attempts to get religion.<sup>16</sup>

In one of his later articles, he implies that his atheism is partly due to the environment he had brought up, to the fact that he “had no religious upbringing and have never developed any attachment to any religious tradition”.<sup>17</sup> That is why he calls himself “religiously unmusical”, admitting that he can be tone-deaf when it comes to religion.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, Rorty offers a new approach to religion while he himself is not religious in any traditional sense of the word. Is this not something somewhat disconcerting? The worry here might be that Rorty is on his high horse, pretending to know about a subject that is completely alien to him, offering reforms in something he does not understand. Or it might be that he is being dishonest, if not flat out hypocritical, by conversing with religious people in what seems to be good faith and suggesting alternative approaches to understanding religion while at the same time wishing religion away completely. We have seen, for example, that his religious critics often accuse Rorty of stripping religion away from what is

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<sup>15</sup> Gross, *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher*, p. 93.

<sup>16</sup> Rorty, “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids,” p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Rorty, “Anticlericalism and Atheism,” p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> Rorty, “Anticlericalism and Atheism,” p. 30.

central to it. Whether intentionally or not, traditional theists might argue, what Rorty seeks to do is not too far from what Dawkins does. Dawkins claims that all religions are malignant and he openly declares a battle against them. Rorty, on the other hand, wants to tame religion into something that is neither relevant nor important.

I want to argue, however, that there is a very plausible way to read Rorty that makes him not guilty of dishonesty or pretentiousness. It is true that there are ways of being religious of which Rorty is at best disdainful. He indeed wants them gone. But he is not hypocritical about this strict disapproval and rejection. He dislikes the kind of Christianity Pope Benedict XVI preached, for example,<sup>19</sup> as clearly and openly as Dawkins dislikes Christianity altogether. Their respective reasons for their dislikes, however, are hardly the same.

Even more importantly, where Dawkins downplays the varieties of being religious<sup>20</sup>, Rorty, “most certainly owing to his broad intellectual interests”<sup>21</sup> and his willingness to not only quarrel, but also converse with intellectuals from different paths of life, resists a reductionist view of religion. This particular virtue, that is the openness to the possibility of meaningful, positive ways of being religious, not only sets apart Rorty from New Atheists, it also creates a chance for a healthy and rewarding dialogue between Rorty and the people of faith.

The rewarding and transformative effects of the dialogue work both ways. It is due to his interactions with his religiously oriented colleagues like Gianni Vattimo and Nicholas Wolterstorff, Rorty softened his initially edgy views on religion and arrived at a more tolerant and less aggressive position. Both of his later works,

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<sup>19</sup> Rorty, R. (2011). *An Ethics for Today. An Ethics for Today: Finding Common Ground Between Philosophy and Religion*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 7–27.

<sup>20</sup> In a debate with Jonathan Sacks, Dawkins mentions the criticism that he always attack the low-hanging fruit, and replies that he does not think there is that much difference between the low-hanging fruit and sophisticated theologians; see: Dawkins, R., & Sacks, J. (2012). *Rethinking the Science versus Religion Debate*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bK0tpvcIRhU>. (Religion & Ethics Festival, BBC) Accessed 01.06.2017, 14:45.

<sup>21</sup> Dann, “Philosophy, Religion, and Religious Belief After Rorty,” p. 45.

“Atheism and Anti-Clericalism” (an article borne out of direct interaction with Vattimo) and “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration” (a reflection on Walterstoff and Stout’s critiques on his early works) are considerably less harsh in their criticisms of religion and a lot more open to dialogue with religious people.

Elijah Dann may be an example of such a theist thinker, who considers himself “religiously musical” but “wholly unenthusiastic about organized religion, especially when it came to how ecclesiastical bodies approached social issues like the so-called hot-button topics of religious conservatives: abortion, embryonic stem-cell research, physician-assisted suicide, and same-sex marriage”.<sup>22</sup> Dann believes that Rorty’s philosophy can create a space to rethink theology as not systematic but edifying.<sup>23</sup> After what Kai Nielsen called “the demise of the philosophical tradition” (a phrase to refer “the end of robust metaphysics”, thus “robust philosophical and theological metanarratives”)<sup>24</sup> Dann believes that Rorty’s metaphilosophy can provide refreshing and significant possibilities for religious belief. He devotes a whole book to explaining and expanding this claim. That is to say, Dann’s understanding of religion and theology owes much to Rorty, which helps to prove that religious people may also find Rorty useful in understanding and reconsidering their own religious beliefs.

Having outlined Rorty’s position with regards to atheism and theism, I will now move on to what I think is the most popular contemporary alternatives to his approach to religion: An aggressive atheism and a defensive theism. In the following sections then, I will do the following things:

1. I will explain the characteristics of New Atheism, focusing on its two chief representatives, Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett.
2. I will characterize what seemingly is one of the most coherent and developed contemporary mainstream theistic positions through Alvin Plantinga’s writings.

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<sup>22</sup> Dann, “Philosophy, Religion, and Religious Belief After Rorty,” p. 36.

<sup>23</sup> Dann, “Philosophy, Religion, and Religious Belief After Rorty,” p. 169.

<sup>24</sup> Dann, “Philosophy, Religion, and Religious Belief After Rorty,” p. 9.

3. I will analyze what lies in the roots of the conflict between these two positions, namely that of Dawkins and Plantinga, and how Rorty would see the debate between the two.
4. I will explore what kind of challenges these two positions may present to Rorty and if they actually indicate any shortcomings for the Rortian approach to religion.

## 6.1 Richard Dawkins and New Atheism

Richard Dawkins is arguably the most famous and influential of all New Atheists. In *The God Delusion*, his best-seller book, Dawkins imagines a spectrum of human judgements about the existence of God and represents it with seven milestones:

On the one extreme end of the spectrum stands the “strong theist” (category 1) who believes that the probability of God’s existence is %100. To exemplify this position, Dawkins quote C. G. Jung: “I do not believe, I know.” On the other end, there are the “de facto atheist” (category 6) and the “strong atheist” (category 7). Dawkins characterizes category 6 with the statement “I cannot know for certain but I think God is very improbable, and I live my life on the assumption that he is not there” and category 7 with “I know there is no God, with the same conviction as Jung ‘knows’ there is one”. And then, to describe his own position, he says: “I count myself in category 6, but leaning towards 7”.<sup>25</sup>

The central claim Dawkins puts forward in *The God Delusion* is that “the factual premise of religion –the God Hypothesis– is untenable. God almost certainly does not exist”.<sup>26</sup> After establishing his claim that the factual premise of religion is untenable, he goes on to discuss the relevant questions in the surrounding area, and tries to answer them in light of science, particularly the theory of evolution:

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<sup>25</sup> Dawkins, R. (2006). *The God Delusion*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, pp. 50, 51.

<sup>26</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 159.

Even if we accept that God doesn't exist, doesn't religion still have a lot going for it? Isn't it consoling? Doesn't it motivate people to do good? If it weren't for religion, how would we know what is good? Why, in any case, be so hostile? Why, if it is false, does every culture in the world have religion? True or false, religion is ubiquitous, so where does it come from?<sup>27</sup>

The book is large and ambitious. It poses a medley of questions and uses many different tools —arguments, scientific theories and explanations, statistics, quotes, anecdotes, and letters etc. to answer them definitively. Dawkins intends the book to prove that it almost certainly is the case that God does not exist and religion is false. Religious beliefs are not only false, but also unnecessary, harmful and pernicious.

For the purposes of this chapter, I will engage only what I take to be the two core claims of the book. These two claims, I believe, are not only representative of Dawkins' own position, but also that of New Atheism more broadly:

1. The God hypothesis is a scientific hypothesis and it is false. God does not exist.<sup>28</sup>
2. Religion is a significant force for evil.<sup>29</sup>

### 6.1.1 God Almost Certainly Does Not Exist

Dawkins repeatedly makes the claim that “the God hypothesis is a scientific hypothesis” throughout *The God Delusion*.<sup>30</sup> It is the single most significant claim

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<sup>27</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 159.

<sup>28</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 159.

<sup>29</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 262.

<sup>30</sup> Here are few examples: “[T]he God Hypothesis’ is a scientific hypothesis about the universe, which should be analysed as sceptically as any other” (p.2); “I believe the existence of

for Dawkins. The book almost solely rely on this particular claim. If he would suspect that the God hypothesis might not be a hypothesis science can disprove, one would safely assume that Dawkins would not even attempt to write *The God Delusion* in the first place.

This claim, however, is quite controversial among both philosophers and theologians. Many would argue that it is not a scientific hypothesis, for God belongs to the realm of metaphysics. Science, on the other hand, does not, or in fact cannot, deal with metaphysics. What makes Dawkins reject this picture? What is the reason for his insistence that the existence of God is indeed a scientific issue? But even before that, what is the God hypothesis? Dawkins gives a clear definition:

[T]here exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.<sup>31</sup>

Right after this definition, he proposes an alternative view:

[A]ny creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution. Creative intelligences, being evolved, necessarily arrive late in the universe, and therefore cannot be responsible for designing it.<sup>32</sup>

Dawkins argues that this second, scientific claim is in contradiction with the first, religious claim. And the second claim has the power to refute the first. That is to say, the God hypothesis is refutable by science and hence, it is essentially a

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God as a scientific hypothesis is, at least in principle, investigable" (p. 105); "I suggest that even a non-interventionist, NOMA God, though less violent and clumsy than an Abrahamic God, is still, when you look at him fair and square, a scientific hypothesis" (p. 60, 61); see: Dawkins, *The God Delusion*.

<sup>31</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 31.

<sup>32</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 31.

scientific claim. In other words, Dawkins believes that the God hypothesis provides an alternative account of the mechanics of existence: how things came to be and how things work in the universe. And this account is in direct conflict with the scientific account:

[A] universe in which we are alone except for other slowly evolved intelligences is a very different universe from one with an original guiding agent whose intelligent design is responsible for its very existence. I accept that it may not be so easy in practice to distinguish one kind of universe from the other. Nevertheless, there is something utterly special about the hypothesis of ultimate design, and equally special about the only known alternative: gradual evolution in the broad sense. They are close to being irreconcilably different.

