

**ANTI-AUTHORITARIANISM,  
MELIORISM, AND CULTURAL POLITICS:  
ON THE DEWEYAN DEPOSIT IN RORTY'S PRAGMATISM**

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**Introduction**

Placing John Dewey in the narrative of the roots of Richard Rorty's philosophy is not as straightforward an undertaking as one might initially suppose. While it is certainly true that Dewey and Rorty held several philosophical theses in common, of which a shared repudiation of epistemological foundationalism was probably the most noteworthy, the exact nature and extent of their philosophical camaraderie is a question of (sometimes) hot scholarly debate.<sup>1</sup> And while it is also true that Dewey was — at least by Rorty's own frequent insistence — the philosopher who most embodied the role of mentor and forefather to Rorty's exciting brand of neopragmatism, a significant number of Dewey scholars have been stubbornly reluctant to grant the authenticity of such insistences. They see Rorty as having distorted or misread Dewey in a number of crucial ways, as having attributed to him many beliefs and theses that, they say, Dewey never held. Larry Hickman sounds the general complaint when he writes, "Rorty may describe himself as a 'follower' of Dewey...but his Dewey is not one that I am able to recognize." (Hickman 2007, 59) Robert Westbrook,

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<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, I regard the following rundown of some of the theses and ideas Rorty and Dewey held in common as more or less uncontroversial. Both Dewey and Rorty were thoroughgoing anti-foundationalists; both powerfully repudiated a representationalist conception of knowledge and the "epistemology industry" that thrives on it; both men were committed naturalists (though, there are some important differences here in how "naturalism" is understood); both put great stress on the promotion of a decidedly "Darwinian" understanding of things; both were historicists (at times of an admittedly romantic or "Hegelian" stripe), and "public philosophers" on a certain understanding of that term; both were ardent defenders of liberal democracy (yet, here again, there are important differences). One might also mention certain commonalities arising from their shared disinclination toward religion, their distaste of Marxism, and so on.

another of John Dewey's most passionate champions, echoes the complaint:

Having labored hard to figure out what Dewey had to say, we strenuously object when Rorty tries to get him to say things he did not say and that we cannot imagine him saying. Thus, over the last several years historians such as James Kloppenberg and I have found ourselves participating with Rorty in conferences in which our role is to say to him, often repeatedly, 'Gee, that argument that you say that you and Dewey make is very provocative, but Dewey never made it and I do not believe he ever would make it since it is at odds with arguments he did make.'<sup>2</sup>(Westbrook 2005, 175)

On Westbrook's view, Rorty "borrow[s] very selectively from Dewey's philosophy" thus enabling him to "link pragmatism to more fashionable currents of thought and thereby earn Dewey a second look among the fashionably inclined." (Westbrook 2005, xiin9)<sup>3</sup> It might be replied that Rorty borrowed selectively from just about everyone from whom he was a borrower: "selective borrowing" is simply what Rorty did with the philosophers and books he read. Controversially, and to the aggravation of many critics, Rorty bestowed upon an oddly diverse lot of figures the title of honorary Rortyan pragmatist. Rorty became notorious for compiling lengthy litanies of names, each of whom, his readers were assured, advanced more or less the same arguments and held more or less the same positions. As Jay Rosenberg expressed this common criticism, "Rorty is the great *mentioner*. He doesn't just drop names; he sprays them, scatters them, hurls them about." (Rosenberg 1993, 197) Rorty has been accused more than once of misrepresenting the heroes of his canon. That Dewey should be among the misrepresented is neither surprising nor particularly noteworthy.

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<sup>2</sup> "It is important to stress," Westbrook also points out, rightly, "that Rorty's pragmatist lineage, particularly from Dewey, is in important respects uncontested" (Westbrook 2005, 145n17).

