Rorty’s Moral Philosophy for Liberal Democratic Culture

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Richard Rorty’s moral writings offer a cogent summary of the moral content of contemporary liberal democratic culture. Rorty insists on a divide between our public and private lives, yet he claims that moral progress (a seemingly public affair) is primarily driven by the imagination of great poetry and philosophy (which Rorty claims are private projects). A pressing tension thus emerges between private imagination and public moral justification, which is also very real in contemporary liberal democratic culture itself. I sketch a way out of this problem, which fits well with the pragmatism he shares with William James and John Dewey.

One question immediately provoked by my title concerns the status of Richard Rorty’s moral vision as specifically philosophical. Critics will wonder whether Richard Rorty really has a philosophical account of moral thought and practice. It is of course true that Rorty has not engaged with moral philosophy in the systematic manner common amongst leading contemporary moral philosophers. Even in those areas to which Rorty has devoted consistent systematic attention, such as philosophy of language and metaphilosophy, he has always been hesitant to apply the label of “philosophy” to whatever it is he sees himself as doing. Rorty has, however, written a number of pieces which indicate the kind of moral philosophical vision we might expect of ourselves if our liberal democratic culture can ever figure out a way to take seriously the pragmatist experimentalism and meliorism that he, following William James and John Dewey, urges us to. And yet nowhere do these occasional pieces get summed up into an overall account of neopragmatist ethics. So, Rorty’s varied writings on this subject are often taken as isolated contributions, rather than as contributing to a philosophical account of moral practice which Rorty is trying to pitch to contemporary intellectual culture.

Taken as individual and occasional pieces, Rorty’s writings on moral philosophy seem to consist mostly in negative claims intended to debunk the typical aspirations of leading contemporary moral philosophers. Though this debunking and quasi-positivist way of reading Rorty can definitely be sustained by a certain view of his writings, a stronger and more nuanced reading of Rorty
emerges if we try to piece together a creative and post-positivist urge in his writings on the kind of moral philosophy he finds appropriate for a liberal democratic culture like ours. The obvious advantage of this stronger reading is that it gives us a more interesting Rorty to confront. It also has the added benefit of explaining why Rorty exercises such enormous influence in contemporary intellectual circles. Rorty the quasi-positivist gadfly can at best be seen as an old-fashioned kind of hanger-on taking a few last gasps of Viennese air just before the final asphyxiation of hard-core logical analysis in American philosophy departments. But Rorty the neo-pragmatist critic can more usefully be engaged as a creative thinker whose command ranges over a wide variety of texts and disciplines, and whose vision for what democratic culture might do next is taken seriously as an alternative to currently fashionable moods. It is this latter Rorty, the neo-pragmatist freewheeling interdisciplinarian, who we professional philosophers find discouraging just as our colleagues in literature departments find him exciting. It is this latter Rorty who comes as close as any other contemporary philosopher to expressing the moral philosophical content underlying much of our contemporary liberal democratic culture.

To get at this widely-embraced moral content of our liberal democratic culture, I will begin by describing Rorty’s view as he stated it in the book in which he set the intellectual trajectory from which he would never stray. I am referring to the book that I take, and that I think Rorty himself also took, to be of greatest ongoing importance of all his works: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989). I will then describe the same view as stated a few years later in a series of lectures in which Rorty offered a revised conception of his pragmatism: “Hope in Place of Knowledge” (1994). Along the way, I will point to a crucial tension in these texts between the view that imagination drives moral progress and the view that the quintessential liberal split between public and private is the last word on democratic politics. I will then explore the same tension as it appears in three of Rorty’s most recent essays, all of which have been recently republished in Rorty’s latest collection of philosophical papers, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*: “Universalist Grandeur, Romantic Depth, Pragmatist Cunning” (2004a), “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” (2004b), and “Trapped Between Kant and Dewey” (2004c). I suggest that these three essays demonstrate a real tension in Rorty’s thought, such that his view of liberal morality must undergo substantial shifts if it is to avoid incoherence. Fortunately, I briefly conclude, Rorty has a way out of these problems by making a few adjustments which, although rather significant, would fit quite nicely with the centermost themes of the pragmatisms of James and Dewey from whom Rorty has drawn his primary inspiration.

1. The Value of Rorty’s Philosophical Cultural Criticism

Before explicating Rorty’s moral philosophy and contrasting it to Dewey’s and James’s views, I would like to address a preliminary concern left hanging by my
introductory remarks. Addressing this concern also enables me to indicate how pragmatists such as Rorty, Dewey, and James typically approach the very project of moral philosophy, or in other words what kind of work pragmatists typically think a moral philosophy ought to do.

The concern can be put this way: if it turns out that Rorty’s moral philosophy is deeply at odds with itself, as I shall argue it is, then it can be fairly asked of me why I am going through so much trouble to explicate it in the first place. Answering this concern requires focusing on an aspect of Rorty’s pragmatism which most of his philosophical critics have unfairly and indefensibly overlooked. Rorty’s thought is generally worthy of explication and critique because it offers a clear and honest summary of many of the beliefs at the heart of contemporary liberal culture. Rorty’s moral philosophy is worthy of consideration because it neatly summarizes the kind of moral practices which most contemporary liberals, that is most of us living in North America and Europe today, find ourselves practicing.