That is to say, the God hypothesis, apart from whatever other things it does, attempts to explain the same phenomena that science seeks to explain. Thus, it is refutable on scientific grounds. If an alternative, contradictory explanation can be shown to do a better job, to better meet the scientific criteria, then this discredits, and for all the practical purposes one may also say disproves, the God hypothesis.

Chapter 4 of *The God Delusion* is Dawkins' attempt to show how the theory of evolution explains the same phenomena that the God hypothesis is invoked to explain in a far superior way. Dawkins' reasoning follows a total of six steps:

1. One of the greatest challenges to the human intellect, over the centuries, has been how to explain how the complex, improbable appearance of design in the universe arises.
2. The natural temptation is to attribute the appearance of design to actual design itself. In the case of a man-made artefact such as a watch, the designer really was an intelligent engineer. It is tempting to apply the same logic to an eye or a wing, a spider or a person.



3. The temptation is a false one, because the designer hypothesis immediately raises the larger problem of who designed the designer. The whole problem we started out with was the problem of explaining statistical improbability. It is obviously no solution to postulate something even more improbable. We need a 'crane', not a 'skyhook', for only a crane can do the business of working up gradually and plausibly from simplicity to otherwise improbable complexity.
4. The most ingenious and powerful crane so far discovered is Darwinian evolution by natural selection. Darwin and his successors have shown how living creatures, with their spectacular statistical improbability and appearance of design, have evolved by slow, gradual degrees from simple beginnings. We can now safely say that the illusion of design in living creatures is just that - an illusion.
5. We don't yet have an equivalent crane for physics. Some kind of multiverse theory could in principle do for physics the same explanatory work as Darwinism does for biology. This kind of explanation is superficially less satisfying than the biological version of Darwinism, because it makes heavier demands on luck. But the anthropic principle entitles us to postulate far more luck than our limited human intuition is comfortable with.
6. We should not give up hope of a better crane arising in physics, something as powerful as Darwinism is for biology. But even in the absence of a strongly satisfying crane to match the biological one, the relatively weak cranes we have at present are, when abetted by the anthropic principle, self-evidently better than the self-defeating skyhook hypothesis of an intelligent designer.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 157, 158.

The argument Dawkins makes here is actually not very relevant to the purposes of this chapter. The question “what explains the mechanics of the world better, the God hypothesis or the theory of evolution?” has no bearing on the question “does New Atheism present some challenges for the Rortian approach to religion and if so, what are they?”. But it is still important for us to be able to see the outlines and the structure of this argument, for it also defines the outlines and the structure of what is commonly called the science versus religion debate.<sup>34</sup> This is important, because there are intellectuals who write on the same topic and make important contributions to it, while at the same time refuse the very structure of this highly popular debate and its underlying premises. Terry Eagleton would be an excellent example for this third group of intellectuals.<sup>35</sup> I want to argue that Rorty also belongs to this third group. Now, let us leave this argument here only to come back to it later, when discussing Plantinga and the theistic reply.

### 6.1.2 Religion Is Evil

In July 2013, Richard Dawkins debates with journalist Mahdi Hasan on the topic “Is Religion Good or Evil?” in Al Jazeera’s *Head to Head*.<sup>36</sup> As in his many other TV appearances, he makes a case against the dangers and evils of religion and religious beliefs. At some point, Mahdi Hasan asks if Dawkins believes religion is evil. Dawkins, after a slight hesitation, replies: “No.” Mehdi Hasan, not satisfied with the answer, insists on the question by referencing to *The God Delusion*: “But you say plenty of times in this book that religion is evil”.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> The science camp in the debate is represented mostly by scientists and intellectuals like Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennet, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Lawrence Krauss etc. and the religion camp mostly by philosophers and theologians like William Lane Craig, Richard Swinburne, and Alvin Plantinga, etc.

<sup>35</sup> Eagleton, T. (2009). *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

<sup>36</sup> Hasan, M. (2013). Is Religion Good or Evil? (Head to Head, BBC) Accessed 21.02.2017. Retrieved from <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/general/2012/12/2012121791038231381.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Hasan, *Is Religion Good or Evil?* 05:45.

Contrary to what Mahdi Hasan claims, however, in *The God Delusion*, Dawkins never clearly and openly says that “religion is evil”. Though, admittedly, he comes very close to saying it in passages like these:

Even if religion did no other harm in itself, its wanton and carefully nurtured divisiveness –its deliberate and cultivated pandering to humanity’s natural tendency to favour in-groups and shun out-groups– would be enough to make it a significant force for evil in the world.<sup>38</sup>

It has to be admitted that absolutism is far from dead. Indeed, it rules the minds of a great number of people in the world today, most dangerously so in the Muslim world and in the incipient American theocracy (...) Such absolutism nearly always results from strong religious faith, and it constitutes a major reason for suggesting that religion can be a force for evil in the world.<sup>39</sup>

The likes of such passages, in which Dawkins points out to a harmful or dangerous aspect of religion, are abundant in *The God Delusion*. He finds religion guilty of causing the abuse of homosexuals and LGBT people,<sup>40</sup> creating intolerance, extremism and murdering of innocent people,<sup>41</sup> fostering fanaticism,<sup>42</sup> bringing physical and mental abuse on children...<sup>43</sup>

The majority of these passages, if not all, follow a certain three-steps format:

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<sup>38</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 262.

<sup>39</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 286.

<sup>40</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 289–291.

<sup>41</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 292–296.

<sup>42</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 301–308.

<sup>43</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 311–337.

1. Dawkins presents a case using various types of empirical data (surveys, statistics, news, court decisions, anecdotes, testimonies, letters etc.),
2. He portrays what he thinks is the common sense conclusion that can be drawn from the case,
3. He then makes a further judgement that religion is either the root cause of the particular evil going on there, or it is a significant force for it.

In the majority of such cases, the controversy between Dawkins and his theist opponents lie neither in the first nor in the second step, but in the last one. Take the following example:

Dawkins discusses an anti-abortion murder case to illustrate that religion fosters violence. The story is that of Reverend Michael Bray and Reverend Paul Hill, both of which look “nice, rather preppy young men, smiling engagingly, casually well-dressed, the very opposite of staring-eyed loonies”. In their printed photograph, they hold a banner saying “Is it wrong to stop the murder of innocent babies?”.<sup>44</sup> “On 29 July 1994”, however, Dawkins writes, “Paul Hill took a shotgun and murdered Dr. John Britton and his bodyguard James Barrett outside Britton’s clinic in Pensacola, Florida. He then gave himself up to the police, saying he had killed the doctor to prevent the future deaths of ‘innocent babies’.” After the event, Dawkins interviews Michael Bray. He says that, in the interview, Bray “defends such actions articulately and with every appearance of high moral purpose”. Furthermore, to Dawkins’ surprise, he even supports penalties like stoning adulterers to death, eventually justifying his position to invoking an “authentic law” that is not “made up by people on the spot”.<sup>45</sup>

So far, Step 1. And then, in Step 2, Dawkins goes on to portray what he sees the most plausible, reasonable conclusion:

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<sup>44</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 294, 295.

<sup>45</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 294–297.

A spokeswoman for another abortion clinic described Paul Hill as a dangerous psychopath. But people like him don't think of themselves as dangerous psychopaths; they think of themselves as good, moral people, guided by God. Indeed, I don't think Paul Hill was a psychopath. Just very religious. Dangerous, yes, but not a psychopath. Dangerously religious. By the lights of his religious faith, Hill was entirely right and moral to shoot Dr. Britton. What was wrong with Hill was his religious faith itself. Michael Bray, too, when I met him, didn't strike me as a psychopath. I actually quite liked him. I thought he was an honest and sincere man, quietly spoken and thoughtful, but his mind had unfortunately been captured by poisonous religious nonsense.<sup>46</sup>

Though it may look like this is where the controversy lies, I do not think this description is controversial. There do not seem to be good reasons for theists like Craig or Plantinga to refuse this description. They may protest against the way in which Dawkins uses the adjective "religious", but they would most likely agree that "the thing that was wrong with Paul was his faith" and "Bray's mind was captured by poisonous nonsense". Neither of these statements imply that there is something wrong with religion anymore than they imply there is something wrong with being human. For this case to present a challenge against religion, there needs to be some additional claims. What is deeply controversial then is Dawkins' third step in which he makes a more general claim from such particular cases: It is not only the extreme religious beliefs that bring about such tragedies, it is also the religion itself. Even moderate religion is a force for evil, because it fosters fanaticism.

It is not as clear, however, why Dawkins holds this further judgement. What are his reasons to believe so? What is his justification for it? Listing all the disasters and tragedies brought about by religiously-oriented people may be one way to try to settle the issue, and at times Dawkins seems to be attracted by this way, but it hardly justifies his claim. One may as well list all the good things religiously-oriented people have done as a counter-argument.

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<sup>46</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 296–297.

It is also not very clear who or what exactly draws Dawkins' fire. Unlike "the God hypothesis", Dawkins does not provide a clear definition for the term "religion". Religions vary, so do religious beliefs, and so do people's individual interpretations of those beliefs. Does Dawkins think all the religions are a force for evil? When he argues that "moderation in faith fosters fanaticism",<sup>47</sup> for example, what faith does he have in mind?

### **The Modest Claim**

As far as I can see, Dawkins fluctuates between different minds on these questions. At times it seems like he is arguing for a more modest, but more robust claim; and at others he makes a more ambitious, but more controversial one.

What I will call the modest claim follows something along these lines: *In Abrahamic religions there are some aspects (maybe certain teachings and doctrines, or some scriptural passages, or some tolerated attitudes) that are either in themselves evil and pernicious, or give support and comfort to fanatic religious extremism.*

The following passages, for example, can be read as making a modest claim of this sort:

Suicide bombers do what they do because they really believe what they were taught in their religious schools: that duty to God exceeds all other priorities, and that martyrdom in his service will be rewarded in the gardens of Paradise.<sup>48</sup>

Teaching children that unquestioned faith is a virtue primes them - given certain other ingredients that are not hard to come by - to grow up into potentially lethal weapons for future jihads or crusades.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 301.

