Chapter Two:  
Two Cheers for Richard Rorty  

I. Introduction  

Pragmatists from William James and John Dewey a century ago through Richard Bernstein and Richard Rorty in recent decades have presented pragmatism as a *via media*, a middle way that has the potential to avoid the frustrations that follow from asking either too much or too little from our ability to think. Pragmatism appeared on the earth late in the nineteenth century as a critique of dogmatic rationalism but also with the hope of making something of human reason. On the one hand, pragmatists have always recognized the unlikelihood of ever succeeding at the rationalist’s quest for certainty, and they have always been glad to free us from the burden of that quest. On the other hand, pragmatists also think there is something better than the utter subjectivity and personal opinion into which the collapse of the rationalist project seems to lead. In attempting to find a middle way between these extremes, the pragmatists are on to something, and those of us who do not think of ourselves as pragmatists would do well to make the most of what the pragmatists offer. When Richard Bernstein presents us with a “third way of understanding critique that avoids–passes between the Scylla of ‘groundless critique’ and the Charybdis of rationally grounded critique that ‘rests’ upon illusory foundations,” he is on to something.  

And though we may give the pragmatists only one or two cheers out of three—and a lot of us will hurry on to list our caveats and provisos—we would do well, nonetheless, to accept Richard Rorty’s invitation to free ourselves from “the increasingly tiresome pendulum swing” between dogmatism and skepticism.  

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II. A Pragmatic Means of Inquiry and Argument

Our first cheer for Richard Rorty, and for the pragmatism that he shares with William James and John Dewey, then, is for the simple method or means of framing inquiry and argument that pragmatism offers as an alternative to the Cartesian quest for certainty. Following William James one can think of this modest means of proceeding as the practice of trying on beliefs in order to see which of these beliefs carries us about in experience most satisfactorily—all things considered. Try on ideas and beliefs, James writes, in order see which of them “help us to get into satisfactory relations with other parts of our experience.” We should make the most, he continues, of “any idea upon which we can ride, so to speak; any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily.”³ We should “give the name of hypothesis to anything that may be proposed to our belief,” he writes, and “call the decision between two hypotheses an option.”⁴ We choose between these hypotheses on the basis of what James calls the “principle of practical results,”⁵ which “is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences.”⁶ This is pragmatism’s “usual question. ‘Grant an idea or belief to be true,’ it says, ‘what concrete difference will its being true make in any one’s actual life?’”⁷ Or again, “the pragmatic method, in its dealings with certain concepts, instead of ending with admiring contemplation, plunges forward into the river of experience with them.”⁸


⁷ James, “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth,” Pragmatism, in Writings, 1902-1910, p. 573.

⁸ James, “The One and the Many,” Pragmatism, in Writings, 1902-1910, p. 541.
Though Richard Rorty takes this modest method several steps further in the direction of modesty, he too recognizes that a simple, pragmatic strategy, or means of proceeding, is what remains once the quest for certainty has been set aside. Though Rorty talks about “pragmatism without method,” he does so in order to make the same points James made a century ago when he wrote about pragmatism as method. Rorty prefers the term “muddling over “method,” but the practices are largely the same as those that James describes. One begins with bits of experience, texts or lumps in Rorty’s parlance, and one tries on alternative hypotheses for how best to understand and work with these lumps and texts. Where big questions are in view one faces the “slow and painful choice between alternative self-images,” and where specific problems are in view one encounters “Deweyan requests for concrete alternatives and programs.” In every case one’s reasons for choosing one hypothesis over another lie in the consequences that follow from holding to that hypothesis. As Rorty notes, “We pragmatists say that every difference must make a difference to practice,” and it is on the basis of these differences, Rorty argues, that we opt for one alternative over another. In other words, we opt for one understanding of how to link certain bits of experience together over another understanding because it is “a more useful belief to have than its contradictory.”

Whether one sets aside the quest for certainty and its resulting skepticism by way of James’s method or Rorty’s muddling, then, one still has a means of proceeding. It consists in trying on alternative hypotheses for how to link certain bits of experience together, and

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comparing those hypotheses against each other by tracing their consequences in experience on the basis of the best reasons any of us can come up with for holding to one hypothesis rather than another. The pragmatist doesn’t allow you to focus on a single hypothesis in isolation and set it aside simply by introducing doubt. Instead, recognizing that rejecting one answer implies embracing another, the pragmatist always weighs hypotheses against other real alternatives. You can never win an argument with a pragmatist simply by introducing doubt. The pragmatist takes doubts seriously and weighs doubts against other considerations, but with a pragmatist, one always has to be able to offer an alternative hypothesis and give specific reasons for its superiority over its competition.

Though we should not have to make a point of it, we would do well to note that while this simple means of proceeding emphasizes consequences, it also values notions such as coherence, consistency, and completeness. For various reasons, some deserved and some not, William James and his pragmatist heirs have often been thought of as disdaining such values. They have been written-off as irrational or even anti-rational. They have been treated as if notions of coherence, consistency, and completeness have no value. Those who suffer from this caricature of pragmatism would do well to remember that the following statements all come from the pen of William James. The truth of any of our beliefs, he writes, “will depend entirely on their relations to the other truths that also have to be acknowledged.”