Indeed, it could be argued along these lines that Rorty’s explication of the moral core of liberal culture deserves to be taken more seriously than many of those more rigorously-articulated but less-influential moral theories which currently enjoy prominence in contemporary philosophical discourse. It was, I think, one of Rorty’s most important points that a gap between the moral practices of a liberal culture and the moral theory of academic liberals presents a serious problem for the latter. Rorty, of course, has not been alone in pressing this point. In the context of moral philosophy, this view has been impressively defended, though with motivations and arguments quite different from Rorty’s, by philosophers as otherwise diverse as Bernard Williams, Stanley Cavell, Charles Taylor, and Michel Foucault. These critics’ shared doubts about the “purity” and “emptiness” of contemporary moral theory express a thought quite familiar to Rorty’s pragmatism, namely that philosophers ought to address those problems of ordinary life which arise in the cultural milieu in which we find ourselves. The poverty of much of contemporary moral philosophy, the thought goes, can profitably be redressed by taking more seriously the kind of moral criticism which Rorty and a handful of others provide useful examples of.

This thought helps us see why it has been one of Rorty’s greatest achievements that he has compellingly shown philosophers how they might learn to be cultural critics first and academics only second. This idea was concisely captured by the title of one of Rorty’s essays, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy” (1988), in which he argued that pragmatists like John Dewey and William James provide us with exemplars of what philosophy as cultural criticism might look like. What Rorty finds exemplary in the classical pragmatists is their commitment to the hopeful democratic vistas which sustain us as individuals and communities in both our brightest and darkest hours. James and Dewey articulated and defended pragmatist philosophy in the light of their commitment to democracy, not the other way around. That point may seem trivial, but that it is not at all trivial can be quickly understood by considering all
those current philosophical fashions whose adherents are more committed to their theoretical ambitions than to the liberal democratic moralities which makes such ambitions possible in the first place. Rorty has more recently reiterated this idea in the title of his last collection of philosophical papers, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*. In the preface to that volume Rorty urges, in quintessential pragmatist fashion, that we evaluate our philosophical disagreements “in the light of our hopes for cultural change” (2007, x).

I fully agree with Rorty, as James and Dewey would have, that if philosophy fails to reconstruct itself as cultural criticism then it shall find itself increasingly irrelevant to our most pressing cultural concerns. If that happens, philosophy would find itself no longer in the service of a culture of liberal democracy, but rather would allow itself to be placed in the service of any variety of moral dispositions. I mention this at the outset so as to clarify that it is on the basis of my agreeing with Rorty’s prioritization of culture critical philosophical practice that I shall here seriously explicate and then severely criticize Rorty’s own particular views on what kind of moral philosophy is appropriate for a liberal democratic culture such as ours. While I am critical of Rorty here, I would still like to consider myself a Rortyan critic of the views I am arguing against.

2. Tensions in Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity and Hope in Place of Knowledge

The central thrust of Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* is a distinction between the public and private sides of modern liberal culture. One’s actions and beliefs are public if they affect others and they are private if they concern only oneself. In terms of moral philosophy, the upshot of this distinction is that we can hold our private hopes and fantasies apart from our responsibilities to other persons. We can be ironic about ourselves in attempting philosophical redescriptions which will make our old beliefs look antiquated. But there is a political risk in such ironyism and so it ought to be confined to the private sphere. Things will hold together alright, Rorty thinks, so long as we allow our public relationships to be mediated by an idea of solidarity while keeping our ironic attempts at self-criticism private. Rorty’s name for our public moral cohesion is ‘solidarity’ while ‘irony’ is his name for our private moral dissent.