<sup>48</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 308.

<sup>49</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 308.

Attitudes to homosexuality reveal much about the sort of morality that is inspired by religious faith.<sup>50</sup>

The modest claim does not bear much weight on the God hypothesis. One can agree with Dawkins on all of these points, yet still believe in the God hypothesis and consider himself a member of this or that religion. In fact, many religious people would agree with Dawkins on many of his modest claims. A huge portion of Muslim world believes that suicide is strictly forbidden and the suicide bombers are committing a deadly sin, There is the mainstream thought in Islamic theology about the different levels of faith in which the questioned/verified (tahqiqi) faith is seen superior to unquestioned/imitative (taqlidi) one and encouraged over it. There are fairly substantial theologies in Christianity that call for the utmost respect to all kinds of human beings for the sole reason that we are all created in the image of God. The Republic of Ireland, known to be among the most catholic countries in Europe, is the first country that legalized same-sex marriage by popular vote. Naming some problematic religious beliefs and attitudes is not enough to show that religion is evil, especially when your religious interlocutors agree that those beliefs and attitudes are indeed problematic.

Dawkins does acknowledge that not all religious people have these problematic beliefs and attitudes, But he thinks that their numbers are “numerically negligible”:

If only such a subtle, nuanced religion predominated, the world would surely be a better place, and I would have written a different book. The melancholy truth is that this kind of understated, decent, revisionist religion is numerically negligible.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 291.

<sup>51</sup> Dawkins, R. (2006). *The God Delusion* (2nd ed.). London: Bantam Press, p. 15.

It is a shame that Dawkins does not elaborate on this. The above quote is kind of a passing remark, and with no reference to some empirical data, it reflects no more than Dawkins' own sense of how things are with the world and with religious societies. He may or may not be right. It is not impossible that decent forms of religion are numerically negligible. But Dawkins' personal opinion on the matter is hardly enough to make a case for this claim.

### **The Ambitious Claim**

Dawkins is not always content with his relatively modest objection to religion. In his more ambitious moods, he wants to say that there is a central evil in all forms of religion, both the common, widespread forms and the sophisticated, revisionist ones: Faith. The ambitious claim, then, may be formulated as such: Faith, when it means "belief in something without evidence", is an evil in itself.

There are several occasions where Dawkins makes this claim, and he always attempts to justify it on similar grounds. In *The God Delusion* he writes that "[f]aith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument".<sup>52</sup> Making his case to Mahdi Hasan, he says:

Because if you believe in something without evidence, then that justifies anything. You are no longer vulnerable to somebody coming back at you and saying "hang on a minute, let me argue the case". If you believe it without evidence, which is what faith is, then you don't argue the case, you say "no, I am not arguing that case, this is my faith, it's mine, it's private, I don't dissent from it, I don't retreat from it, you are just going to have to accept it". Now, that is evil.<sup>53</sup>

In an interview with Steve Paulson, he repeats essentially the same argument:

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<sup>52</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 308.

<sup>53</sup> Hasan, *Is Religion Good or Evil?* 07:07.



I think there's something very evil about faith, where faith means believing in something in the absence of evidence, and actually taking pride in believing in something in the absence of evidence. And the reason that's dangerous is that it justifies essentially anything.<sup>54</sup>

I believe, when formulated in this ambitious way, Dawkins' claim faces many intellectual and philosophical difficulties. It stereotypes religious people in a very uncharitable way and makes a straw man out of faith. But I will leave this ambitious claim at the moment, to come back to it later, at the very end of this chapter.

## 6.2 Alvin Plantinga and Defense of Theism

There is a visible contemporary interest towards advocating and promoting atheism mostly due to the works of New Atheists. On the other hand, however, there is also an equally spirited contemporary interest among some philosophers of religion to defend theism. Within this revival of a theistically oriented philosophy of religion, the most influential one is arguably the reformed epistemology movement. One of the key figures, if not the key figure, in reformed epistemology is renowned American philosopher Alvin Plantinga.<sup>55</sup> In the following, I will try to outline Plantinga's position in the science versus religion debate. By doing this, I hope to (1) examine the structure of the current debate between New Atheists and contemporary theists, and (2) discover the challenges a traditionally theistic position may pose for Rorty.

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<sup>54</sup> Paulson, S. (2006). The Flying Spaghetti Monster. *Salon Magazine*. (Interview) Accessed 23.02.17. Retrieved from [http://www.salon.com/2006/10/13/dawkins\\_3/](http://www.salon.com/2006/10/13/dawkins_3/).

<sup>55</sup> The editors of the anthology *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, for example, describes Plantinga's paper "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" as containing "the classic early statement of Reformed epistemology"; see: Geivett, R. D., & Sweetman, B. (1992). *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; and also Plantinga, A. (1992). Is Belief in God Properly Basic? *Noûs*, 15(1), 41–51

And the other two major names in reformed epistemology that deserve to be mentioned here are Nicholas Wolterstorff and William Alston; see, for example: Wolterstorff, N. (1988). *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Alston, W. (1982). Religious Experience and Religious Belief. *Noûs*, 16(1), 3–12.

### 6.2.1 Science Does Not Refute Theism

At the core of Dawkins' book lies the idea that science refutes religion by providing a supremely better explanation for the phenomena that the God hypothesis attempts to explain. And at the core of this idea lies the premise that the God hypothesis is inconsistent with the Darwinian theory of evolution by natural selection. One is a "skyhook" and the other is a "crane".<sup>56</sup> They exclude each other and cannot work together.

Not so surprisingly, at the core of Plantinga's defense lies the refutation of this latter idea: that there is a conflict between contemporary science and Abrahamic religions. Plantinga argues that contemporary science and Abrahamic religions may actually work well together. It is the naturalism that creates the conflict, not the science itself. New Atheists are wrong in presuming that naturalism is inherent to science.

In 2009, at American Philosophical Association Central Division Meeting, a debate on this particular topic takes place between Plantinga and Daniel Dennett, one of the four horsemen of New Atheism. By 2011, an expanded version of the debate gets printed with the title "Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?".<sup>57</sup> This debate summarizes well both the strongest theistic reply to "science refutes religion" claim and the strongest atheistic comeback to this theistic reply.<sup>58</sup>

Because the terms "science" and "religion" are rather broad and ambiguous, Plantinga suggests that we should carefully identify the actually conflicting views.

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<sup>56</sup> These terms are first coined for this discussion by Daniel Dennett and thus, Dawkins uses them in quotation; see: Dennett, D. (1995). *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*. London & New York: Penguin Books, pp. 73–80.

<sup>57</sup> Dennett, D., & Plantinga, A. (2011). *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>58</sup> This is not to say, of course, they are the best possible theistic and atheistic positions *per se*. In fact, from a Rortian point of view, both would be very much problematic and undesirable.

And he identifies them as “contemporary evolutionary theory” and “theistic belief”. When specifying theistic belief, he says:

I won’t be talking about religion generally, but about specifically theistic religion, in particular Christian belief; and when I speak of Christian belief, I’m thinking of C. S. Lewis’s “mere Christianity,” something like the intersection of the great Christian creeds. Although what I say is explicitly concerned with Christian belief, it will also be relevant to many versions of Judaism and Islam.<sup>59</sup>

As for contemporary evolutionary theory, he defines it as a collection of theses:

1. The ancient earth thesis,
2. The thesis of descent with modification, that is the thought that the enormous diversity of the contemporary living world has come about by way of offspring differing, ordinarily in small and subtle ways, from their parents,
3. The common ancestry thesis: the claim that, as Gould put it, there is a “tree of evolutionary descent linking all organisms by ties of genealogy”
4. The claim that the principle mechanism driving this process of descent with modification is natural selection winnowing random genetic mutation.<sup>60</sup>

Plantinga sees no conflict at all between theistic belief and the first three claims, since theistic belief only argues that God created the world. It does not particularly say how he had done so. He could have done it in many different ways and thus all three theses are perfectly compatible with theistic belief. The incompatibility then must arise from the fourth claim, which Plantinga calls “Darwinism”.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Plantinga, A. (2011). *Science and Religion: Where the Conflict Really Lies. Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 2.

<sup>60</sup> Plantinga, “Science and Religion: Where the Conflict Really Lies,” p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Plantinga, “Science and Religion: Where the Conflict Really Lies,” p. 3.

“A suggested source of conflict” says Plantinga “has to do with the Christian doctrine of creation, in particular the claim that God has created human beings in his image. This requires that God intended to create creatures of a certain kind and planned that there be creatures of that kind”. As long as evolution is understood as a guided process, Plantinga thinks there is still no logical incompatibility between the fourth claim and theistic belief: “God could have caused the right mutations to arise at the right time, he could have preserved populations from perils of various sorts, and so on; in this way, by orchestrating the course of evolution, he could have ensured that there come to be creatures of the kind he intends”.<sup>62</sup>

If evolutionary process is to be understood as unguided, unplanned and unintended, however, then the fourth claim is indeed inconsistent with theistic belief. The trouble here is that “[t]here is a veritable choir of extremely distinguished experts insisting that this process is unguided, and indeed that it is a part of contemporary evolutionary theory to assert that it is unguided”.<sup>63</sup> Plantinga, on the other hand, argues that the claim that evolution is unguided is only “a naturalistic gloss on the scientific theory”, not the scientific theory itself. It is “a metaphysical or theological add-on”.<sup>64</sup>

Naturalism and evolutionary theory together imply the denial of divine design, but evolutionary theory by itself doesn’t have that implication. It is only evolutionary science combined with naturalism that implies this denial. Since naturalism all by itself has this implication, it is no surprise that when you conjoin it with science or, as far as that goes, anything else —the complete works of William McGonagall or the Farmer’s Almanac, or the Apostle’s Creed— the conjunction will also have this implication.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Plantinga, “Science and Religion: Where the Conflict Really Lies,” p. 4.

<sup>63</sup> Plantinga, “Science and Religion: Where the Conflict Really Lies,” p. 5.

<sup>64</sup> Plantinga, “Science and Religion: Where the Conflict Really Lies,” p. 6.