<sup>3</sup> It is appropriate to point out that Hickman and Westbrook, while no doubt impatient with aspects of his appropriation of Dewey, have plenty of complimentary things to say about Rorty. Both are quick to admit that reading Rorty is an exciting, worthwhile, and fruitful undertaking. This is an important point to make, I think, because many "Deweyan" critics of Rortyan pragmatism begin and end their praise of Rorty with the colorless observation that Rorty performed a useful service by reigniting an interest in Dewey — by making pragmatism (*semi*) respectable again among professional philosophers.

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The plausibility of Rorty's many proclamations about "We Deweyans" will not be my concern here. It will be enough, I think, to mention in passing that an erroneous extremism can be found on both sides of the question. On the one hand, there is no doubt some validity to the criticism that Rorty habitually overlooked or glossed over many important differences between himself and Dewey. Indeed, one could rather easily get the impression from reading his books and essays that, on Rorty's view, there was in the end extremely little — some of Dewey's occasional and naive "metaphysical" moments notwithstanding<sup>4</sup> — on which the two men did not see eye to eye. And yet, on the other hand, it is also true that many critics over-accentuate the differences and under-appreciate the commonalities. Again, one could easily come away with the false impression from some of the critical literature on Rorty written by self-professed "Deweyans" that the claimed links between Rortyan and Deweyan pragmatism is nothing more than a big mistake, the product of little more than Rorty's delusion. The truth in this case is to be found somewhere in the middle: there *is* an important and unique legacy that Rorty inherits from Dewey, even if Rorty sometimes exaggerated and misrepresented it.

My task in what follows is to explore the uniquely Deweyan deposit in Rorty's philosophy. This undertaking requires attention to the fact that (no less than Wittgenstein or Heidegger) there were two very different and sharply contrastable periods in Richard Rorty's philosophical career. Rorty's thinking is rightly characterized as having undergone a transformative *kehre* sometime in the mid to late 1970's.<sup>5</sup> The "early" Richard Rorty was a "thrusting young analytic

philosopher" (Rorty 1998a, 10n5), a highly professionalized Princeton professor, and the author of tightly argued papers on specialist's topics in the philosophy of mind bearing titles like, "In Defense of Eliminative Materialism," "Incorrigibility as the Mark of the Mental," and "Functionalism, Machines, and Incorrigibility".<sup>6</sup> The early Richard Rorty believed that analytic philosophy as it was then practiced in many of the leading American philosophy departments pointed the way forward and he did his very best to digest as much of it as he could. The "late" Richard Rorty in contrast was a world famous man of letters, someone whose reputation and influence was felt far outside the narrow confines of professional analytic philosophy. Writing on an eclectic variety of topics, in a vivid but accessible prose, this was the Richard Rorty who was labeled by Harold Bloom "the most interesting philosopher in the world".

If it is true then that Richard Rorty had, for lack of another way to put it, two different careers as a professional philosopher, it is also true that Dewey, while scarcely mentioned in the first career, comes to occupy the significant role attributed to him only in the second one.<sup>7</sup> I am suggesting that the moment of Rorty's professional "turn" also happens to be the moment at which Dewey appears on the Rortyan map. Getting clear on the Deweyan deposit in Rorty's thought therefore involves understanding the nature of Rorty's turn, and trying to see more clearly the complicated vision at its center. That vision can be clarified, I think, by attending to the broad, sweeping, cultural-political significance that Rorty claimed to have recognized in Dewey's work. For, despite all their agreements on what Rorty might have called "merely philosophical" matters, Rorty read Dewey as having contributed to "a world-historical change in Humanity's self-image" (Rorty 1998a, 132). On Rorty's view, Dewey's monumental significance involved his contribution to a "long-term attempt to change the rhetoric, the common sense, and the self image of [his] community." (Rorty 1998a, 41) Along with the Romantic poets and Nietzsche, Dewey helped partially fill in a

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<sup>4</sup> Rorty seems to have held that metaphysics formed a rather peripheral and insignificant part of Dewey's thought. We were often told that Dewey was merely getting "sidetracked into doing 'metaphysics'" (Rorty 1982, 82), that such concerns were not central to Dewey's philosophical enterprise. Many readers and interpreters of Dewey beg to differ.