Pragmatism’s “only test of probable truth is what works best in the way of leading us, what fits every part of life best and combines with the collectivity of experience’s demands, nothing being omitted.” Therefore, “What is better for us to believe is true unless the belief incidentally clashes with some other vital benefit.... In other words, the greatest enemy of any one of our truths may be the rest of our truths.” Any particular candidate for truth, then, “has to run the gauntlet of all our other truths. It is on trial by them and they on trial by it. Our final opinion […] can be settled only after all the truths have straightened themselves out

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14 Ibid. p. 522.

15 Ibid. p. 521.
together. “There is no contradiction, then, between proceeding by pragmatic means and wanting to make the most of our ability to think and to be reasonable. “Above all we find consistency satisfactory,” wrote James, and from a pragmatic standpoint, one can say the same of coherence and completeness too.

We would do well, then, to think of pragmatism primarily as an answer to the question: How shall we proceed once we have let go of the rationalist quest for certainty? By thinking of pragmatism in this way we acknowledge, with Rorty, that pragmatism places itself outside of the modern quest to identify the one method that will give us the certainty that no other method can give, while we also acknowledge, with James, that pragmatism is concerned with the question of how we can actually get on with our lives, pursue lines of inquiry, have worthwhile arguments, and arrive at settled beliefs in a reasonable manner. Having set aside the quest for certainty, pragmatism does not leave us with no way forward. It offers us a modest means for arriving at settled, albeit fallible, beliefs. Pragmatism encourages us to begin with the questions that arise in the course of experience, try on alternative hypotheses for how best to answer these questions, and decide between these hypotheses by tracing their consequences back into experience and offering the best reasons we can manage for one hypothesis over another. We may not achieve certainty, but we may still hold our beliefs for good reasons, and they may be true—we just may not be as certain of that as we would like to be.

III. A Pragmatic Reading of the History of Reason

Rorty and the pragmatist tradition get a second cheer for providing us with an understanding of the story of modern reason that helps us understand this story as our own, appreciate its accomplishments, and yet not get swept up into the grand hopes of rationalism


or end up trapped in the cul-de-sac into which the failure of rationalism leads. The pragmatist account of the story of modernity suggests that in our best moments, over the past few centuries, we have gotten on quite nicely by pragmatic means. It was never called that, of course, but whether we were criticizing literary texts, interpreting scientific data, theorizing about political institutions, or negotiating personal relationships, we have done our best work by trying on alternative hypotheses and weighing them against each other by tracing their consequences in experience. This is the process by which literary critics did their best work. This is the process by which we made personal decisions. This is the process that led to the creation and development of democratic institutions, and this is the process that led to extraordinary breakthroughs in science from the seventeenth century to the present. Ironically, we enjoyed so much success through these means that we yielded to the temptation to think that we were doing something much more than merely coming up with the best solution to a problem or answer to a question that pragmatic considerations alone could provide.

Consider, for example, the story of the scientific revolution. The pragmatist telling of this story suggests that at the dawn of modernity people, whom we now call scientists, were getting on quite nicely by what amounted to pragmatic means. Aided by helpful devices such as microscopes and telescopes, which were themselves the products of pragmatic inquiry and experimentation, scientists worked with the bits and pieces and lumps and texts that their inquiries served up to them, and they attempted to answer the questions that arose in the context of those inquiries. “How shall we link the new lumps and texts with the old lumps and texts?” they wondered. “How shall we link all the celestial bits together?” “How shall we link the terrestrial lumps together?” “How shall we link the celestial bits with the terrestrial lumps?” –and so on. Sometimes their questions had to do with concerns over how to build more accurate clocks, sail their ships on course, or heave cannon balls at their enemies more accurately and effectively than their enemies were heaving cannon balls back. At other times the questions focused on just finding more satisfying ways to think about things. For instance, some scientists sought more satisfying ways to make sense of the fact that a mercury barometer gives one reading at the foot of a mountain and another reading at the
mountain’s summit, and others attempted to make better sense of the puzzling fact that a few lights in the night sky move in strikingly different ways from all the other lights in that same sky. In each case, scientists addressed their questions by trying on alternative hypotheses for how to link various lumps and texts together in more satisfying ways, and they judged these hypotheses against each other by tracing the consequences that followed from holding one hypothesis rather than another. Worthwhile arguments focused on just which of the real hypotheses available did the best job of solving the puzzles at hand and moving science forward.

Just when everything was going along nicely in this pragmatic mode, disaster struck in the form of too much success. As Pope put it, “God said ‘let Newton be’ and all was light.” By linking the new and the old and the celestial and the terrestrial, Newton’s law of gravity performed the “marriage function” to an extent that few ideas have ever managed to do. In Jamesian language Newton linked parts of experience together in more satisfactory ways than anyone to date had done. In Rortyan terms he wove lumps and texts together in more useful ways than anyone else had ever managed to do. For understandable reasons, however, Newton’s contemporaries concluded that he had not simply succeeded at the humble pragmatic task of coming up with a compelling set of action-guiding beliefs, but that he had accomplished the Cartesian task of identifying the one certain and necessary truth that Reason had been waiting to give us all along. As William James observed, “When the first mathematical, logical, and natural uniformities, the first laws, were discovered, men were so carried away by the clearness, beauty and simplification that resulted, that they believed themselves to have deciphered authentically the eternal thoughts of the Almighty.” In a similar vein, Rorty notes that the Enlightened of the eighteenth century believed that “the New Science [had] discovered the language which nature itself uses.” They concluded that,

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“The new vocabulary was the one nature had always wanted to be described in”¹⁹ and, therefore, that it gave us the one certain truth for which scientists supposedly sought.