<sup>65</sup> Plantinga, “Science and Religion: Where the Conflict Really Lies,” p. 7.

Dennett agrees with Plantinga that there does not have to be a logical incompatibility between contemporary evolutionary theory and theistic belief, but he thinks that is a rather moot point to make, for two reasons:

(1) It is true that contemporary evolutionary theory cannot demonstrate the non-existence of God, or any intelligent designer for that matter. But Plantinga does not give us any good reasons as to why we should assume a design in the first place. Yes, science may not definitively rule out that God remote controls the mechanics of world. But it does not have to either, because that is “an entirely gratuitous fantasy”.<sup>66</sup> Dennett writes:

I could happily concede that anybody who wishes to entertain the fantasy that intelligent designers from another galaxy (or another dimension) fiddled with our evolutionary prehistory, or salted Earth with life forms, or even arranged for the constant of physics to take on their particular “local” values will find their fantasy consistent with contemporary evolutionary biology. There is not a shred of evidence for any such fantasy, but it’s a free country, and it might be harmless enough to keep such fairy tales alive, but in general, I think, it is wise of us to not to respect such frivolities, since they can, in fact, do serious damage to the epistemological fabric of our society.<sup>67</sup>

(2) Naturalism, Dennett argues, is tacitly assumed in all reputable scientific investigation. It has not been established or defended by scientists, yet it is the assumption on which reputable scientific investigation takes place. Scientists “do not routinely add an escape clause, ‘unless God chooses to intervene’, because

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<sup>66</sup> Dennett, D. (2011). Truths That Miss Their Mark: Naturalism Unscathed. *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 27; Please note how Cliffordian the phrase “the epistemological fabric of our society” sounds.

<sup>67</sup> Dennett, “Truths That Miss Their Mark: Naturalism Unscathed,” pp. 27, 28.

of the implicit understanding that no such ‘possibilities’ are taken seriously”.<sup>68</sup> Making an analogy with a court room, Dennett argues that

[n]aturalism is the null hypothesis. That means that it is always open to counsel to try to demonstrate that a miracle —some violation of naturalism— has occurred, but I wouldn’t want my attorney to try the patience of a judge and jury with such a gambit.<sup>69</sup>

Let us take a step back here and focus again on the structure of the discussion: If Dennett is right and current scientific practices indispensably presume a naturalistic background, then there is indeed a conflict between science and religion. If scientific community insists that the practice of science has to be strictly naturalistic, then they are doomed to be in perpetual antagonism with the religious community. In fact, even if this is not the case right now, Plantinga entertains the thought that science at some point in the future, the practice of science may turn out to be completely and exclusively naturalistic. Even then, Plantinga wants to argue for the legitimacy and rationality of theistic belief before such naturalist science. He says:

I’ve argued that the contemporary scientific theory of evolution (taken as including Darwinism) does not entail the claim that natural selection is unguided. But suppose I am mistaken, or suppose instead that current evolutionary theory itself evolves in such a way that this claim becomes part of it. This could certainly happen. (...) Would that show that there is scientific evidence against theism? Hardly. Annexing a proposition *p* to one for which there is evidence doesn’t automatically confer evidence on *p*. (...) And even if, contrary to fact, there were scientific evidence for unguided evolution and hence for atheism, that

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<sup>68</sup> Dennett, D. (2011). *Habits of Imagination and Their Effect on Incredulity: Reply to Plantinga. Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 48.

<sup>69</sup> Dennett, “Habits of Imagination and Their Effect on Incredulity: Reply to Plantinga,” p. 49.

would by no means settle the issue. Suppose there is scientific evidence against theism: it doesn't follow that theism is false (...) Perhaps there is also evidence, scientific or otherwise, for theism.<sup>70</sup>

This passage and the entire way Plantinga engages with the science versus religion debate implies that he implicitly concedes to Dawkins that the God hypothesis may indeed be a scientific hypothesis in the way Dawkins understands it: That there might be some scientific evidence against it. Plantinga's solution, in that scenario, is to embrace the conflict but choose religion over science:

The sensible Christian believer is not obliged to trim her sails to the current scientific breeze on this topic, revising her belief on the topic every time science changes its mind; if the most satisfactory Christian (or theistic) theology endorses the idea that the universe did indeed have a beginning (isn't eternal), the believer has a perfect right to accept that thought. If so, then even if there were scientific evidence against theism, and no propositional evidence, scientific or otherwise, in favor of it, it might still be both rational and warranted.<sup>71</sup>

I will explain how Plantinga justifies this choice later on,<sup>72</sup> but what is particularly interesting about this passage is that Plantinga confesses a significant distrust on the outcomes of the scientific inquiry even when the scientific community is unanimous. What Plantinga asserts here is not the commonplace acknowledgement of the fallibility of scientific knowledge. Instead he refuses the idea that science is the best tool we have at the moment to understand the mechanics of the universe. Theology may as well be an equally valid tool.

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<sup>70</sup> Plantinga, "Science and Religion: Where the Conflict Really Lies," pp. 15, 16.

<sup>71</sup> Plantinga, "Science and Religion: Where the Conflict Really Lies," p. 16.

<sup>72</sup> See "§6.3.2. The Theism That Does Not Require Evidence".

In an article called “When Faith and Reason Clash”, Plantinga argues that the Bible tells us not only about values, purposes, origins and the like, but it also speaks “on an enormous variety of topics and questions” many of which “having to do with what happened within the cosmos at particular place and time, and hence with what also falls within the province of science. It speaks of history, of miracles, of communications from the Lord, of what people did and didn’t do, of battles, healings, deaths, resurrections, and a thousand other things”.<sup>73</sup> Thus, he claims, “we can’t start (...) by declaring that the teachings of contemporary science cannot conflict with the deliverances of the faith; obviously they can”.<sup>74</sup> As for what religious people have to do when confronted with such a conflict, Plantinga refrains from providing a definitive answer:

So what, precisely, must we do in such a situation? Which do we go with faith or reason? More exactly, which do we go with, our grasp of Scripture or current science? I don’t know of any infallible rule, or even any pretty reliable general recipe. All we can do is weigh and evaluate the relative warrant, the relative backing or strength, of the conflicting teachings.<sup>75</sup>

Again, from a bird’s eye view, Plantinga and Dawkins/Dennett agree on the foundational premises of the debate: That the God hypothesis is a scientific claim and the explanation provided by science for the existence of the universe may conflict with the explanation provided by religion. Neither has an issue with the way the debate is structured. The real disagreement between them lies in Plantinga’s additional claim: Scripture (“deliverances of faith”) can be as reliable a source as scientific inquiry even on the questions that fall within the province of science (“deliverances of reason”).

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<sup>73</sup> Plantinga, A. (1991). When Faith and Reason Clash. *Christian Scholar’s Review*, 21(1), 8–33, p. 12.

<sup>74</sup> Plantinga, “When Faith and Reason Clash,” p. 12.

<sup>75</sup> Plantinga, “When Faith and Reason Clash,” p. 14.



## 6.2.2 Theism Does Not Require Evidence

Now let's go back to Plantinga's particularly controversial claim so that we can uncover the arguments behind it:

[E]ven if there were scientific evidence against theism, and no propositional evidence, scientific or otherwise, in favor of it, it might still be both rational and warranted.<sup>76</sup>

Plantinga maintains that religious beliefs do not necessarily require evidence to be rational. Some beliefs, such as the belief in God, can legitimately be considered as properly basic, foundational beliefs. This view is famously known as “reformed epistemology”. By way of explanation, Plantinga points to a number of early reformed theologians, one of which is Herman Bavinck:

There is not a single object the existence of which we hesitate to accept until definite proofs are furnished. Of the existence of self, of the world round about us, of logical and moral laws, etc., we are so deeply convinced because of the indelible impressions which all these things make upon our consciousness that we need no arguments or demonstration. Spontaneously, altogether involuntarily: without any constraint or coercion, we accept that existence. Now, the same is true in regard to the existence of God. The so-called proofs are by no means the final grounds of our most certain conviction that God exists. This certainty is established only by faith.<sup>77</sup>

To Plantinga, what Bavinck brings to light here in this passage is two fundamental ideas:

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<sup>76</sup> Plantinga, “Science and Religion: Where the Conflict Really Lies,” p. 16.

<sup>77</sup> Bavinck, H. (1951). *The Doctrine of God*. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, pp. 78–79; via Alvin, P. (1983). Reason and Belief in God. P. Alvin & N. Wolterstorff (Eds.), *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, p. 64.

First, arguments or proofs are not, in general, the source of the believer's confidence in God.<sup>78</sup>

Second, argument is not needed for rational justification; the believer is entirely within his epistemic right in believing, for example, that God has created the world, even if he has no argument at all for that conclusion.<sup>79</sup>

Plantinga then adds to these two ideas, a crucial third idea from John Calvin:

I'll take Calvin as suggesting that there is a kind of faculty (like sight or hearing) or a cognitive mechanism —what he calls a “sensus divinitatis” or sense of divinity— which in a wide variety of circumstances produces in us beliefs about God.<sup>80</sup>

This natural knowledge of God is not arrived at by inference or argument (for example the famous theistic proofs of natural theology) but in a much more immediate way. The deliverances of sensus divinitatis are not quick inferences from the circumstances that trigger its operation. It isn't that one beholds the night sky, notes that it is grand, and concludes that there must be such a person as God: as an argument, this would be pretty weak. (...) It is rather that upon the perception of the night sky or the mountain vista or the tiny flower these beliefs just arise within us. They arise in these circumstances; they are not conclusions from them. The heavens declare the glory of God and the skies proclaim the work of his hands (Psalm 19): but not by way of serving as premises for an argument.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Alvin, “Reason and Belief in God,” p. 64.

<sup>79</sup> Alvin, “Reason and Belief in God,” p. 65.

<sup>80</sup> Plantinga, A. (2015). *Knowledge and Christian Belief*. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, p. 33.

<sup>81</sup> Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, p. 35.