<sup>5</sup> Where precisely to make the "cut" between the early and late periods in Rorty's career is largely a matter of interpretation. I won't weigh in on that largely biographical, and, for my present purposes, relatively unimportant question here. See Gross (2008) for an excellent and detailed biographical account of the early Rorty's growing dissatisfaction with mainstream Anglo-American analytic philosophy in general, and the philosophy department at Princeton more particularly.

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<sup>6</sup> See Rorty 1970a, 1970b and 1972.

<sup>7</sup> As Rorty told the story in an autobiographical essay, he was taught contempt for Deweyan pragmatism while studying at the University of Chicago during the so-called "Hutchins period". "Since Dewey was a hero to all the people among whom I had grown up," he reflected, "scorning Dewey was a convenient form of adolescent revolt." (Rorty 1999, 8-9.)

“startlingly counterintuitive self-image sketched by Darwin” (Rorty 1998a, 41), a self-image, Rorty argued persistently, from whose adoption we would all stand to benefit in the long run.<sup>8</sup>

What seems to me most worth preserving in Dewey's work is his sense of the gradual change in human beings' self-image which has taken place in recorded history — the change from a sense of their dependence upon something antecedently present to a sense of the utopian possibilities of the future, the growth of their ability to mitigate their finitude by a talent for self-creation. Dewey saw religious tolerance, Galileo, Darwin, and (above all) the rise of democratic governments and literate electorates, as central episodes in this story. His own effort to overthrow representationalist doctrines, an effort which embroiled him in endless controversies about objectivity, truth, and relativism, was undertaken because he thought that these doctrines had become impediments to human beings' sense of self reliance. I think that he was right about this, and that his effort is worth continuing. (Rorty 1991, 17)

Three broad and inter-related themes stand out as jointly articulating Rorty's attempt to continue this Deweyan effort: (1) Anti-authoritarianism, for which what we may call Dewey's democratic constructivism serves as a guide, (2) Meliorism, which forms the background against which Dewey's and Rorty's mutual enthusiasm for Darwin is best understood, and (3) Cultural Politics, which can be understood as an instantiation of the future-oriented experimentalism that was central to both philosophers. I will discuss these three themes in turn, while intermittently trying to show how they hang together and mutually reinforce one another.

The impact of Deweyan pragmatism on Rorty is admittedly vast and complex. The emphasis here placed on my three themes should not be understood as an argument against the significance of *other* Deweyan legacies in Rorty's thought. To quickly mention but one that I here overlook: it can be suggested that Dewey (like James) is representative

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<sup>8</sup> Perhaps here is a suitable place to point out that the grand, historical-philosophical significance that Rorty located in Dewey's work strikes many philosophers as wildly implausible. To be sure, even readers sympathetic to Dewey and classical American pragmatism would have been surprised to find Dewey's name mentioned alongside Wittgenstein's and Heidegger's as one of the three most important philosophers of the twentieth century (cf. Rorty 1979, 5).

of a brand of “anti-professionalism” — a certain publicization of academic philosophy — that Rorty sought to emulate. As is well known, Rorty spent much of his time debunking the grand, self-congratulatory aspirations of traditional philosophy (with a capital ‘P’), arguing, as did Dewey before him, that philosophers should dedicate their energy to the “problems of men” not the “problems of philosophers”.<sup>9</sup> While I do not claim that Dewey was the *sole* influence on Rorty vis-à-vis my three themes, I believe that it is in Dewey's bequest that these commitments and the broader hopes and temperament of which they are a significant part come together in their richest and most coherent whole. It is, in short, a distinctly American, secularist, anti-foundationalist, historicist, naturalistic, deeply democratic, quasi-romanticist, future-oriented vision of what we have been, what we are, and what we might yet become.