Newton’s remarkable success propelled successive generations into the quest to do for every other area of inquiry what Newton was thought to have done for astronomy. They believed that what Condorcet called “the infallible method of reason”²⁰ would break through every limit, overcome every prejudice and arrive at certain and necessary truth. This is the project that John Dewey called the “quest for certainty” and Alasdair MacIntyre called the “Enlightenment Project.” It is the project that did not pan out as it was supposed to. In fact, this modern project turned into the story of a subject-centered rationality that brought the modern world under the spell of “the violence of a subjugating subjectivity,”²¹ and under the “regime of a subjectivity puffed up into a false absolute.”²² It made reason the object of its own totalizing critique and inverted the very notions of certainty, objectivity, and necessity. The notion of necessary and certain truth dissolved, and in its place we were left exploring limitless, anti-essentialist possibilities for thinking differently—without any assurance that any one difference actually makes a difference. This, in short, is the story of the modern swing from dogmatism to skepticism, a story in which the seemingly glorious highway of reason ended up in a cul-de-sac from which God and the idols had been removed.

The pragmatist telling of the story of modern reason frees us from having to travel inexorably down this road and into this cul-de-sac. It allows us to see the story of modern reason as our own story and yet see that there has always been an alternative understanding


²² Ibid. p. 56.
of reason available. It was there in the seventeenth century, and it is available today as well. In fact, when we have made genuine progress, it has probably been this more modest method that has served us so well. Although the rationalistic quest for certainty has always loomed over us as the ideal and has been central to the modern story, pragmatism allows us to frame or bracket that quest within a more modest understanding of reason and to reassert this more modest method in the face of the collapse of the modern quest for certainty and necessity. The modest consideration of alternative hypotheses in response to questions that arise from experience, unburdened from the quest for certainty or necessity, frees us from both the pretense and the failure of the rationalist quest. Furthermore, we can choose the understanding of human experience to which the failure of that quest has led, if we have good reasons for doing so, but we are not bound to do so. We can also consider alternative understandings, including ones that were driven from consideration by the logic of the rationalist quest for certainty during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

IV. A Question

Having given Rorty and the pragmatist tradition two cheers, however, the cheering stops when we consider Rorty’s late-modern, di-divinized understanding of the human condition. Having freed himself from the swing from modern dogmatism to (post)modern skepticism, Rorty settles, nonetheless, for the empty self-understanding into which the swing from dogmatism to skepticism leads. He rejects the quest for certainty and yet he chooses to live in the absence into which the failure of that quest has led. Viewing the subject as no more than “drawing a line around a vacant place in the middle of the web of words, and then claiming that there is something there rather than nothing,”\(^\text{23}\) Rorty aligns with Nietzsche to “prevent us from inventing God surrogates,”\(^\text{24}\) and he identifies with Derrida in attempting to find a ‘joyous affirmation of the play of the world... the affirmation of a world of signs

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\(^{24}\) Rorty, *Philosophical Papers, III*, p. 54.
without fault, without truth, and without origin.” One wonders. Why does Rorty choose to live in this place of absence? Does he have good pragmatic reasons for holding these views or is he driven to them only by the enduring power of the very history from which his pragmatism should free him? This is the history from which pragmatism frees us, and yet, the pre-eminent pragmatist of our day sides consistently with the understanding of the human condition that flows from the quest for certainty that he rejects. What would the pragmatic reasons be for holding to what he himself calls his morally humiliating views?

To the extent that Rorty answers this question, he does so in an autobiographical essay entitled “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids” in which he tells the personal story of how he got into philosophy and then found himself “unable to use philosophy for the purpose [he] had originally had in mind” (141). The story begins in a little New Jersey town on the Delaware River where we meet a child who from an early age thought deeply about questions of justice and beauty. With family ties to Leon Trotsky and other refugees from Stalin’s Russia Socialism was the family religion, so Rorty grew up revering the socialist canon as other children revered their family Bible. He “grew up knowing that all decent people were, if not Trotskyites, at least socialists,” and by the age of twelve, he “knew that the point of being human was to spend one’s life fighting social injustice” (142). While grappling with deep issues of justice, however, Rorty also wondered what to make of his equally moving encounters with the numinous orchids that he found in the forests near his home. “I was not quite sure why those orchids were so important,” he writes, “but I was convinced that they were.” He was also unsure how the orchids fit together with Trotsky, and he worried that such rare but socially worthless flowers might have no place in Trotsky’s world. At age fifteen, therefore, as Rorty went off to the University of Chicago to study with as lofty an intellectual elite as America had to offer at the time, he did so in the hope that his professors at the university would know how the ineffable beauty of rare wild flowers fit

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26. The essay appeared first in Common Knowledge volume 1, number 3 (1992):140-53. Page numbers are inserted in parentheses. The essay can also be found in Philosophy and Social Hope (Penguin, 1999).
together with the urgency of freeing the weak from the strong. “Insofar as I had any project in mind,” he writes, “it was to reconcile Trotsky and the orchids. I wanted to find some intellectual or aesthetic framework which would let me – in a thrilling phrase which I came across in Yeats – ‘hold reality and justice in a single vision’” (143).