One important innovation which appears in Rorty’s treatment of the quintessential liberal split between public and private spheres is as follows: philosophy gets recast as a private ironizing project in contrast to public projects of solidarity-building. On this view, the role of philosophy is not to strengthen the ethics that bind us together but rather to ironically unweave the metaphors by which we describe ourselves. Ethical practices constituting the core of our public culture stand to gain everything from human solidarity and very little from philosophical irony.
One interesting feature of *Contingency* is that we find in it an argument to the effect that imagination is crucial for increasing moral solidarity. Rorty writes, “In my utopia, human solidarity would be seen not as a fact to be recognized by clearing away ‘prejudice’ or burrowing down to previously hidden depths, but, rather, as a goal to be achieved. It is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection, but created” (1989, xvi). Thomas Alexander, another contemporary pragmatist, puts his finger on a curious tension in Rorty’s view on this matter. He notes that the key for the Rortyan public sphere “is an imaginative education which allows one to grasp different contexts and enter into the standpoint of the other” (Alexander 1993, 381). Alexander detects here a strong divorce in Rorty’s view between argumentation and creation, inquiry and imagination. Alexander thus concludes that Rorty “has no way of explaining how a moral imagination is educated or how it works. Creativity is as mysterious for him as the romantics; the creative shifts in language can only be absurd entrances into the fixed mechanism of routine speech habits... Ironically, Rorty’s postmodernism plays upon the very conceptual notions introduced by modernism” (1993, 382–383). While it may be unfair to attribute anything resembling a frivolous postmodernism to Rorty, Alexander is correct to point out that Rorty seems to proffer a high modernist contrast between reason and imagination. Rorty’s deployment of this contrast in carelessly strong terms cannot but trouble other contemporary philosophers who take Dewey and James as seriously as he does. Thus Ruth Anna Putnam echoes Alexander’s worry in arguing that “insofar as we have made moral progress, I find [Rorty’s] claim that this is not due to increased moral knowledge problematic.” The reason Putnam finds this problematic is because she cannot endorse Rorty’s view that “if there were moral knowledge it would be of a nonempirical reality, the sort of knowledge that Plato or, in a different way, Kant thought we could have” (Putnam 2000, 394, 403). But moral knowledge, for contemporary Deweyans and Jamesians like Alexander and Putnam, is not the kind of thing that could be opposed in any philosophically- or morally-relevant way to moral imagination. Moral success, which is what most pragmatists want to claim is what really counts, does not require moral certainty and as such it can result from either imagination or knowledge, or, even better, some hybrid of the two. The compartmentalization of knowledge and imagination on which Rorty’s arguments in *Contingency* seem to rely is, whatever its merits, strangely out of step with his professed pragmatism.

This suggests a further, even deeper, tension in Rorty’s position. On the one hand, Rorty wants to confine philosophy and poetry to the private sphere. And on the other hand, he offers a picture of progress in the public sphere as driven primarily by imagination. The tension between these two positions gets focused by this observation: imagination has typically been the achievement of those very philosophers and poets, the romantic ironists, who Rorty thinks ought to cloister themselves in their private monasteries. *So how can imagination,* a
typically private project, drive moral progress in the public sphere? This is the central problem facing the liberal moral philosophical vision which Rorty offers such a poignant expression of.

The reason that Rorty argues that genius philosophers and poets need to keep their work private is that if let loose in public, the wild fires of their imagination would at least some of the time unleash torrential political confla-
grations. The kind of imaginative redescription that Rorty, clearly following Shelley as much as Hegel, finds essential for moral and political progress consists in large part of the kind of ironizing that Rorty rightly recognizes as leading to moral and political instability. Rorty seems to want to have it both ways. He seems to want to be able to nurture a private sphere where poets can be strong and autonomous, but he also wants these strong isolated poets to be able to dart out into the public sphere once in awhile in order to assist moral progress. But if what Rorty really wants is imaginative moral progress, then he ought not to focus so much energy on the public-private split. By the same reasoning, if he really wants the public-private split, then he ought not focus so much energy on imagination as a motor of moral progress. This tension only gets intensified in Rorty’s writings subsequent to Contingency.

In a series of three lectures first delivered in German in 1994, Rorty tried his hand at stating a new “version of pragmatism”. The pragmatism he there offered hinged on three ideas: truth without correspondence, a world without essence, and ethics without principles. In these essays, Rorty construed prag-
matism, quite originally, as a form of romanticism. Rorty ends the final lecture on this note: “We [pragmatists] see imagination as the cutting edge of cultural evolution, the power which – given peace and prosperity – constantly operates so as to make the human future richer than the human past” (1994, 87). Indeed Rorty is right, at the end of this sentence, to suggest that pragmatism focuses on hope rather than certainty. Pragmatists are not impressed with constancy, but with becoming and with growth. Pragmatists replace all the old philosophical dualisms with a more innocent “distinction between the present and the future” (1994, 87).

Basic to Rorty’s argument as he lays it out here is the pragmatist denial of the distinction between morality and prudence. By getting rid of this distinction, Rorty sees pragmatism as moving past the problems of Kantian moral philo-
sophy and toward something very close to Mill’s utilitarianism, Aristotle’s virtue ethics, and Hume’s moral sympathy (1994, 74). Rorty claims that “the prudence-morality distinction is, like that between custom and law, a distinction of degree – the degree of need for conscious deliberation and explicit formulation of precepts – rather than a distinction of kind.... There was no point at which practical reasoning stopped being prudential and became specifically moral, no point at which it stopped being merely useful and started being authoritative” (1994, 73).

At this point Rorty connects his own pragmatist ethics, with Dewey as his primary model, to that of moral philosopher Annette Baier, who takes Hume as
her primary model. Baier’s central point, according to Rorty, is that we ought to replace the Kantian moral notion of obligation with Humean ideas of trust and sympathy. Morality turns on something like imaginative sensitivity rather than on something like rational duty. Writes Rorty, “moral development in the individual, and moral progress in the human species as a whole, is a matter of re-making human selves so as to enlarge the variety of the relationships which constitute those selves” (1994, 79). Morality consists in growth, in amplification, in education. Rorty is right to emphasize this as the quintessence of Deweyan and Jamesian pragmatism. But Rorty further claims that imagination is the essential means of this process of Bildung. Many pragmatists will be less than comfortable with this view and especially with its implications.