### 1. Anti-authoritarianism

Rorty famously interpreted Darwin as providing support for a new self-image for humanity, a new way for human beings to think of themselves and their relation to everything else. On Rorty's view, Darwin's theory suggests “[a] picture of humans-as-slightly-more-complicated-animals” (Rorty 1998a, 48). Rorty thought that coming to see ourselves in this way — as differing only in complexity from the rest of the animal kingdom; “clever beasts” in Nietzsche's jargon — would help free us from “the notion that there are nonhuman forces to which human beings should be responsible” (Rorty 1989, 45). The “authoritarian” idea that there *are* such forces, Rorty argued, represents the least common denominator between a belief in god and Platonic metaphysics. Both are manifestations of the idea that “There is [an] authority called Reality before whom we need to bow down.” (Rorty 2000b, 376) Rorty labored long and hard to eschew the spell that that idea (in all its guises) has cast on our thinking. It was his great hope that we might “try

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<sup>9</sup> I have argued elsewhere (cf. Rondel 2011) that the anti-professionalism shared by Dewey and Rorty rears its head in the “lay sermon” quality of their otherwise very different prose styles. The “lay sermon” occupies a middle ground between a large, systematic philosophical theory and a policy recommendation. Both Dewey and Rorty, I argued in that paper, are quite at home in this middle ground.

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to get to the point where we no longer worship *anything*, where we treat *nothing* as a quasi-divinity..." (Rorty 1989, 22) This was also Heidegger's hope (insofar as Heidegger was capable of hoping for anything), in his struggle to overcome metaphysics, to "sing a new song," to repudiate the powerful grip of "onto-theology".<sup>10</sup>

Rorty hoped that this kind of "authoritarianism" would go away. Not because one day we will have discovered its objective falsity (or incoherence or unintelligibility), but because we will stop thinking of it in terms of what William James called a "live, momentous hypothesis" — because one day no one takes it seriously anymore.

[I]n its ideal form, the culture of liberalism would be one...in which no trace of divinity remained, either in the form of a divinized world or a divinized self...The process of de-divinization...would, ideally, culminate in our no longer being able to see any use for the notion that finite, mortal contingently existing human beings might derive the meanings of their lives from anything except other finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings. (Rorty 1989, 44-45)

Rorty was inspired by the possibility that his remote descendants will find it obvious and platitudinous that there is no god; that there is nothing in the universe to which we are answerable save for our fellow human beings. Such descendants would look back at present-day "authoritarians" (religious or philosophical) with the same incredulity as present-day New Englanders think about *their* ancestors who hanged witches. In this possible future, everyone would know — again, as a matter of banal platitude — that there is nothing in the cosmos to hang on to except other human beings (and that we are none the worse for it). All of these fuzzy hopes are manifestations of what Rorty has called his "militant anti-authoritarianism". (Rorty 2000, 376) Expressed generally, it is the hope that one day we shall reject all sources of authority, save for the outcome of free and open human cooperation. Rorty did not

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<sup>10</sup> There are a number of thinkers whose "anti-authoritarian" chorus Rorty claimed to be joining, including but not limited to Nietzsche, Heidegger, Dewey, Foucault, and Habermas. One may well add the later Wittgenstein to the list, insofar as he made respectable the idea that language and meaning are self-enclosed, and repudiated the idea that some language games correspond to something nonhuman better than others.

argue that an anti-authoritarian future of this kind would be more rational, more in accordance with reality, or more faithful to our true nature. It is simply a promising, long-term experiment, a direction in which humanity might, with encouragement, go. Rorty's anti-authoritarianism is rightly understood, not as an attempt to accurately represent reality, but rather as a bold instance of "cultural politics" (about which more in section 3).