For several years Rorty looked hopefully to the absolutist philosophy of Socrates and Plato to provide the unifying truth that he hoped to find. The intellectual elite at Chicago, which included several notable refugees from Hitler’s Germany, was not well disposed toward the pragmatism with which Rorty had family ties, so they urged him instead to seek out theological or philosophical alternatives. As Rorty’s professors “pointed out over and over again, Dewey had no absolutes” (144), and therefore, pragmatism offered no adequate response to Hitler. Willing to set pragmatism aside, but unwilling to take religion seriously, Rorty turned to philosophy for the sought-after absolutes, and for a while he found what he was looking for in the Socratic idea that virtue is knowledge. This notion struck him as just the sort of insight for which he had gone to university, and so he set himself the task of achieving that place “beyond hypotheses” to which absolutist philosophy offered to take him. “It seemed obvious to me,” he writes, “that getting to such a place was what everybody with any brains really wanted. It also seemed clear that Platonism had all the advantages of religion, without requiring the humility which Christianity demanded, and of which I was apparently incapable” (145).

Despite his best efforts, however, Rorty’s attempt to become a Platonist did not work out so well. He gradually came to realize that there is no place “beyond hypotheses.” There is no place that is free from what William James called the “trail of the human serpent.” Rorty also concluded that John Dewey was right in arguing that the modern “quest for certainty” is doomed to fail. Rorty observed that there is no neutral point from which to think or make judgments, and “if there [is] no such standpoint, then the whole idea of ‘rational certainty,’ and the whole Socratic-Platonic idea of replacing passion by reason, seem[s] not to make much sense” (145). Nor does it help to switch from a quest for certainty to a quest for coherence. In Rorty’s view, seeking coherence does not preserve much serious work for
philosophy to do. Achieving coherence, Rorty found, is largely the task of re-describing, a task at which he was quite good, but which, in the end, does not carry one very far. One can cobble together a coherent view of human experience without having to include a compelling account of how justice and beauty come together deep down in the nature of things. Realizing that philosophy was not likely to give him the unifying truth that he went to college hoping to find, Rorty began to doubt the absolutist philosophers around him and started to seek alternate pathways for how to think about Trotsky and the wild orchids.

Beginning with Hegel and Proust, and moving by way of Derrida and Heidegger, Rorty gradually found his way back to Dewey and to a different vision of what philosophy is good for. At the heart of this different vision was both a letting go of the adolescent quest that had led him to college and a rejection of the ancient and enduring questions that had consumed the attention of philosophers for centuries. In one sense, the choice to let go of these quests grew out of his failure to find the certainty for which he had sought. At the end of the quest for certainty and absolutes, he found no certainty, no absolutes, no single vision that was able to make him a believer. After decades of trying, Rorty writes, “I had not spoken to any of the questions which got me started reading philosophers in the first place. I was no closer to the single vision which thirty years back, I had gone to college to get” (147). But it was not simply failure that led him to a new vision for philosophy. It was also the growing conviction that the questions themselves had been bad questions all along. In one sense, the choice to let go of these quests grew out of his failure to find the certainty for which he had sought. At the end of the quest for certainty and absolutes, he found no certainty, no absolutes, no single vision that was able to make him a believer. After decades of trying, Rorty writes, “I had not spoken to any of the questions which got me started reading philosophers in the first place. I was no closer to the single vision which thirty years back, I had gone to college to get” (147). But it was not simply failure that led him to a new vision for philosophy. It was also the growing conviction that the questions themselves had been bad questions all along. In one sense, the choice to let go of these quests grew out of his failure to find the certainty for which he had sought. At the end of the quest for certainty and absolutes, he found no certainty, no absolutes, no single vision that was able to make him a believer. After decades of trying, Rorty writes, “I had not spoken to any of the questions which got me started reading philosophers in the first place. I was no closer to the single vision which thirty years back, I had gone to college to get” (147). But it was not simply failure that led him to a new vision for philosophy. It was also the growing conviction that the questions themselves had been bad questions all along. In the end, he writes, “I gradually decided that the whole idea of holding reality and justice in a single vision had been a mistake – that a pursuit of such a vision had been precisely what led Plato astray.” Concluding that only religion can provide the unified vision for which Plato sought, and admitting that he had become too “raucously secularist” to imagine becoming religious, Rorty “decided that the hope of getting a single vision by becoming a philosopher had been a self-deceptive atheist’s way out” (147). As a result, he gave up on the quest, broke ranks with the Western philosophical tradition, and began to imagine a new vision for philosophy.

Rorty articulated this new philosophical vision in Contingency, Irony and Solidarity, a book in which he explored “what intellectual life might be like if one could manage to give
up the Platonic attempt to hold reality and justice in a single vision.” In this book and elsewhere Rorty made the case “that there is no need to weave one’s personal equivalent of Trotsky and one’s personal equivalent of my wild orchids together.” The two may come together for Christians and revolutionaries, “but they need not coincide, and one should not try too hard to make them do so” (147). Herein lies the centerpiece of Rorty’s new vision for philosophy. Rather than come up with yet another, more convincing solution to the quest for certainty and for unifying truths, we would all do well simply to let go of the quests and questions that have burdened Western thought for over two millennia. The philosophical pursuit of such quests and questions, Rorty believed, had led only to a rancid single-mindedness that had done more harm than good. The best solution to the quests, therefore, is not to come up with still better answers to old questions, but simply to stop asking the old questions.