Rorty explicates this point later on: “[M]oral progress is not a matter of an increase of rationality – a gradual diminution of the influence of prejudice and superstition, permitting us to see our moral duty more clearly. Nor is it what Dewey called an increase of intelligence, that is, increasing one’s skill at inventing courses of action which simultaneously satisfy many conflicting demands. People can be very intelligent, in this sense, without having wide sympathies... So it is best to think of moral progress as a matter of increasing sensitivity, increasing responsiveness to the needs of a larger and larger variety of people and things” (1994, 81). The danger of this approach is that Rorty risks romanticizing morality insofar as he divides imagination from intelligence. Rorty is indeed right that we can break the old distinction between contemplation and action if only we can first move from certainty to hope. But why he thinks of hope in purely romantic terms of an imagination purified of reason so that it might spawn “unpredictable change” I cannot, at least not from a pragmatist perspective, adequately explain (1994, 88).

Rorty urges in these lectures that we replace metaphors of height and depth with those of width (1994, 82). But romanticism offers depth no less than does rationalism – it simply offers the depth of the imagination in place of the depth of reason. Width is achieved by embracing both imagination and reason, not one at the expense of the other. Rorty’s version of pragmatism in these lectures culminates in a kind of romanticism in extremis. It is not at all a pragmatism that favors romanticism alongside of utilitarianism. As such, it strays from the pragmatism of both James and Dewey, who saw their philosophies as ways of bringing together these two grand currents of modern thought.

3. Pragmatist Cunning

I find Rorty more convincing in recent work where he acknowledges troubles with romantic metaphors. “I have tried too hard to assimilate pragmatism to romanticism,” he admitted in an article contrasting pragmatism with both universalism and romanticism (2004a, 129). This piece sketches a characteristically Rortyan summary of the last few hundred years of intellectual history:
“The dialectic that runs through the last two centuries of philosophical thought ... is one in which universalists decry each new other to reason as endangering both rationality and human solidarity, and in which romantics rejoin that what is called rationality is merely a disguise for the attempt to eternalize custom and tradition” (2004a, 136). So what’s the solution to this impasse? “[P]ragmatism should be viewed ... as an alternative to both universalism and romanticism” (2004a, 136). Rorty’s thought here is in keeping with the best efforts of *via media* pragmatists like William James and John Dewey. Unfortunately, I suspect that Rorty has yet to realize all of the ramifications implicated by taking this view seriously.

To be really committed to this vision of pragmatism as pitched around both rationalism and romanticism, one ought to stop talking as if reason and imagination can be purified of one another – because that is the central quest of both rationalism and romanticism, the only difference between the two being where each side places the plus and minus signs. Romantics find in pure imagination our saving grace. Rationalists find in pure reason our lamp of liberation. So purified, both faculties look out onto the world as something to be illuminated and reflected by that part of us which is best, grandest, and deepest. As Rorty puts the concern, “The trouble with both universalist metaphors of grandeur and romantic metaphors of depth is that they suggest that a practical proposal, whether conservative or radical in character, can gain strength by being tied in with something not merely human – something like the intrinsic nature of reality or the uttermost depths of the human soul” (2004a, 137). Thinkers beholden to both rationalism and romanticism *simply assume* that we ought to chain ourselves to these extra-human powers, while virtually nobody in either tradition suspects that it might be better for we humans to push back against that which is above and beyond us. Rorty’s pragmatist rejects these positions insofar as both exhibit that dreadful but all too typical posture of profundity to which Rorty, as Habermas has recently observed, was always opposed: “behind the aura of the impressive speaker and writer and the passionate teacher lay concealed that honest and soft, nobly restrained and infinitely loveable man who hated nothing more than any pretense of profundity” (forthcoming).

Rorty ends his discussion of universality and grandeur, those two pretences to profundity, with the suggestion that pragmatist cunning does the trick of nicely balancing between the opposed needs of rationalism and romanticism or what he calls “the need for consensus and the need for novelty” (2004a, 136). The pragmatist thinks that “[n]either consensus nor imaginative-ness is good in itself” (2004a, 138) and that “it takes a lot of unheroic bourgeois cunning to balance the continuing need for justification with the continuing need for novelty” (2004a, 140). Pragmatism, Rorty rightly holds, is that view of things which recognizes the importance of such cunning. On this view, pragmatism is best understood as a “romantic utilitarianism” that integrates the best parts of both traditions (Rorty 1999, 267ff.).
Now if Rorty were really to take this view seriously it would require that he go back on a great many of the things he stated earlier on in the *Contingency* book. It would, for example, require that he recant his view that imagination is the primary vehicle of moral progress. For the newest version of pragmatism as romantic utilitarianism suggests that moral progress involves both imagination and reason. While I think a shift of position here is advisable, I am not so sure that Rorty himself ever fully made the move to the more nuanced position he sketched under the heading of “pragmatist cunning.” For in other articles from around the same time, Rorty continued to purvey his old idea that imagination is the best motor of moral and political progress.5