That is to say, Plantinga argues that we have a particular kind of belief-forming faculty that can be called “sensus divinitatis”. It is implemented by God in each of us and when it works properly, it enables us to produce true beliefs about God. How can one argue for the existence of such a faculty though? How can one argue that belief in God is indeed a properly basic belief produced by such faculty? Plantinga is aware that there are no non-circular way to argue for the truth of these claims, so he only argues for their rationality.

If theistic belief is false, Plantinga admits, then there probably is no warrant for it. But if such a person as God exists, a person who created human beings in his own image and desired that they know and love him, then “the natural thing to think”, he writes, “is that he created us in such a way that we would come to hold such true beliefs as that he is our creator, that we owe him obedience and worship, that he is worthy of worship, that he loves us, and so on. And if that is so, then, further, the natural thing to think is that the cognitive processes that do produce belief in God are aimed by their designer (God) at producing that belief. But then the belief in question will be produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth: it will therefore have warrant”.<sup>82</sup>

Plantinga admits that this argument is not polemically useful.<sup>83</sup> He cannot sensibly convince an unbeliever that theistic belief is true by arguing that she should start from faith to have faith. But he believes that he can convince her that it is entirely rational to subscribe to a different understanding of rationality, in which the deliverances of reason include divine truths just as much as perceptual truths, self-evident truths, memory truths etc.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, p. 39.

<sup>83</sup> Alvin, “Reason and Belief in God,” p. 77.

<sup>84</sup> Alvin, “Reason and Belief in God,” p. 90.

### 6.3 Rorty on the Science vs. Religion Debate

It would not be a stretch to say that the ongoing debate between Dawkins-like atheism and Plantinga-like theism is what dominates the intellectual discussions around religion today. Arguments about the existence of God, rationality and the ethics of religious belief can be said to be as lively as ever, both in the intellectual circles and among people who do not have a specialized knowledge in the subject, but they all tend to be a variation on the debate between New Atheists and Reformed Epistemologists. It is against this background we shall evaluate Rorty's pragmatic approach to religion.

We shall also remember the distinction made in Chapter 3 between "pragmatic approach to religion" and "pragmatic religion". The former promises an alternative way of having these public discussions around religion: It offers different premises to start our conversations with and it also encourages us to prioritize different questions. The latter, on the other hand, is an alternative way to characterize religious belief: It suggests we reconsider the very content of our own private religious beliefs. With respect to this distinction, I will make two claims:

1. The pragmatic approach to religion Rorty offers is inclusive and accommodative enough to embrace strong theistic and atheistic commitments. One does not need to give up one's personal faith that a personal, supernatural God exists (or does not exist) to be able to adopt a Rortian pragmatic approach. Moreover, not only Rorty's approach is more inclusive, it also carries fewer problematic aspects than that of Dawkins' and/or Plantinga's.
2. Rorty's pragmatic religion is not equally inclusive. It asks one to do away with one's beliefs in supernatural. But it does not have to be inclusive either. It is meant to be an articulation of what Rorty thinks as the better private beliefs to have, and as such, it concerns private decisions, not public processes. One can choose not to opt in with no repercussions. More importantly, Rorty's approach to religion does not depend on his account of properly pragmatic religion to make sense and be plausible.

With these two claims in mind, in the following, I will compare Rorty to Dawkins and Plantinga. I will first examine the problematic aspects of Dawkins and Plantinga from a Rortian perspective. And then, I will reverse the perspective and identify the challenges Dawkins and Plantinga may pose for Rorty.

### 6.3.1 An Analysis of the Debate

What seems to be most characteristic about the Dawkins-Plantinga debate is that both parties are in agreement that the primary question at stake, the question that the whole discussion should be centered around, is the truth of the God hypothesis. Both Dawkins and Plantinga believe that there is a matter-of-fact answer to this question and they both claim to have that answer. But what is the nature of this question? How do we go about finding the answer to it? Here, the two parties disagree: Dawkins believes that we know the answer because the scientific evidence decisively points to the non-existence of a God. Plantinga, on the other hand, believes that we know the answer because we have a particular faculty called *sensus divinitatis* and it gives us the answer, again decisively. One apparent problem here, then, a fruitful dialogue between the parties seems impossible. This is because both parties lack a real sense of humility when it comes to their core beliefs.

Dawkins deprives himself of the possibility of genuinely appreciating his opponents' intellectual contributions to the discussion by strongly holding that religious belief is nothing but a delusion.<sup>85</sup> At the American Atheists National Convention in 2009, a member of the audience asks Dawkins a question: "you have done debates all around the world, have you ever had a clever or interesting argument from the other side?" As if to prove my point, Dawkins triumphantly answers

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<sup>85</sup> Terry Eagleton mockingly says that the sentence "Ditchkins then humbly allowed that there was something to be said for the other side" is an anomaly or a contradiction" ("Ditchkins" is a single signifier Eagleton coins to refer to Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens in one breath); see: Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*, p. 19.

with a resolute “no”.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, Plantinga’s account does not have any room for doubt, for the possibility of the non-existence of God. The only thing that can genuinely challenge or change a Plantinga’s beliefs about the deliverances of faith is the deliverances of faith itself. In this sense, they both offer a closed system of rationality, which assumes that the outsider has a certain cognitive deficiency. For Dawkins, theists are displaying some sort of intellectual dysfunction by not responding to the evidence in the right way. For Plantinga, atheists are displaying another kind of cognitive dysfunction because their *sensus divinitatis* fail to function properly, possibly due to their sins or their “desire to live in a world without God”.<sup>87</sup>

This is not to say that they are blindly dogmatic about their beliefs. It would be very unfair to portray them as such. Dawkins’ position as a scientist commits him to respond to evidence and change his mind accordingly. And, as a theologian, Plantinga readily confers that though Scripture cannot be wrong, humans can, and thus our grasp of Scripture may be “faulty and flawed in thousand ways”.<sup>88</sup> But the way they hold their beliefs makes it nearly impossible for them to be open to change. When asked “what would it take you to believe in God? (...) Popping his head through the clouds?”, Dawkins answers:

I used to think, yes, if there was a great, deep, Paul Robeson voice coming out of the clouds saying, “I exist,” then yes, obviously, I would believe it. But have you ever seen a really, really good conjuring trick?<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Dawkins, R. (2009). American Atheists Conference. (Untitled Talk) Accessed 10.04.2017. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xbza-UtseE0>, 58:35.

<sup>87</sup> Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, p. 44.

<sup>88</sup> Plantinga, “When Faith and Reason Clash,” p. 13.

<sup>89</sup> Hasan, *Is Religion Good or Evil?* 32:54.

Similarly, as I have already quoted him twice on this, Plantinga holds that Christian belief is still rational and warranted even if there were scientific evidence against it and no propositional evidence in favor of it.<sup>90</sup>

My point here is not the apparent fact that Dawkins-like atheism and Plantinga-like theism are in conflict, but rather these positions deprive themselves of the tools they need to be able to converse with each other in a productive way. Not only they are unable to converse, but they are fearful of and thus hostile to one another. New atheists are afraid that even Plantinga-like theism is harmful for the advancement of science.<sup>91</sup> The aggressive and militant nature of Dawkins-like atheism is scary for traditional theists. What makes this worse is they are justified in their fears of each other. In a society where Dawkinsian naturalism reigns, religious people will most likely be considered delusional, simple minded, and backward. Alternatively, in a society where Plantingian theism is the norm, the odds are atheists will be seen as cognitively impaired, sinful, and/or obstinate.

### 6.3.2 A Pragmatic Reconfiguration of the Debate

Here two Rortian terms comes to mind: “Irony” and “common sense”. I believe Rorty would consider both Dawkins and Plantinga as “commonsensical” intellectuals rather than “ironist” ones. And this might be the main reason why the conversation between them has the shortcomings it has.

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<sup>90</sup> Plantinga, “Science and Religion: Where the Conflict Really Lies,” p. 16.

<sup>91</sup> Dennett, for example, thinks that religion may indeed be rational in the particular sense Plantinga describes, yet it still does not go beyond being a fantasy which not only lacks evidence, but is also dangerous for our contemporary societies. He calls Plantinga’s views a “frivolity” and asks us not to respect them. He says: “I think, it is wise of us to not to respect such frivolities, since they can, in fact, do serious damage to the epistemological fabric of our society: For instance, they might mislead deluded people into basing policy on them, for instance, by offering public sacrifices to those imagined intelligent designers in hopes of enticing them to return and repair our damaged planet, or, to take two entirely real and utterly deplorable examples, they might mislead deluded people into dismissing environmental concerns since the End Times will soon be upon us in any case, or spawn hatred of a political candidate because he is deemed to be Antichrist.”; see: Dennett, “Truths That Miss Their Mark: Naturalism Unscathed,” p. 28.

To understand these two terms, however, one must understand the concept of a “final vocabulary”. “All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives”, writes Rorty:

These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. I shall call these words a person’s “final vocabulary”.<sup>92</sup>

What makes this vocabulary “final” is its circular nature:

It is “final” in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse.<sup>93</sup>

It is on this understanding of final vocabulary, Rorty defines common sense:

[It] is the watchword of those who unselfconsciously describe everything important in terms of the final vocabulary to which they and those around them are habituated.<sup>94</sup>

“To be commonsensical”, says Rorty, “is to take for granted that statements formulated in that final vocabulary suffice to describe and judge the beliefs, actions and lives of those who employ alternative final vocabularies”.<sup>95</sup> It is in this sense, then, Dawkins and Plantinga are commonsensical intellectuals. They both aim to show how the other fails to be rational with reference to the final vocabulary they

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<sup>92</sup> Rorty, “Private Irony and Liberal Hope,” p. 73.

<sup>93</sup> Rorty, “Private Irony and Liberal Hope,” p. 73.

<sup>94</sup> Rorty, “Private Irony and Liberal Hope,” p. 74.