If we will only let go of the old questions, Rorty maintained, we can then accept the idiosyncratic character of what matters most to each of us without thinking that we have to find a way of unifying these idiosyncratic loves under some universalizing concept. Adopting this understanding of life means,

accepting that what matters most to you may well be something that may never matter much to most people. Your equivalent of my orchids may always seem merely weird, merely idiosyncratic, to practically everybody else. But that is no reason to be ashamed of, or downgrade, or try to slough off, your Wordsworthian moments, your lover, your family, your pet, your favorite lines of verse, or your quaint religious faith. There is nothing sacred about universality which makes the shared automatically better than the unshared. There is no automatic privilege of what you can get everybody to agree to (the universal) over what you cannot (the idiosyncratic). (148)

Our sense of moral obligation, then, need not be rooted in “‘rationality’ or ‘human nature’ or ‘the fatherhood of God’ or ‘a knowledge of the moral law.’” It need be associated with
nothing more than an “ability to sympathize with the pain of others.” There is no reason to think, therefore, that our moral sensibilities and our “idiosyncratic loves are going to fit within one big overall account of how everything hangs together. There is, in short,” Rorty concludes, “not much reason to hope for the sort of single vision that I went to college hoping to get” (148).

Rorty acknowledges that this leaves us with an ungrounded moral relativism, but he encourages us not to be overly concerned. Dropping the quests for certainty and for absolutes, Rorty continues, means that we can see

human beings as children of their time and place, without any significant metaphysical or biological limits on their plasticity. It means that a sense of moral obligation is a matter of conditioning rather than of insight. It also entails that the notion of insight (in any area, physics as well as ethics) as a glimpse of what is there, apart from any human needs and desires, cannot be made coherent. (148-49)

While this view might rightly be called moral relativism, Rorty argues, to adopt this view is not to adopt the attitude “that every moral view is as good as every other” (148). Rorty always maintained that there are good reasons for holding the moral and political views that he held; there are just no reasons of the sort that most people want. He admitted that most people complained that he was begging all the crucial questions and arguing in a circle, but so be it. In Rorty’s view groundless arguments that move in circles are the only arguments any of us ever have, but they are still our arguments for how we might best solve our problems and answer our questions. Rorty consistently refused to yield to the temptation to seek unwobbling pivots and he remained remarkably consistent in holding these views. Though he realized that most people around him still wanted more, he refused to meet them on their own terms. He chose to live contentedly in the space created by the “twilight of the gods,” and he simply let go of any attempt to seek what Derrida called “‘a full presence beyond the reach of play’” (153). If anyone managed to experience “the non-center otherwise
than as [a] loss of center” and to “play without security” in “a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin,” Rorty managed to do it.

While Rorty maintains that we do not need the deep reasons for our moral convictions that most people want, he also candidly admits that his views on these matters are “morally humiliating.” In the Introduction to *Consequences of Pragmatism*, his first collection of essays, Rorty writes about what he calls the “morally humiliating” view that “there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves”?27 As he unpacks the humiliation of this view, he admits that Sartre is right in saying that,

when the secret police come, when the torturers violate the innocent, there is nothing to be said to them of the form, ‘There is something within you which you are betraying. Though you embody the practices of a totalitarian society which will endure forever, there is something beyond those practices which condemns you.’”28

Rorty acknowledges that “this thought is hard to live with,” and yet he is quite willing to follow Nietzsche and Sartre and Foucault into that place of absence created by the death of God and to stand with these thinkers who have worked consistently to “prevent us from inventing God surrogates.”29 In this place of absence, nothing is allowed to stand in for God or his doubles—not even the individual subject. On this point, Foucault and Rorty agree. “I have tried to define this blank space from which I speak,” Foucault writes, “and which is slowly taking shape in a discourse that I still feel to be so precarious and so unsure. […] I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face.”30 Rorty concurs, admitting that the very notion of the subject is no more than “drawing a line around a vacant place in


28 Ibid.

29 Rorty, *Philosophical Papers, III*, p. 54.

the middle of the web of words, and then claiming that there is something there rather than nothing.”³¹ These comments unpack the significance of Sartre’s lament. Both the torturer and the tortured subjects are but blank spaces caught in webs of belief, and so, as Sartre points out, there is no way of appealing to anything that could be shared and understood by both of them as human *qua* human.

This honest admission on Rorty’s part leads us back to the question: Why does he hold to this morally humiliating understanding of himself and of the curious species of featherless bipeds who have invented knowledge and who inhabit the planet with him? Why does he reject the quest for certainty and yet settle into the absence to which the failed quest for certainty led? Does he hold these views because he sees them as compelling on pragmatic grounds? Are these the action-guiding beliefs to which pragmatism leads? Or has the swing from dogmatism to skepticism pushed even a thinker as original and independent as Rorty into a place of absence and emptiness to which pragmatic considerations alone would never lead? Has he rejected the quest but accepted its conclusions? Do pragmatic considerations warrant his hope that our ungrounded potential to choose to sympathize with the pain of others is the best way to understand ourselves and engage the moral challenges of our day?