4. Persisting Tensions in Rorty’s Recent Moral Philosophical Writings

In a recent essay entitled “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” Rorty described philosophy as a stage of intellectual culture somewhere between religion and literature. Philosophy’s location between these other two intellectual forms could be staged conceptually, but Rorty here stages it historically and hence we get a view of philosophy as the intellectual form that mediates the transition from religion to literature. “[I]ntellectuals of the West have, since the Renaissance, progressed through three stages: they have hoped for redemption first from God, then from philosophy, and now from literature” (2004b, 8). While both theists and philosophers sought redemption in “Knowledge of ... a way things really are” (2004b, 11), for members of literary culture, “redemption is to be achieved by getting in touch with the present limits of the human imagination” (2004b, 12). Such a culture is “always in search of novelty” and sees itself as “an ever-living, ever-expanding, fire” (2004b, 12). Rorty is thus back at the old game of presenting his own view as heavily inflected with romantic metaphors. From the point of view of literary culture, both philosophy and religion sought redemption through some “nonhuman authority to whom we owe some sort of respect” (Rorty 1998, 150; cf. 2000, 123–127 and 2002, 75). Philosophy only half-overcame the metaphysical pathos of the priests, and it was not until the great breakthrough of literary culture that we learned to teach ourselves what Emerson called self-reliance (Rorty 2004b, 13). Rorty described the “insufficient self-reliance” of the clerics and the philosophers as a “self-deluding attempt to find dignity in the acceptance of bondage and freedom in the recognition of constraint” (2004b, 26).

Critics of literary culture, romanticism, or any other cultural practice that exalts the imagination tend to underscore the dangers implicit in any style of thought that sees itself as ever-expanding and hence potentially all-consuming. Rorty was never ignorant of these risks. He recognized, and made it clear that he did, the dangers implicit in the imaginations of some of his own favorite romantics like Nietzsche and Heidegger. While Nietzsche helped us expand our conception of what was humanly possible, it was nevertheless a good thing, Rorty urged, that he was not taken too seriously by the masses he happened to
despise. Rorty’s way of admitting this point without letting go of his view of the importance of the literary imagination was to suggest that “although argumentation is essential for projects of social cooperation, redemption is an individual, private matter” (2004b, 22). So his argument about literary culture was that it “asks us to disjoin political deliberation from projects of redemption ... disjoin the need for redemption from the search for universal agreement” (2004b, 22, 24). This means making a strong distinction between public and private spheres so that rational argumentation and romantic imagination can both reign free, but separately – it means “acknowledging that private hopes for authenticity and autonomy should be left at home when the citizens of a democratic society foregather to deliberate about what is to be done” (2004b, 22).

This view leads Rorty straight back to the problematic tensions in Contingency that I described above. The view is that imagination can be exalted, can be the free and sovereign flame that it is in its purest form, only if we keep it safely confined in the private sphere. And insofar as Rorty never stopped viewing private projects of literary-cum-romantic imagination as the engine of moral progress, he never stopped endorsing the odd implication that moral progress is a private affair. Of course, Rorty could have conceivably denied the connections between moral progress and imagination which he had previously argued for. But it seems that Rorty never abandoned this position, for in another article published contemporaneously with his recent defense of the public-private distinction, he even more strongly underscores the value of imagination for moral philosophy and the moral life.

Rorty’s recent “Trapped between Kant and Dewey” should have been titled “Dewey versus both Kant and Bentham”. That would not only fit with how Dewey himself understood pragmatist moral theory, but it would also better describe Rorty’s purposes here. For the central thrust of this article is to debunk claims common amongst both utilitarians and deontologists. Perhaps Rorty focuses his title on Kant alone simply because in contemporary moral theory, the Kantians have almost the full field. In any event, Rorty’s biggest concern here is with “the obsession with the opposition between consequentialism and non-consequentialism which still dominates elementary courses in ethics” (Rorty 2004c, 202). He thinks that his favorite pragmatist philosopher, John Dewey, showed us how to get over this obsession, and that his two favorite contemporary moral philosophers, Annette Baier and Jerome Schneewind, are pretty much up to the same thing. None of these moral philosophers thinks that we need to choose between consequentialism and deontology. Both are useful in situations where we face what Dewey called moral “uncertainty and conflict” (Dewey 1932, 165).

The problem with utilitarianism and deontology is that they perpetuate the search for ahistorical moral criteria. It is by these criteria, they think, that moral progress will finally be judged. To this Rorty contrasts his own Deweyan view that “there is only the criterion of how well or badly we ourselves can fit... new practical identities together with our own. There is only, if you like, the
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judgment of history” (Rorty 2004c, 209). These new practical identities, Rorty argued, are not supplied by the conditions of practical reason itself nor by a calculus of pleasure and plain, but rather by practical exemplars. Huck Finn and Thomas Jefferson inspire us to adopt new moral stances, not principles of pleasure calculation and imperatives which bind us categorically. Rorty could thus confidently conclude with the interesting suggestion that “[d]iscussions of deontology versus consequentialism, or of whether our sense of moral obligation originates in reason or in sentiment, seem pedantic distractions from discussions of historical or literary personages” (2004c, 211).