<sup>95</sup> Rorty, “Private Irony and Liberal Hope,” p. 74.



themselves employ. Rorty then describes what happens when you challenge the core beliefs of a commonsensical intellectual. His description of the process is, as far as I can see, very fitting for the Dawkins-Plantinga debate:

When common sense is challenged, its adherents respond at first by generalizing and making explicit the rules of the language game they are accustomed to play (as some of the Greek Sophists did, and as Aristotle did in his ethical writings). But if no platitude formulated in the old vocabulary suffices to meet an argumentative challenge, the need to reply produces a willingness to go beyond platitudes. At that point, conversation may go Socratic. The question "What is X?" is now asked in such a way that it cannot be answered simply by producing paradigm case of x-hood. So one may demand a definition, an essence.

To make such Socratic demands is not yet, of course, to become and ironist in the sense in which I am using this term. It is only to become a "metaphysician" in a sense of that term which I am adapting from Heidegger. In this sense, the metaphysician is someone who takes the question "What is intrinsic nature of (e.g. justice, science, knowledge, Being, faith, morality, philosophy)?" at face value. He assumes that the presence of a term in his own final vocabulary ensures that it refers to something which has a real essence. The metaphysician is still attached to common sense, in that he does not question the platitudes which encapsulate the use of a given final vocabulary, and in particular the platitude which says there is a single permanent reality to be found behind the many temporary appearances. He does not redescribe, but, rather, analyzes old descriptions with the help of other old descriptions.<sup>96</sup>

Now this rather lengthy passage gives us the idea of how Rorty sees the debate between Dawkins and Plantinga. To him, both of them aspire to be a metaphysi-

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<sup>96</sup> Rorty, "Private Irony and Liberal Hope," p. 74.

cian for their own versions of “permanent reality”. Plantinga’s appeal to Calvin’s terminology and his account of what it really means to be rational, for example, is a metaphysician’s attempt to analyze old descriptions (the Dawkinsian description of rationality) with the help of other old descriptions (the Calvinian description of rationality). Similarly, when Dennett admits the rationality of Plantinga’s theism (in the sense of it being coherent and logically possible) but nevertheless calls it a “fantasy” as opposed to what is real, he takes on the task of a metaphysician in this Rortian sense.

The opposite of common sense, on the other hand, is irony. Rorty describes “ironist” as someone who fulfills three conditions:

- (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered;
- (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself.<sup>97</sup>

An ironist intellectual, then, sees another final vocabulary where a common-sensical intellectual sees an alternative representation of reality. The latter thinks that there must only be one true representation of reality. Thus alternative views appear not only wrong but also necessarily hostile to her own views. The former, however, thinks of the alternative vocabularies in a much more positive way: They can be means for constructive criticism. On this, Rorty says:

For us ironists, nothing can serve as a criticism of a final vocabulary save another such vocabulary; there is no answer to a redescription save a re-redescription. Since there is nothing beyond vocabularies which serves as a criterion of choice between them, criticism is a matter of looking on this picture and on that, not of comparing both pictures with

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<sup>97</sup> Rorty, “Private Irony and Liberal Hope,” p. 73.

the original. Nothing can serve as a criticism of a person save another person, or of a culture save an alternative culture — for persons and culture are, for us, incarnated vocabularies. So our doubts about our own characters or our own culture can be resolved or assuaged only by enlarging our acquaintance. (...) Ironists are afraid that they will get stuck in the vocabulary in which they were brought up if they only know the people in their own neighborhood, so they try to get with strange people (Alcibiades, Julien, Sorel), strange families (the Karamazovs, the Casaubons), and strange communities (the Teutonic Knights, the Nuer, the mandarins of the Sung).<sup>98</sup>

In principle, then, the possibility of genuine, fruitful communication between an ironist theist and an ironist atheist is much more likely than it is between Dawkins and Plantinga. Rorty is as good an example for an ironist atheist as any, and the tone and nature of his interactions with his theistically oriented interlocutors (be it his reading of William James, his sympathetic discussions with Gianni Vattimo, or his relatively adversarial exchanges with Jeffrey Stout and Nicholas Wolterstorff) serves as a proof for this claim. Rorty is able to stay fully committed to his atheism and naturalism, but at the same time refrains from any implications of cognitive incompetency on behalf of his theist interlocutors. He takes their criticisms seriously and at times, changes his mind about his own position due to these criticisms.

From a Rortian point of view, then, the discussion between Dawkins and Plantinga is entirely futile. They lack the tools for genuine respect for each other's positions and thus they lack the tools to converse effectively. It is not a conversation, but a battle between two metaphysicians arguing past each other. And what can they hope to achieve if they were to win this battle? As far as practical points go, what Dawkins may hope to achieve is an autonomy of science and a society that is not harmed and crippled by what he considers the evils of religion. And as far as Plantinga's involvement with the debate goes, it seems like he seeks to achieve

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<sup>98</sup> Rorty, "Private Irony and Liberal Hope," p. 80.

the autonomy of faith and religious belief from naturalist science and evidentialism in general. For Rorty, both of these goals can be achieved simultaneously within a framework that invokes the public-private distinction. The chapters so far demonstrated how Rorty can respect the legitimacy of private religious beliefs and argue for an autonomous science at the same time. On top of that, Rortian pragmatists do not need their opponents to be fundamentally wrong to argue for their case. Because their debate would not be about who gets what right or who has the appropriate epistemological tools to get things right. It would be about what kind of beliefs helps to improve the solidarity of a society and what kind of beliefs unnecessarily inflicts harm and pain upon others. To put it in a more Rortian jargon, it would be about the possible benefits and dangers of running different social experiments. Their discussion would turn out to be a very different discussion than that of the discussion around “the God Hypothesis” and contemporary theory of evolution.

## 6.4 Challenges from Dawkins and Plantinga

So there are reasons to think that Rorty’s approach may be a significant improvement over the currently dominant ways of thinking and talking about religion. But what are the problematic aspects of Rorty from Dawkins’ or Plantinga’s point of view? Are there any challenges Dawkins or Plantinga may pose for Rorty? In the following, I will examine these challenges. I will argue that neither Dawkins nor Plantinga are able to pose any novel challenges. At the end of the day, both of their criticisms end up being a rather poor variation of W. K. Clifford’s “the ethics of belief” argument.

### 6.4.1 Plantinga Versus Rorty

Unlike Dawkins, Plantinga explicitly engages with Rorty in his book *Warranted Christian Belief*.<sup>99</sup> His engagement with Rorty is particularly illustrative of a

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<sup>99</sup> Plantinga, A. (2000). *Warranted Christian Belief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 429–436.

common worry among traditional theists towards postmodern approaches such as Rorty's.

Plantinga seems to consider postmodernism an unfriendly movement towards Christian belief. He reads Rorty as a postmodern philosopher whose account of truth is incompatible with Christianity. Plantinga also thinks, however, postmodernists do not offer anything in the way of argument to defeat Christian belief.<sup>100</sup> "The problem with postmodernism", he writes, "is that it is extremely hard to find in it anything that is a sensible candidate for being a defeater for Christian belief".<sup>101</sup> To Plantinga, Rorty is no exception to this rule. Rorty, in nowhere of his work, offers a clear defeater for Christian belief. In fact, what Plantinga finds in Rorty's work (along with that of Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida) is the opposite of clarity: a "posturing obscurantism".<sup>102</sup> Thus Plantinga takes it on himself to extract possible defeaters from Rorty's obscure work. His attempt to come up with a Rortian argument against Christian belief starts with the following passage:

Richard Rorty is widely credited (some might say "debited") with the view that "truth is what our peers will let us get away with saying." Now this is a bit vague, but if taken seriously, it does, indeed, seem to be incompatible with Christian belief. That is because if a proposition is true (true 'for me', I suppose) if and only if my peers will let me get away with saying it, then, given proposition (1) on p. 424,<sup>103</sup> God is dependent ('for me', if that makes sense) for his very existence on my peers. For if they were to let me get away with saying that there is no such person as God, then it would be true that there is no such person,

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<sup>100</sup> "Postmodernism, therefore, doesn't offer anything that can be sensibly thought a defeater for Christian belief"; see: Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 437.

<sup>101</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 429.

<sup>102</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 427.

<sup>103</sup> Proposition (1) states that: "Necessarily, there is such a person as God if and only if it is true that there is such a person as God"; see: Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 424.

in which case there would be no such person. So whether there is such a person as God depends upon the behavior of my peers. Not easy to believe.<sup>104</sup>

This passage summarizes the worry most traditional theists seem to share: In postmodernist views like Rorty's, God is no more than a concept. It is created by our imagination and/or intellect. But the traditional theist is very much committed to the view that our existence depends on God and not the other way around. Rortian pragmatism is incompatible with this core commitment. The Rortian approach to religion, thus, amounts to undermining the very essence of religious belief. It is not much different than Dewey's naturalized religious belief in which God is not a real entity but an imaginative unity of all human ideals, That is to say, it is essentially a human construct. To Dewey, God exists because humans exist, not vice versa.

Dewey's understanding of God is fundamentally different than Plantinga's understanding of God. Moreover, Dewey's approach to religion lacks the theoretical flexibility to accommodate blameless belief in a supernatural God. Followers of Abrahamic religions need to drop all of their supernatural beliefs if they were to adopt a Deweyan approach. What Dewey asks from traditional theists then is a form of religious conversion. They need to be converted from Christianity, Islam, Judaism etc. to what he calls "a common faith". He asks them to believe in a different God than they currently believe in. I believe this is more or less the case with Rorty's account of a pragmatic religion, that is his account of religious faith as romance. When Rorty asks traditional theists to renounce their faith in a supernatural God in favour of a faith in the possibility of human beings, what he asks is also a religious conversion: From Christianity, Islam, Judaism etc. to what he calls "romance".

It is important, however, to remember the distinction I have made in chapter three between Rorty's "pragmatic religion" and "pragmatic approach to religion". Rorty's account of pragmatic religion does indeed demand a radical transformation

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<sup>104</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 430.

of traditional, supernatural religious notions such as God, heavens etc. It claims to be a better alternative to traditional theism. Thus, it neither is nor have to be inclusive. His pragmatic approach to religion, on the other hand, places a special emphasis on the legitimacy of private religious beliefs. It does not demand anyone to transform their existing religious beliefs into any other beliefs, unless these beliefs cease to be private. Unlike that of Dawkins or Dewey, Rorty's approach to religion does not pose an existential threat to traditional theism. It can accommodate any and all religious beliefs as long as they do not prove to be harmful for the society.