In an essay entitled “Pragmatism and the Sense of the Tragic” published in a volume called *Prophetic Thought for Postmodern Times*, Cornel West raises exactly this question. Pushing the pragmatist tradition to confront the “challenge of a deep sense of evil in the tragic,”³² and critical of what he considers to be Dewey’s shallowness in response to the evils of the twentieth century, West looks to his colleague Josiah Royce for a more satisfying response to the moral challenges of our day. “To Royce,” West observes, James’s and Emerson’s promotions of heroic action, “in and of themselves, are insufficient or Sisyphysian, pushing a rock up a hill, but [there is] no progress, unless there is a deeper

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³² Cornel West, “Pragmatism and the Sense of the Tragic,” in *Prophetic Thought for Postmodern Times*, (Common courage, 1993), p. 44.
struggle with the sense of the tragic.” What pragmatists have called the “strenuous mood,” simply is not enough. Pragmatist thinkers have often been inspiring preachers, and even Rorty could wax eloquent on the need for “existential transformation,” but West doubts that these ungrounded appeals are sufficient for dealing with the seriousness of evil in this world. West continues by noting that, “The full seriousness of the problem of evil,” or of pessimism in the pure sense,

isn’t the doctrine of the merely peevish man, but of the man who, to borrow a word of Hegel’s has once feared not for this or that moment in his life, but who has feared for all of his nature. So that he has trembled through and through and all that was most fixed in him has become shaken. There are experiences in life that do just this for us.

When the fountains of the great deep are once thus broken up and floods have come, it isn’t over this or that loss of our green earth that we sorrow. It is because of all that endless waste of tossing waves which now row cubits deep above the top of what were our highest mountains. Most of us know something of the floods to which West is pointing. These are not the “mere pains of our finitude that we can easily learn to face courageously,” West reminds us. These are the tragic times and the confrontations with evil that demand a deeper understanding of human experience than anything Dewey, Emerson, or Rorty have to offer us. Muster up the “strenuous mood” falls short in the face of the genuine moral struggles that each of us faces sooner or later.

As West continues he points his readers toward understandings that are more adequate to human experience than is the ungrounded strenuous mood of pragmatism. West

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33 Ibid. p. 47.

34 Rorty, unpublished lecture delivered on the grounds of the University of Virginia, fall 2000.

35 West, Pragmatism and the Sense of the Tragic,” p. 48.
points us to deeper understandings that might enable us to face up to and fight against evil. As he does so, he continues to look to Royce, who found these deeper understandings in philosophical idealism and in the symbolism of Christianity. Being careful to move by way of pragmatic considerations alone, West develops his argument by comparing alternative hypotheses against each other on the basis of their consequences in experience. He does not proceed by appealing to authority—whether scientific or religious. “Were our insight into the truth of *logos* based upon a sort of emperical [sic] assurance,” West writes, “it would surely fail us here. But [...] if we have the true insight of deeper idealism, we can turn from our chaos to him the suffering God, who in his flesh bears the sins of the world and whose natural body is pierced by the capricious wounds that hateful fools inflict upon him.”

This insight is based upon neither empirical nor religious authority; it is based on the pragmatic consideration of alternative sets of action-guiding beliefs in the context of experience. In the view of both Royce and West, the encounter with evil in actual experience points us toward the deeper ways of thinking offered by philosophical idealism and Christian symbolism because both offer more compelling frameworks for meeting the challenges presented by the tragic realities of this world than the ungrounded, strenuous mood can offer.

One hundred years ago, while struggling with a similar sense of the evils of this world, William James observed that life feels like a fight in which something important is at stake. “If this life be not a real fight in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success,” he writes, “it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. But it *feels,*” he concluded, “like a fight.” A century later it still feels like a fight in which something deeply significant is at stake, and we still find ourselves wondering how to think about this feeling. Rorty admits that this is a tough question. He acknowledges that it is in just this sort of moral intuition that his own conclusions find their greatest challenge. Rorty understands that for a lot of people, some sort of “metaphysical comfort” is needed in order to stay in the fight and not give up. Without such comfort there is

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36 Ibid. p. 49.

a sort of moral humiliation with which they cannot cope, a humiliation that can have real and harmful consequences.

Despite these real and harmful consequences, however, Rorty concludes that it felt to James that something eternal is at stake because over 2000 years of cultural history had pushed him in that direction. Citing James’s observations from *The Will to Believe*, Rorty concludes,

> For us, footnotes to Plato that we are, it *does* feel [like something eternal is at stake]. But if James’s own pragmatism were taken seriously, if pragmatism became central to our culture and our self-image, then it would no longer feel that way. We do not know how it *would* feel. We do not even know whether, given such a change in tone, the conversation of Europe might not falter and die away. We just do not know.\(^{38}\)

Rorty does not deny James’s feelings, nor does he deny that we need to be able to link these feelings together with other parts of experience. In good pragmatic style, furthermore, he looks to consequences in his attempt to sort this question out. He is also willing to break out of the shortsightedness for which pragmatists are often criticized and to think about imagined, possible consequences in a distant future. In the end, however, having concluded that what is most important to us does not come together deep down in the nature of things, Rorty puts all his hope in the possibility that someday we will learn to think differently about our moral intuitions and feelings.