Such anti-authoritarianism was at the very heart of Rorty's philosophy. "I think of my work," he once wrote, "as trying to move people away from the notion of being in touch with something big and powerful and non-human." (Rorty 2006a, 49) Anti-authoritarianism was central not only to his more professional views on truth, justification, knowledge, and rationality but also — and more dramatically — to his synoptic retelling of western philosophy's recent history. It is not an embellishment to say that an anti-authoritarian perspective provides the background against which virtually all of Rorty's views are best understood.

John McDowell provides an eloquent "simple outline" of the anti-authoritarian story that was at the center of Rorty's work:

The sense of sin from which Dewey freed himself was a reflection of a religious outlook according to which human beings were called on to humble themselves before a non-human authority. Such a posture is infantile in its submissiveness to something other than ourselves. If human beings are to achieve maturity, they need to follow Dewey in liberating themselves from this sort of religion of abasement before the divine Other. But a humanism that goes no further than that is still incomplete. We need a counterpart secular emancipation as well. In the period in the development of Western culture during which the God who figures in that sort of religion was stricken, so to speak, with his mortal illness, the illness that was going to lead to the demise famously announced by Nietzsche, some European intellectuals found themselves conceiving the secular world, the putative object of everyday and scientific knowledge, in ways that paralleled that humanly immature conception of the divine. This is a secular analog to a religion of abasement, and human maturity requires that we liberate ourselves from it as well as from its religious counterpart...*Full human maturity would require us to acknowledge authority only if the acknowledgement does not involve abasing ourselves before something non-human.* (McDowell 2000, 109-110. My emphasis)

The parallel drawn with religion here is noteworthy, not only because the vocabulary of a “secular analog to a religion of abasement” was one of Rorty’s favorite anti-authoritarian rhetorical strategies, but also because this rhetorical, analogical use of religion sheds light on a strong similarity between the Deweyan and Rortyan brands of anti-authoritarianism. Even if Rorty was, as is undeniable, the much more raucously secularist (and atheist) between them, it was not uncommon for both men to express their hopes for the future in a more or less religious idiom.<sup>11</sup> Paradoxically in Rorty’s case, it was a sort a religious faith in a future that is utterly without religious faith.

My sense of the holy, insofar as I have one, is bound up with the hope that someday, any millennium now, my remote descendants will live in a global civilization in which love is pretty much the only law. In such a society, communication would be domination-free, class and caste would be unknown, hierarchy would be a matter of temporary pragmatic convenience, and power would be entirely at the disposal of the free agreement of a literate and well educated electorate. (Rorty 2005, 40)

This might have been John Dewey’s sense of the holy too, once he gave up on the Congregationalist Christianity in which he was reared in Vermont. Despite his firm secularism, Dewey would very often articulate his defense of democracy in religious language. When he wrote that, “Democracy is a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature.” (Dewey 1993, 242), someone would be forgiven for supposing that when Dewey stopped attending Ann Arbor’s *First Congregational Church* in 1894, democracy assumed the central ethical role once occupied by his Christian belief. Indeed, Alan Ryan is exactly right to suggest that Dewey conceived of democracy “as the modern secular realization of the kingdom of God on earth.” (Ryan 1995, 86)

What I will call Dewey’s democratic constructivism served as a powerful inspiration for Rorty’s “militant anti-authoritarianism”. On Dewey’s view, there is no independent criterion of “right action” to which democracy reliably leads (or, if there is, it is a thin, minimal criterion). The quality of the associations themselves — the fact that