Plantinga's passage above, however, may be revealing a deeper concern. The concern is that Rorty's pragmatism itself, the pragmatism that lies behind his private versus public distinction, makes the belief in God in any traditionally acceptable sense impossible. If a believer admits to a type of pragmatism Rorty champions, she can no longer genuinely believe in the God of Christianity (or Islam, or Judaism etc.). This is because Rortian pragmatism treats truth as the result of some interpersonal human activity. If truth is no more than "what our peers will, *ceteris paribus*, let us get away with saying", argues Plantinga, then "whether there is such a person as God depends upon the behavior of my peers".<sup>105</sup> Reading Plantinga's further criticism on the matter, however, one cannot help but suspect if he misinterprets Rorty:

The view in question has still other peculiar consequences. For example, it promises an auspicious way of dealing with war, poverty, disease, and the other ills our flesh is heir to. Take AIDS: if we all let each other get away with saying that there just isn't any such thing as AIDS, then on this Rortyesque view it would be true that there isn't any such thing as AIDS; and if it were true that there is no such thing as AIDS, then there would be no such thing. So all we have to do to get rid of AIDS, or cancer, or poverty is let each other get away with saying there is

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<sup>105</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 429.

no such thing. That seems much easier than the more conventional methods, which involve all that time, energy, and money.<sup>106</sup>

This is, of course, a grotesque caricature of Rorty's views. Rorty never means to say anything even close to "all we have to do to get rid of AIDS is to deny the existence of AIDS". Our efforts, actions and beliefs, in the Rortian picture, are there to serve a purpose. When we want to get rid of AIDS, cancer or poverty, the purpose behind this desire is something like reducing unnecessary human suffering. It would be extremely absurd to say that getting rid of the words or the concepts would help reducing unnecessary human suffering caused by AIDS, cancer or poverty. The very existence of these words, for Rorty, has to do with our public projects aiming to reduce the suffering caused by AIDS, cancer or poverty.

Plantinga admits that he may be making a straw man out of Rorty by representing his views as such, but he argues that this straw man reading of Rorty is the only reading in which Rorty can offer a candidate for a defeater for Christian belief. He acknowledges the existence of much finer and more charitable interpretations of Rorty, such as the one provided by Garry Gutting,<sup>107</sup> but he ignores them as they "aren't so much as mildly shocking" and "they certainly don't constitute defeaters for Christian belief".<sup>108</sup>

This is very interesting, because I agree with Plantinga that Rorty's views do not constitute defeaters for Christian belief. And they do not mean to be either. They do not aim to prove Christian belief wrong. They do not aim to provide a definitive answer to a metaphysical question. They try to tackle different, less metaphysical and more social problems. Hence, Rorty's pragmatism neither necessarily leads to antirealism about God, nor it pretends to prove the God hypothesis wrong. In fact, Rorty's uninterest in offering defeaters for Chris-

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<sup>106</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 430.

<sup>107</sup> Gutting, G. (1999). Richard Rorty: The Rudiments of Pragmatic Liberalism. *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 7–69.

<sup>108</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 431.



tian belief is one of the defining characteristics that differentiates Rorty's atheism than that of Dawkins. Unlike Dawkins, Rorty is able to defend the intellectual legitimacy of private religious beliefs exactly because he has radical doubts about such defeaters. Contrary to what Plantinga seems to think, Rorty defends that Christian belief (or any other religious belief) can be held without any damage to one's intellectual integrity.<sup>109</sup>

### 6.4.2 Militant Atheism Versus Rorty

Richard Dawkins is not a philosopher by profession and he does not directly engage with Rorty or his thoughts. Daniel Dennett, on the other hand, is not only a professional philosopher, but also a fellow pragmatist who admires Rorty and is admired by him too. In his various engagements with Rorty, Dennett always has a friendly and constructive tone.<sup>110</sup> Also noteworthy is that none of Dennett's works criticize Rorty's approach to religion.

This being the case, however, the lack of criticism from militant atheists is more likely due to the fact that neither Dawkins nor Dennett have much knowledge, or maybe even interest, on what Rorty has to say on religion. One can surely imagine Dawkins, for example, raising some worries and objections if he were to engage with Rorty's views on the subject. This is because although Rorty's approach to religion is certainly compatible with atheism, it is not quite compatible with the militant atheism Dawkins champions. In the following, then, I will look at these

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<sup>109</sup> See Chapter 2: The Ethics of Faith

<sup>110</sup> Richard Rumana's bibliography of secondary literature on Rorty lists three occasions:

1. Dennett, D. (1982). Comments on Rorty. *Synthese*, 53, 349–356
2. Dennett, D. (2000). The Case for Rorts. R. Brandom (Ed.), *Rorty and His Critics* (pp. 99–101). Oxford: Blackwell
3. Dennett, D. (2000). Postmodernism and Truth. D. O. Dahlstorm (Ed.), *The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy* (Vol. 8: Contemporary Philosophy, pp. 93–103). Ohio: Bowling Green State University Press

See: Rumana, R. (2002). *Richard Rorty: An Annotated Bibliography of Secondary Literature*. New York: Rodopi, pp. 25, 26

worries and objections to see if militant atheism can prove Rorty's approach to religion problematic.

As a starting point let us remember that Dawkins makes two central claims in *The God Delusion*, and militant atheism relies on the strength of these two claims:

1. The God hypothesis is scientific hypothesis and it is false. God does not exist.<sup>111</sup>
2. Religion is a significant force for evil.<sup>112</sup>

Corresponding to these two claims, one might imagine two Dawkinsian worries about Rorty's approach:

1. The thesis of the legitimacy of unjustified private beliefs allows people to believe things that are not true. It justifies believing in falsehood.
2. Rorty is being too easy on religion and does not realize the gravity of the evil it causes. If religion is the root cause for much evil,<sup>113</sup> we should wage an effective war against it. Rorty's defense of private beliefs does not help, and even may hinder the battle against the evils from religion by justifying the beliefs that lead to said evils.

Both of these worries imply that Rorty's approach fails to address the issue at stake. The former wants to insist that what matters is not if the belief is

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<sup>111</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 159.

<sup>112</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 262.

<sup>113</sup> In 2006, Dawkins presents a television documentary on religion called "The Root of All Evil?". He later says in *The God Delusion* that from the start, he didn't like the title. "Religion is not the root of all evil", he declares, "for no one thing is the root of all anything". In the following paragraph, however, he seems to argue that religion is the root cause for much evil nevertheless, from suicide bombings to crusades and witch-hunts, from Israeli/Palestinian wars to the troubles in Northern Ireland etc.; see: Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 1, 2.

private or public but if the belief is true or not. And the latter implies that Rorty's justification of private beliefs gives comfort and aid to the kinds of religious believers that cause much unnecessary misery and pain in the world. I would like to argue here that it is difficult to make a sound criticism of Rorty's approach based on either of these worries.

### **Professor Ryan: A Religious Scientist**

The difficulty with the first worry, for example, is how to make a challenging objection from it. To make things a bit more concrete, I will discuss the issue through an illustrative story. Rorty, in his speech "Is Religion Compatible With Science?" given in 2000 at West Valley College, asks the audience to consider an imaginary person, professor Ryan, who is both an evolutionary biologist and a religious believer. His description of professor Ryan goes as follows:

Ryan spends her working hours figuring out how to bridge the gaps in Darwin's story of how the mammals and, in particular, human beings came into existence. Her work is done against the background of, and takes for granted, the usual story about the history of the physical universe. The story first told by Lucretius and enlarged upon by Galileo, Newton and Einstein. It's a story about elementary particles batting about without purpose, coming together accidentally to form stars, planets, protein molecules, and eventually everything else. God does not get into the act.

On Sundays Ryan goes off to mass, recites the creed, takes communion and all the rest of it. She doesn't think much about the relation between her weekday and her Sunday activities. She was raised a Catholic, has never seriously considered abandoning Catholicism and relishes the experience of communal worship. Ever since she realized that our oldest son was gay he has had doubts about the church's views on various issues, and she regards the present Pope as a bit too preoccupied with sex. But she figures that popes come and go and the next one may be a bit better. Although she's married to an agnostic, her

husband agreed that their children would be raised as Catholics. Her oldest son has stopped going to mass, and has a casual and offhand way going over to his father's agnosticism. This pains professor Ryan somewhat but not enough to cause a family crisis. She still hopes that her other children will stick by the faith of her father. When her kids were studying the Catechism they would ask her the usual questions about just how God managed to create the world out of nothing, how Jesus managed to be both fully God and fully man, and how the consecrated host on the altar manages to be the divine substance while retaining its previous appearance, she shrugged the questions all. She has little interest in theology and is quite content to toss in the phrase "mystery of faith" wherever it will do the most good.<sup>114</sup>

And though she is an imaginary person, Rorty argues that many people like professor Ryan actually exists:

Lots of people who see themselves as perfectly good, perfectly sincere believers in some standard version of Christianity or Judaism or Islam nevertheless unquestionably except propositions such as those of the Darwinian theory of biological evolution which many other believers think incompatible with the creeds of their respective faiths.

These people are the despair both of their swaggeringly atheistical scientific colleagues and of the less liberal members of the clergy. Professor Ryan, for example, is well aware and rather amused by the fact that her parish priest would like her to take the Pope's pronouncements more seriously than she actually does. She's also well aware that her atheistical colleagues make jokes about her religious beliefs behind her back. She is equally insouciant about both.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Rorty, R. (2000). *Is Religion Compatible with Science?* Accessed 10.04.2017. West Valley College, California. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fn2F2BWLZOQ>, 04:41.

<sup>115</sup> Rorty, *Is Religion Compatible with Science?* 07:03.

The Dawkinsian objection here should be clear: God does not exist and thus professor Ryan's religious beliefs are false. They should be called out as false beliefs. By calling them "legitimate private beliefs" what Rorty does is to conceal the truth and trivialize it. This Rortian approach undermines the importance of seeking truth by allowing people to believe in false beliefs in good conscience.