This interesting suggestion enabled Rorty to go on to emphasize the value of moral imagination for moral progress. Rorty claimed later in the essay that “[i]t is a detailed comparison of imagined selves, situations, and communities that does the trick, not argument from principles” (2004c, 212). That line could have been lifted from Contingency as could the claim that moral progress is a consequence of the fact that people “are more imaginative, not that they are more rational” (2004c, 212).

To sum up, then, in recently re-stating both the primacy of imagination for moral progress (“Trapped”) and the centrality of the public-private split for democratic progress (“Transitional”), Rorty lands himself back in the very same tensions which troubled his work in the Contingency book and the Hope lectures. This is unfortunate, because in the “Pragmatist Cunning” piece Rorty seemed ready to admit the presence of this problematic tension and he seemed prepared to reconcile the incoherence by revising his view of pragmatism in a way that emphasizes pragmatism’s capacity for synthesizing romanticism and utilitarianism. I would like to now conclude by suggesting how Rorty’s cunning pragmatist might overcome the problems I have focused on in a way that would nicely fit with some of the broader themes of the philosophical outlook which Rorty just so happened to share with James and Dewey.

5. Resolving the Tensions in Rorty’s Moral Philosophy

Here is the problem with Rorty’s moral philosophy in capsule form: his emphasis on the primacy of the imagination for morality cuts against his emphasis on the importance of a distinction between our public and private lives. This, apparently, leaves the Rortyan moral philosopher with only two options.

A first option would involve abandoning the public-private split in order to extend the influence of the imagination and lessen the authority of reason. This split abandoned, imagination could then reign throughout literary culture and drive forward both our ironic self-criticism and our progressive moral solidarity. The problem with this option is that it seems to overemphasize the pragmatic efficacy of imagination. A romanticism intoxicated with its own imaginations too much risks undermining consensus (i.e., the traditional goals of the public sphere) for the sake of novelty (i.e., the traditional goals of the private
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sphere). This is the danger that rationalists and pragmatists alike have always recognized in an unbridled romanticism.

A second option would involve retaining the public-private split in a way that forces us to confront a dilemma about the best means for furthering moral progress. This option forces us to face a tough, and I think irresolvable in the terms in which it is given to us, question as to whether moral progress is primarily public (and hence unimaginative) or primarily private (and hence nonpublic). Placing moral progress in the public sphere amounts to ceding it to the rationalists just insofar as imagination is exactly the thing which the private sphere was designed to contain. The effect of adopting this option would be that of making moral progress in its most radical and imaginative forms difficult to countenance. But if we balk here and place morality in the private sphere in order to retain these important connections to imagination, then we will face the usual problems concerning the seemingly relativistic claim that morality is a private affair.

It seems, then, that both of these options are untenable so far as they only lead to further problems. And so Rorty’s tension between an emphasis on the primacy of the imagination for moral progress and an emphasis on the public-private split seems irreconcilable.

However, a third option deserves consideration. Why not refuse priority in the way of moral progress to both imagination and reason and at the same time refuse to partition romanticism and rationalism into separate realms of public and private? The third option involves abandoning both the thought that imagination is prior to reason in the case of morality and the firm distinction between public and private. This option may seem far from the views which Rorty himself had defended, but I doubt that it need be far from the hearts of any of the rest of us pragmatist defenders of liberal democratic culture.

This third option, which should be recommended to those embracing Rorty’s view on the basis of James’s and Dewey’s writings on morality, seems to me a nice way for him to repackage his account of “pragmatist cunning” as doing justice to both utilitarianism and romanticism in a way that does not require an unconvincing view of moral progress as either wholly public (and hence unconvincing because seen as unimaginative) or wholly private (and hence unconvincing because seen as private). This third option certainly requires abandoning the distinction between public and private which seems to have been at the heart of Rorty’s work ever since Contingency. But in many ways this is advisable insofar as Rorty’s defense of this distinction has occasioned more criticism than any other single view he has on offer. Those who embrace Rorty’s position can, I think, consistently repudiate his previous over-emphasis on this distinction in a way that would nicely mesh with the broader themes of his neopragmatism: his anti-foundationalism and anti-representationalism, his view of the role of pragmatism in modern intellectual history, and his characteristically pragmatist attempt to overcome dualisms by way of emphasizing the important points captured by both sides of an opposing argument (for instance,
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Rorty openly admitted in one of his last essays, “I am a hedgehog who, despite showering my reader with allusions and dropping lots of names, has really only one idea: the need to get beyond representationalism, and thus into an intellectual world in which human beings are responsible only to each other” (Rorty 2004b, 4). It is useful to note that Rorty’s one big idea leaves open the question of whether or not a strong distinction between public and private provides the most viable route around inhuman authorities. I follow James and Dewey in thinking that a better option for hedgehogs like Rorty involves repudiating all strong dualisms, be them between public and private or reason and imagination or utilitarianism and romanticism. The cunning pragmatist endorses the view that both reason and imagination are central to our moral progress. They do this by abandoning the traditional positions insisted upon so vehemently by those who defend the old impulse to purify reason and imagination of one another by giving them free reign in separate spheres of human life. Dewey and James alike recognized the value of both “tough-minded” austerity and “tender-minded” celebration. To think as a pragmatist as they did leads us to doubt at least two thoughts which have proven central for Rorty’s moral philosophical vision for our liberal democratic culture. The first doubtful thought is that there need be an important distinction in kind between the roles that tough rationality and tender imagination play in our lives. The second doubtful thought is that there is an equally important distinction to be made between the public and private sides of our lives. James and Dewey doubted both of these thoughts long before either was defended by Rorty.