We do well to recognize that Rorty is right when he says that one need not see justice and beauty coming together deep down in the nature of things in order to have a genuine concern for justice and beauty. Rorty himself is an example of this fact, and examples could be multiplied. One need not have a deep understanding of human experience in order to care about social injustice, seek peace, love deeply, and delight in beauty. When people argue that

\(^{38}\) Rorty, “Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism,” in *Consequences*, p. 174.
Rorty’s democratic ethics are inconsistent with his view of the human condition, therefore, they are simply wrong. In Rorty’s understanding, neither nature nor anything else dictates our ethics. To the contrary, we live in a place that is absent of any inherent meaning and is therefore open to the meanings we create. Democracy is, therefore, a possibility. So are concerns for justice and for peace, for love and for beauty. There are other options that are not so democratic and not so welcome which are available to us too, of course, but Rorty and others are being perfectly consistent when they choose democratic values and hold to them as ungrounded preferences. Rorty is not able to provide deep reasons for holding these values, but he is perfectly consistent in holding these values if he chooses to. It is not necessary, therefore, that one hold to a deep understanding of what human beings share in order to hold the moral convictions to which Rorty holds and to act on them consistently and even sacrificially.

The point of pragmatism, however, is to get us beyond arguments based in what is either necessary, on the one hand, or merely possible, on the other. Pragmatism seeks to get to arguments about which of the live hypotheses that are available to us in any given situation is more compelling than its alternatives. Pragmatism wants to get us beyond holding to our beliefs either because we see them as necessary or simply because we see them as unnecessary and possible—but we prefer them. When Rorty writes, therefore, that “There is no need to weave one’s personal equivalent of Trotsky and one’s personal equivalent of my wild orchids together,” and that beauty and justice “need not coincide,” (emphasis added) he is still caught in the paradigm of certainty and necessity that he professes to have left behind. He is still using the language of what “needs” to be the case. It is clear that if one argues that deep understandings are necessarily true, the argument will fall short of the standard of necessity, and it will be judged a failure. If, however, the debate moves clearly to pragmatic considerations, then saying with Rorty that justice and beauty need not come together deep down in the nature of things doesn’t get us very far. It reminds us that the outcome of the modern story is that what we thought was necessary is not necessary, and it ushers us into the realm of exploring possibilities because they are possible, but it does not get us to the point of weighing alternatives against each other to see which is more compelling in the context of
experience. In a genuinely pragmatic framework, arguments about what needs to be the case—or what does not need to be the case—should carry no weight. We do not want to know what is or is not necessary. We want to know which of the alternatives that are available to us is more compelling than the others. One must ask, then, whether Rorty has genuinely gotten to the pragmatic framework he professes or whether he is still laboring under the burden of necessity and, therefore, is also caught in the absence created by the failure of the quest for certain and necessary truth. While Rorty demonstrates that a person can choose the moral values of late western democracy without having deep reasons for doing so, he has not demonstrated the pragmatic value of holding the morally humiliating view of the self and of others that he holds. So the question remains: Does Rorty’s understanding of human experience turn out to be compelling in the thick of life’s real moral struggles?

When we genuinely break free from the modern paradigm that rests in what is or is not certain or necessary, we can consider the possibility that there may be a more compelling, alternative hypothesis for how to think about the moral feelings that James describes than what Rorty offers. Specifically, we can consider the possibility that the reason life feels like a fight in which something eternal can be gained for the universe is that life is a fight in which something eternal can be gained for the universe. Or, to put it slightly differently, the reason it feels that there is something deep down inside that we have not put there ourselves is that there is something deep down inside that we have not put there ourselves. Again, the framing of this statement makes all the difference. If we assume that there must be deep and eternal realities and that it is necessary for us to know them, then our quest will certainly fail and we will once again discover that what we thought was necessary is not necessarily so. If, however, we assume no outcomes, start with questions that arise out of experience, and try on alternatives in order to see which turns out to be most compelling in the context of experience, then we can consider both the view that there are no deep meanings given in the universe and we can also consider the view that there are deep meanings given in the universe. We can acknowledge that while understandings of human experience that rest in deep, shared meanings are not necessarily so, they might still be true – and we might still
hold them for good reasons. We need not see them as necessary nor abandon them because they are not necessary. We can hold them because they resonate so powerfully with the moral and aesthetic realities of our lives. In our moral struggles with injustice and evil and in our moments of wonder, love, and beauty, we might just find that understandings of human experience that are rooted in deeper understandings of the human condition have more resonance than the footnotes-to-Plato hypothesis. Perhaps Trotsky and the orchids do come together deep down in the nature of things and we have good reasons to think so—not because we are convinced from the outset that things must necessarily come together deep down in the nature of things but because understandings that run deep resonate with the depth of our moral experience, provide us with action-guiding beliefs, and simply make the best sense of that experience.