decisions were *made in the right way*, viz., deliberately, experimentally, and democratically — determines the worth of the prescriptions so derived. Just as Rawls understands justice as the outcome of an idealized legislative procedure (The Original Position), Dewey appraises democratic decisions according to the conditions under which they arise. We do not value the answers democracy produces because they are independently valuable answers — as if an authoritarian king or a coin flip might have arrived accidentally at the very same conclusions; as if antecedently sound political outcomes were out there all along, waiting patiently for some *demos* to come along and apprehend them — but rather because they were reached democratically. Dewey celebrated democratic decision-making because it (and it alone) constitutes the social and political expression of a rich community of associated men and women, governing their affairs in relations of mutual respect and equality. Take care of democracy, Dewey might have said (echoing Rorty’s constructivist slogan about truth),<sup>12</sup> and sound political outcomes will take care of themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Dewey’s democratic constructivism and anti-authoritarianism fit comfortably together, as different expressions of the same basic idea. I would suggest that democracy was for Dewey precisely the form anti-authoritarianism takes in social and political life; it is what societies which have outgrown their need for what Nietzsche called “metaphysical comfort” can, at their best, be like. Dewey and Rorty are united, then, in rejecting the idea that we have a duty to anything — Truth, The Will of God, The Moral Law, The Dictates of Reason, and so on<sup>14</sup> —

<sup>12</sup> Viz., “Take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself.” Cf. Rorty 2006a.

<sup>13</sup> See Talisse (2007) for the argument that Deweyan democracy is not a wholly proceduralist ideal, but ethically substantive and “comprehensive” in Rawls’s sense of the term.

<sup>14</sup> Some philosophers like to use capital letters to distinguish between ordinary and philosophical usages of concepts, viz., Truth/truth; Reality/reality; Justice/justice, and so on. Others philosophers think that only frivolous postmodernists make such use of capital letters. I have no strong feelings on the matter. I have used capital letters here if only to remind readers that Rorty was a rather famous practitioner of such capitalization, even applying the technique to “philosophy” itself.

<sup>11</sup> For a useful account of John Dewey’s wrestling with the very idea of authority — metaphysical, religious, philosophical, and political — see Diggins 1994, chapter 5.

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that can supersede our duty to cooperate with one another in reaching free consensus.

Fittingly, Dewey sometimes conceived of this duty in terms of "Creative Democracy" (cf. Dewey 1993, 240-245). He took for granted that, "the task [of democracy] can be accomplished only by inventive effort and creative activity." (Dewey 1993, 241) The concept of creativity brings into focus the fundamental anti-authoritarian insight here. Rather than helping citizens locate what is antecedently valuable in communal life — though it can do that too — democracy is valuable inasmuch as it encourages the creation and articulation of a community's moral identity. It is the social and ethical context within which a community can meaningfully pose questions that arise about its own character and self-image. Democracy, then, provides the moral and political background against which a deliberative community can pose questions like: "Who are we?" and "What shall we become?" It is the social, ethical and political context within which "we, who are also parts of the moving present, [can] create ourselves as we create an unknown future." (Dewey 1993, 88)

Deweyan democracy was for Rorty tantamount to the sort of community that has achieved the "full human maturity" that was at the heart of his anti-authoritarian hopes. Citizens of such a community, Rorty seems to have thought, would all take for granted that there is no authority to be appealed to apart from the free, deliberative consensus of fellow democratic peers. The citizens of such a community would believe that it is "solidarity" rather than "objectivity" that really matters. As Rorty explained in an important essay,

There are two principle ways in which reflective human beings try, by placing their lives in a larger context, to give sense to those lives. The first is by telling the story of their contribution to a community. This community may be the actual historical one in which they live, or another actual one, distant in time or place, or a quite imaginary one, consisting perhaps of a dozen heroes and heroines selected from history or fiction or both. The second way is to describe themselves as standing in immediate relation to a nonhuman reality.... I shall say that stories of the former kind exemplify the desire for solidarity, and that stories of the latter kind exemplify the desire for objectivity. (Rorty 1991, 21, emphasis added)