Critics have, of course, not been afraid to point out the problems engendered by Rorty’s dualistic thinking about reason and imagination or public and private. But critics have generally thus far failed to focus on the way in which these various dualisms inform one another in Rorty’s use of them. Critics have, in other words, thus far failed to connect Rorty’s deployment of the two quite different distinctions between reason and imagination on the one hand and public and private on the other. This is worth noting just insofar as these dualisms are, when taken by themselves, not obviously problematic. It is only when we are able to witness their connection to one another in the context of Rorty’s broader moral philosophical vision that we get a sense of just how problematic they can be. This is why my discussion has focused precisely on the problems attendant to Rorty’s weaving together of the public versus private and reason versus imagination dualisms. Having focused on the problems with this interrelated use of these dualisms, I would like to now turn to James’s and Dewey’s critiques of these dualisms in order to suggest a more viable conception of liberal democratic morality which I believe is quite in keeping with the most important aspects of Rorty’s thinking.

Rorty’s implicit, but for his position necessary, distinction between reason and imagination can be easily shown to be quite distant from the
philosophical approaches of James and Dewey. One need only consider the way in which James and Dewey constantly worked to reinterpret the classic dualisms of modern philosophy in a way that proved them to be only functional distinctions of limited use rather than substantial distinctions of wide value. James and Dewey articulated visions of moral philosophy which rejected the reductionism of both rationalistic utilitarianism and imagination-centered intuitionism. They offered instead a richer and deeper moral vision which they believed could embrace the important demands of both rationality and imagination. An example of Dewey’s rejection of a dualism of rationality and imagination can be found in his repeated criticisms of the separation of rationalistic science and imaginative art. In Reconstruction and Philosophy, one of Rorty’s favorite books, Dewey wrote of this separation: “Surely there is no more significant question before the world than this question of the possibility and method of reconciliation of the attitudes of practical science and contemplative esthetic appreciation. Without the former, man will be the sport and victim of natural forces which he cannot use or control. Without the latter, mankind might become a race of economic monsters, restless driving hard bargains with nature and with one another, bored with leisure or capable of putting it to use only in ostentatious display and extravagant dissipation” (Dewey 1920, 152–153). Dewey’s response to this “most significant question” was that we must find a way of reconciling scientific ratiocination and aesthetic imagination.\(^7\) In taking this approach he was essentially following James who had argued something very similar in his “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” (1891).\(^8\) Both Dewey and James, thus, understood pragmatism to be the philosophical project of negotiating a reconciliation between our utilitarian and romantic modes.

Rorty’s second important distinction, between public and private, is far more complex and cannot be easily handled in a short space. This distinction is extraordinarily complex in part owing to the fact that it operates in different ways in different contexts such that what is ‘public’ in one context may be ‘private’ in another. Yet despite widely different deployments of the distinction between public and private, I think James and Dewey can be read as suggesting that we need not take any form of this distinction quite so seriously as thinkers like Rorty have. That does not mean that we have to prove the distinction to be philosophically incoherent or politically useless. It only means that we shall treat the distinction as one tool amongst many and therefore not as something that might qualify as the very heart of liberal culture.

That James can be read in this way follows from the basic position outlined, once again, in his essay “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life”. The upshot of that essay is that we live amidst a plurality of ideals in which no single ideal could offer a neutral and publicly-available means of adjudicating between all the others.\(^7\) Rorty, I think, would prefer to point to James’s defense in “The Will to Believe” (1896) of our right to privately believe in ideas which do not turn out to publicly harm those who do not endorse them.\(^10\) This is, of
course, a plausible reading of James’s argument in this essay, but I think his point in “The Will to Believe” is better read alongside other essays from the same period including “What Makes a Life Significant?” (1899a) and “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” (1899b). In these two essays James goes to great lengths to explicate how easy it is for us to neglect the impact our beliefs and actions may have on one another. James, in other words, is very concerned to show how precariously-constructed are our familiar fences between publicity and privacy. The upshot of these essays, including “The Will to Believe,” is that rather than seeing substantial portions of our lives as occurring in carefully fenced private domains, we should strive to recognize the way in which our lives impact those all around us in ways we had never suspected. This is the best way to make sense of James’s recommendation in the “The Moral Philosopher” of a pluralistic morality in which the great variety of human ideals continuously impact one another in ways that cannot be anticipated in advance. He does not recommend evading the clash of ideals by setting them in private – “Some part of the ideal must be butchered” (1891, 622). He recommends instead a public effort of reinterpreting our ideals in the light of the ideals of others such that we may develop newer ideals which may inclusively embrace an ever-broadening moral culture – “the victory to be philosophically prayed for is that of the more inclusive side” (1891, 623).