The genius of pragmatism is that it starts with experience and addresses questions that arise from experience without assuming that there is depth and that we have to find it, or that there is no depth and that we ought to give up looking for it. Pragmatism does not assume that there is something we must find or that there is nothing to be found at all. There is no necessity involved, and therefore, we need not burden ourselves with a quest for certain and necessary truth, nor need we settle into the place of absence into which the failed quest for necessary and certain truth leads. Pragmatism starts with questions that arise from experience, and its only quest is to find the best ways we can come up with for solving puzzles and addressing questions that range from the most mundane puzzles of daily life to the largest and most perplexing questions about how things in the largest sense of the word hang together in the largest sense of the word. If deep notions about what humans share provide the best answers to these large questions, then we do well to consider such answers—not because we have determined that such answers must necessarily exist and that we have to find them, but because deep understandings resonate with experience better than the alternatives do. If the thought that a remarkable species of featherless bipeds happens to have appeared on this planet and has the potential to live sympathetically offers the more satisfying understanding of the human condition, then we do well to embrace this understanding and to encourage each other in the strenuous mood—not because we have
been driven to this position by the failure of the quest for certainty but because it resonates with experience better than the alternatives do.

Rorty’s own writing links pragmatism as method to his de-divinized conclusion that there is nothing deep to be said about our idiosyncratic preferences. In other words, he runs two things together that can and ought to be distinguished and separated: namely, the pragmatic method by which he proceeds and the conclusions about the human condition to which he moves. As a result, under Rorty’s influence, pragmatism has come to be associated with what amounts to a Nietzschean view of the world, a democratized and pragmatized Nietzsche, but Nietzsche nonetheless. We do well to separate Rorty’s method from his conclusions, so that, on the one hand, we can affirm the insight of his pragmatist critique of modern reason and also the value of his turn toward a modest pragmatic method, while, on the other hand, questioning his di-divinized conclusions.

As William James pointed out, pragmatism is primarily a critique and a simple method or means for how to get on with thinking about life once we have let go of the modern quest for certainty. In itself, pragmatic method is open. It invites a wide variety of contenders for how to solve puzzles and problems and how to answer questions that range from the most mundane to the most profound. “At the outset,” James reminds us, pragmatism “stands for no particular results.” Though Rorty quite intentionally ran his method together with his own conclusions, we can and should separate Rorty’s conclusions from the pragmatic considerations by which he arrived at those conclusions. When we do so, we can avoid throwing the baby out with the bathwater and can thank Rorty for re-introducing a modest pragmatist method at a time when we most needed it. While others have certainly contributed to this pragmatist renaissance, probably no single individual played a more prominent role in bringing pragmatism back into view in the second half of the twentieth century than Richard Rorty. For this we can give Rorty credit—and give him two cheers, but we can also separate his conclusions from his method and ask whether pragmatic considerations leave us in the absence to which the modern story led or lead us, instead, to deeper understandings of human experience that are available to us still. Though the modern
quest for certainty pushed these deeper understandings aside, pragmatism reopens the conversation and allows us to reconsider.

VI. Conclusion

Popular caricatures notwithstanding, the genre that captures the character of pragmatism best is not the how-to manual or the self-help treatise but rather confessional literature. To trace the consequences of beliefs and to assess their value for life is finally a very personal, living project. Pragmatist writers, therefore, are often engaging not only because they write lucidly and talk about practical matters but also because they write autobiographically and confessionally. Both William James and Richard Rorty are at their best in their most confessional moments, and other pragmatists write in a similar style. The pragmatist is concerned with life: with what works and what does not work, with what is good and what is not. The pragmatist also knows that the best place to carry out this inquiry is in the flow of one’s own life and in conversation with others. Pragmatist writing, then, is deeply personal, conversational, and confessional, and at its best it focuses on the challenges of day-to-day life. In my own case, inquiries and conversations focus on how to think about the challenges of being an understanding and faithful husband, an encouraging father, a thoughtful son, a supportive friend, a hard working and sympathetic colleague, an active and informed citizen, a creator and lover of beauty, a human being who seeks fairness and justice for others and who is ready to make sacrifices for strangers and to love his enemies. More to the point, I seek ways of thinking about these challenges knowing that I face them on a playing field that seems always to be slanted uphill. Most importantly, I seek ways of understanding my experience that will enable me to face these challenges as someone who fails frequently in all these roles. I am embarrassed to admit that simply cultivating an ungrounded strenuous mood and cheering myself on does not do the work that deeper understandings of the human condition do.

Richard Rorty and the pragmatists are right. Pragmatism does offer us a way of getting free from the tiresome swing between dogmatism and skepticism. By beginning with
questions that arise from experience, trying on alternative hypotheses for how best to answer these questions, and then weighing these alternatives against each other by tracing their consequences back into experience, pragmatists deliver us from the frustrations that follow from the dogmatist’s appeal to authority and from the skeptic’s slide into absence. As simple as the pragmatist’s modest means of proceeding with inquiry and argument sounds, it can take us a long way in delivering us from the frustrations that follow, on the one hand, from our failure to attain the unattainable standards of the rationalist quest for certainty and necessity, while also avoiding the frustrations that follow, on the other hand, from attempting to live in the absence created by that failure. Pragmatism also enables us to accept the story of modern reason as our own, appreciate its accomplishments, avoid the cul-de-sac into which that story leads, and still have a means by which to pursue inquiry and argument and arrive at settled beliefs. Freed from the quest for certainty and necessity, we may now consider—and reconsider—ways of thinking about experience that have come and gone over the centuries. We are free to embrace the understandings to which the modern story has led if there are good reasons for doing so, and we are also free to reconsider the deeper ways of thinking that the quest for certainty unfairly pushed aside.