One problem with such an objection, however, is that even Dawkins cannot definitively say that God does not exist. Remember how Dawkins describes his own strong atheistic position: "I cannot know for certain but I think God is very improbable, and I live my life on the assumption that he is not there".<sup>116</sup> This statement does not tell much about God's existence, but rather how Dawkins thinks or feels about it. And even if he would change a stronger statement, such as "I know that there is no God", it would still tell us only about Dawkins' conviction and nothing more. As for all the scientific evidence against God's existence that Dawkins sets forth, it may indeed be good enough to conclude that the God hypothesis is scientifically untenable, but it is not clear at all why and how that should pose a challenge to Rorty. Rorty most likely would agree with the claim that "the God hypothesis is scientifically untenable", but he would not be able to see why and how this bears any weight on professor Ryan's case. As far as Rorty's pragmatism goes, science is not the only game in town. The God hypothesis may be scientifically untenable, but this only says that the vocabulary of religion is useless, or maybe even detrimental, for the project of predicting and controlling our environment. It does not say this vocabulary cannot be useful for some other purposes. "The sole virtue of any descriptive vocabulary", writes Rorty, "is its utility. It can't have a further virtue called 'getting things right'. This view of the function of the description is at the heart of the pragmatism developed by James and Dewey".<sup>117</sup>

Both Dawkins and Plantinga seem to believe that their respective scientific and religious beliefs have this further virtue of "getting things right". If atheism gets

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<sup>116</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 51.

<sup>117</sup> Rorty, *Is Religion Compatible with Science?* 17:53.

things right, then any theory that allows and encourages religious belief, whether in private or public, must be on the wrong intellectual track. The same goes for theism. But Rorty does not commit to this notion of “getting things right”. On the contrary, he believes his pragmatism allows letting go of this notion without falling prey to anti-realism. In the absence of this notion, the accusation that his approach lets people to believe in falsehood is difficult to make sense of. In other words, it is difficult to see what the cash value of this accusation is, as it only expresses the accuser’s disagreement with pragmatism. It is of course possible to make an evidentialist objection out of this same worry. In fact, such an evidentialist objection is already made by W. K. Clifford. I have discussed it in chapter two and argued that Rorty is able to deal with it well.

### **Is Religion Evil?**

Another line of criticism Dawkins may want to take is to stress the evil nature of religion: If religion is evil, or a strong force for evil, then it shall not be tolerated, but instead obliterated. The “militancy” of New Atheism is thus required. Rorty’s defense of private religious beliefs, on the other hand, prevents him to effectively wage against the evils of religion. Rorty’s approach allows the root cause of all religious evils (namely, faith) to foster freely. But this line of criticism is not very challenging either. Dawkins’ arguments on the matter are at best weak and clumsy.

As discussed earlier,<sup>118</sup> his claim that “religion is a significant force for evil in the world”<sup>119</sup> can be understood two ways: As a modest claim and as an ambitious claim. Let us start with the modest claim: *In Abrahamic religions there are some aspects (maybe certain teachings and doctrines, or some scriptural passages, or some widespread attitudes) that are either in themselves evil and pernicious or give support and comfort to fanatic religious extremism.*

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<sup>118</sup> See “§4.2.2. The Religion That Is Evil”.

<sup>119</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 262.

In this relatively modest argument, Dawkins' moral objection is not directed at the God hypothesis, or at religion per se, but rather at certain beliefs, actions, and attitudes. But these beliefs, actions, and attitudes are not exclusive to religious believers. One does not need to be religious, for example, to be homophobic. That is to say, in the modest argument, Dawkins do not think there is something morally questionable about being religious, but rather in being undemocratic, homophobic, xenophobic etc. He criticizes the types of religion and religious atmospheres that allow and support hateful thinking and harmful behaviour. This is surely an important criticism, but it is hardly controversial or new. It also hardly presents any challenge to Rorty. These morally reprehensible beliefs, actions, or attitudes are all of public character. Rorty's account of the legitimacy of private beliefs does not justify any of the evils mentioned here in this modest claim.

What is required for Dawkins to make an effective criticism of Rorty, then, is to argue that even private religious beliefs are, or can be, evil. And the strong version of his claim says exactly that: *Faith, when it means "belief in something without evidence", is an evil in itself.*

This claim, however, itself requires justification. What Dawkins can offer, however, is only a watered down, much less rigorous version of original "the ethics of belief" argument by W. K. Clifford. I have already discussed how Rorty is able to hold his ground against Clifford's better argument in chapter 2, so I can dismiss Dawkins' vague attempts to make the same argument. But then what is left for Dawkins here? Surely not much. Dawkins' criticism of faith relies less on an elaborate case for evidentialism, and more on a crude stereotype of how faith works. His typical explanation of why faith is evil takes the form of the following quote:

Because if you believe in something without evidence, then that justifies anything. You are no longer vulnerable to somebody coming back at you and saying "hang on a minute, let me argue the case". If you believe it without evidence, which is what faith is, then you don't argue the case, you say "no, I am not arguing that case, this is my

faith, it's mine, it's private, I don't dissent from it, I don't retreat from it, you are just going to have to accept it". Now, that is evil.<sup>120</sup>

This is a crude stereotype because it assumes all sorts of causations that are not necessarily true. The passage assumes that once you believe in something without evidence, then you immediately close yourself to dialogue, conversation, exchange of views and ideas. Your faith justifies anything, so you no longer need to listen to others. It also implies that once you have a faith, it's there forever. You will never retreat from it.

Needless to say, these assumptions are incorrect. Having faith (believing without evidence) is not the same thing with being dogmatic and never questioning your beliefs. It also does not mean that you will start justifying your other beliefs by your unjustified faith. In Rorty's account, for example, private religious beliefs do not justify anything. They also do not prevent someone from listening to others and exploring other vocabularies. On the contrary, Rortian pragmatism encourages irony over dogma. It encourages continuous self-creation through exploration of other vocabularies. These beliefs do not have to be so serious and fixed either so that one will never dissent or retreat from it. I used to believe, without evidence, that Bomfunk MC's makes the best music ever. I no longer believe that. I also used to believe, without evidence, Islam is the one true religion. I no longer believe that either. And I am fairly certain that in neither of these cases it was the arrival of some new evidence that changed my mind. I had a change of mind and a change of heart because my encounters with new experiences and new vocabularies.

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<sup>120</sup> Hasan, *Is Religion Good or Evil?* 06:07.



## Conclusion

**Sacha:** I stopped going to church with my nana. It was too hard. I'd be sitting there and I'd start thinking about Joe Crawley or someone else and I just got so angry.

**Mike:** Did you tell her why?

**Sacha:** She goes to church three times a week Mike.

– *Spotlight*, 2015

Recently I saw the film *Spotlight* about *The Boston Globe*'s investigative journalism into the systematic sexual abuse of minors within the Roman Catholic Church. I wanted to see the film after a colleague of mine told me the story of her grandmother, a very Catholic Irish woman, and how *The Boston Globe* story caused her the biggest heartbreak of her life. In the introduction of this thesis, I have entertained the idea that the experience of losing your faith may be more analagous to getting your heart broken than discovering some new piece of truth about your current beliefs. The film *Spotlight* and the story of my colleague's grandmother took me back to this thought.

Maybe the reason why Rorty's approach to religion sounds very attractive to me is because it allows me to model religious beliefs on the experience of love and heart-break while at the same time respecting their significance and value. Rorty helps me to understand why two people can be exposed to same factual knowledge, and have the same intellectual honesty and ethical dignity, and yet legitimately have different religious beliefs. His approach helps me to see why I feel the two different responses to the sexual abuse scandal in Catholic church from the honest religious community were equally legitimate: Some lost their beliefs and some

asked for reform within the Church while holding onto their belief. Above all, it helps me understand why my siblings, being as honest, intellectual, educated and inquisitive as I am, can keep holding onto their religious beliefs most of which I consider implausible, or even, at times, absurd. Adopting a Rortian approach, I no longer feel the need to prove (not only to them, but also to myself) that my non-religious metaphysical beliefs are right and their religious beliefs are wrong. The need for comparison, argument and justification only arises if/when we find ourselves disagreeing on a political/public issue.

Admittedly, however, this is too vague a remark to conclude a PhD thesis. Thus, in the following, I will summarize some of the key conclusions I have arrived throughout this dissertation:

- Though Rorty did not write extensively on religion, his writings on the subject were rich and immensely helpful in thinking and talking about a pragmatic approach to religion.
- Rorty can convincingly sustain his claim that there is nothing wrong, be it morally or intellectually, in holding unjustified private religious beliefs.
- They may argue for the same claim, that the private beliefs do not need justification, but Rorty's way of defending this claim is marginally different than that of James. This marks Rorty's position as unique and not just an extension of James'.
- Although there is some truth to the slogan "private is public", the arguments from it will not serve as a strong criticism of Rorty's private vs. public distinction. Seeing the distinction as 'political and mobile' instead of 'ontological and fixed' will render the criticisms invalid. As a political, mobile distinction, private vs. public distinction remains to be a useful conceptual tool to think about religion and politics.
- Rorty's writings on religion seems to be marked by two tendencies: A Jamesian tendency for finding an inclusive 'approach to religion' to accommodate any and all private beliefs, and a Deweyan tendency to offer a better, more pragmatic 'religion' as an alternative to traditional, non-pragmatic religions.

- With the above two tendencies comes two products: "A Rortian pragmatic religion" ("religion as romance") and "a Rortian pragmatic approach to religion". Being able to separate these two tendencies, and consequently, the two projects they lead to, is important.
- Religion may have an inseparable aspect to it, but religious beliefs can still be seen as private. Societies/communities formed around recreational activities serve as a model for this argument.
- Rorty's initial demand for the unconditional restraint of religious arguments from the public space receives a lot of criticisms. These criticisms are mostly robust and valid. However, Rorty listens to his critics and revises his views accordingly. Rorty's revised position is more wholesome, more inclusive and does not invite similar criticisms.
- Rortian way of approaching religion has considerable benefits over the currently dominant ways with seemingly no noteworthy disadvantages. It promises a better communication between different religious groups and a more tolerant society with a stronger sense of solidarity.

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