That Dewey is close to James on these matters can be seen in his frequently repeated claim that “democracy is a way of life,” a formulation which suggests that democracy penetrates every aspect of the modern existence and is anything but a political ideal which makes claims on us only in our public, and not in our private, affairs. Democracy, on Dewey’s model, is found throughout our lives and perhaps most significantly in those deepest portions of ourselves which we like to think of as fenced off from public view. It is of course true that in his fullest statement of political philosophy, The Public and Its Problems, Dewey retained the idea of a distinction between public and private. But he argued there that this distinction should be drawn only “experimentally” and that politics is better understood on a model of a plurality of “publics” (Dewey 1927, 65, 126). Presented with this view, Rorty would I think applaud Dewey and suggest that this exactly how he conceives of the distinction between public and private. I agree with Rorty that there is nothing preventing him from accepting Dewey’s experimental way of distinguishing public and private, but it nevertheless remains true that this is a view which Rorty himself failed to really internalize into his own thinking about the split between publicity and privacy. For if one really takes seriously Dewey’s experimental way of distinguishing public and private, then one will not be inclined to think of this distinction as at the very heart of liberal democratic morality, which is how Rorty, just like Rawls, described it. Certainly Dewey did not think of this distinction that way. For Dewey the heart of liberal democracy was a democratic way of life which simply cannot be brought into focus through a distinction between public and private. Dewey had a different view of liberal democracy as a pluralistic culture
in which a welter of associated publics are in unceasing interaction with one another. Some times these interactions will assume more harmonious tendencies while at other times they will be more conflictual. But never will there be a unified and neutral one ‘public’ sphere which adjudicates amongst all the other ‘private’ associations.

The best kind of philosophers, on the view I interpret James and Dewey as recommending, are those who weave the utilitarians and the romantics together into some ever yet more inclusive conception of the moral life. These philosophers will experience much trouble if they try to spell out exactly how we might unravel our utilitarianism from our romanticism in order to parse the two out into distinct spheres of public and private. These philosophers will fail to see a strong distinction in kind here even if they will recognize numerous piecemeal distinctions in degree. For that very reason these philosophers will think that distinctions between public and private or rationality and imagination are not the kinds of tools which we philosophers need to worry about improving. This is not to say that these tools will never be useful again, it is only to say that they should not be central parts of our moral vision of how a liberal democratic culture such as ours might improve itself. There are other tools more important for a liberal democratic culture and it is to those tools that we cunning pragmatist cultural critics ought to devote our attention.

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NOTES


2. I argue that the most important aspects of Rorty’s pragmatism are in these respects continuous with James’s and Dewey’s pragmatisms, in Koopman (2006). I there describe my conception of pragmatist philosophy as a form of melioristic cultural criticism. For a detailed exploration of the ways in which Rorty’s pragmatism is and is not compatible with classical pragmatisms see Koopman (2007). I believe that this view of Rorty’s pragmatism is also borne out by Neil Gross’s (forthcoming) sociological biography of the development of Rorty’s thought up to the early 1980s. Gross’s book is a remarkably rich study and it is sure to contribute enormously to the transformation of the
clearly inadequate received wisdom about Rorty’s thought with which most philosophers
have thus far labored.

4. This quote is taken from a public memorial address for Rorty delivered by Habermas at Stanford University on 2 November 2007. This lecture will be published in New Literary History in 2008 and is, until then, available online at www.telospress.com.
5. Problems also persist in that Rorty continues in some contexts to identify his pragmatism with romantic thought. In an undergraduate seminar offered in 2005 at Stanford University, Rorty characterized his own position as a “romantic philosophy” identified most strongly with post-Nietzschean thought. While admittedly the format of an undergraduate course does not present the same exigencies of context as one faces in publishing in an academic journal, the point is that Rorty remains quite comfortable identifying his pragmatism with a form of romanticism.
6. For criticisms of Rorty’s reason versus imagination dualism see the discussions by Alexander and Putnam cited above. Rorty’s public versus private dualism has engendered a wealth of critical attention; two of the best responses are by Nancy Fraser (1988) and Thomas McCarthy (1990).
7. Gregory Pappas discusses Dewey’s view on these matters in the introduction to his excellent forthcoming book on Dewey’s ethics.
9. For readings of James’s moral philosophy along these lines see Ruth Anna Putnam (1990, 1997b).
10. See Rorty’s discussion of this essay (1997).
11. This idea permeates Dewey’s works from the early Dewey (1888) to the late Dewey (1939).
12. Robert Westbrook (1991, 305) rightly emphasizes this point that Dewey’s concern is not the public but rather multiple publics.

REFERENCES


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