If someone is challenged about a deeply held belief, Rorty is here saying, she can — beyond succumbing to "helpless passivity or a resort to force" (Rorty 1989, 73) — respond to the challenge in at least one of two ways. On the one hand, she can appeal to what Rorty called "objectivity" (something like "God's Will," or "The Dictates of Reason," or "The Nature of Ultimate Reality," or "The Moral Law") — that is, something big and non-human that makes beliefs of the relevant sort true or false. On the other hand, she can appeal to some community, some *ethnos*, with which, by virtue of the deeply held belief in question she is announcing her solidarity. The first kind of "authoritarian" response appeals to something unconditioned and timeless; the second "anti-authoritarian" response appeals to something human and contingent. As Rorty interpreted it — not implausibly in my opinion — Deweyan democracy is one name for the kind of society that would fully and consistently embody the latter, solidarity-inspired, anti-authoritarian option. "The democratic community of Dewey's dreams," Rorty wrote, "is a community in which everybody thinks that it is human solidarity, rather than knowledge of something not merely human, that really matters. The actually existing approximations to such a fully democratic, fully secular community...seem to me the greatest achievements of our species."<sup>15</sup> (Rorty 1999, 20)

It is here, however, in its unflinching commitment to an increasingly tolerant and humane democratic culture, that Rorty's anti-authoritarianism reveals its distinctly Deweyan (and American) colors. Unlike other (mainly European) anti-authoritarians — Nietzsche, say, or Foucault — the anti-authoritarianism of Dewey and Rorty is of a decidedly "meliorist" stripe. Both see a possible anti-authoritarian future as cause for hope, not nihilism, despair, or cynicism. Both see a possible anti-authoritarian future (melioristically) as one in which greater freedom and a reduction of suffering can, with intelligent effort and luck, be achieved, a future in which men and women can live richer, fuller, more satisfactory lives. For Rorty, it is a future in which the idea that "cruelty is the worst thing we do" is accepted by just about everyone, without thinking that it can be justified by reference to a non-human authority of any kind.

<sup>15</sup> This thought is much more fully developed in Rorty 1998b.

## 2. Meliorism

Meliorism belongs to a worldview for which indeterminacy, uncertainty, and impermanence are the central features. It stems from acceptance of the fact that, “[t]he future is always unpredictable” (Dewey 1993, 87). It is made plausible by the incompleteness and contestation inherent in experience. Recognizing that there shall always be conflicts among our ends, that even our most systematic efforts to resolve such conflicts will invariably generate new ones, and so on — *ad infinitum* — is the first step on the road to pragmatist meliorism.

Accepting that there are no final answers to life’s most pressing questions — no set of habits and beliefs that will end, once and for all, the need for reflection about what we should care about and what we should do — makes attractive what James and Dewey call an ethos of “meliorism”. Meliorism makes no predictions about how the future will unfold; it claims no superior knowledge about the forces that govern human history; it offers no unique insights into the nature of the human condition. It is “not concerned with prophecy but with analysis.” (Dewey 1954, 185) As Dewey says, it is simply the belief “that the specific conditions which exist at one moment, be they comparatively bad or comparatively good, in any event may be bettered.”<sup>16</sup> (Dewey 1959, 178)

Pragmatist meliorism is not just an attitude or disposition — though it is that too. It is also the more concrete thesis that the reformer’s work shall never be complete, that growth, modification, and improvement do not admit of an eschatological terminus. They are their own ends: “The end of human activity is not rest, but rather richer and better human activity.” (Rorty 1991, 39) The meliorism shared by James, Dewey and Rorty is tantamount to the hope “not that the future will conform to a plan, will fulfill an immanent

teleology, but rather that the future will astonish and exhilarate.” (Rorty 1999, 28) What Dewey called “growth” points to nothing save for more growth, a better future, more capacious and humane individual habits and social institutions — a more effective set of tools with which to cope with our problems (or “problematic situations” as Dewey would call them). Meliorists do not believe there is such a thing as “The Good Life for Man,” at least not in the way that Socrates supposed. Nor is there such a thing as “an Ideal Society,” at least not in the way Plato, Augustine, or Marx supposed. There are only “more interesting modes of life” and “better future societies” and so on, forever, until (or unless) our species becomes extinct.<sup>17</sup>

I invoke the notions of “species” and “extinction” here so as to emphasize that pragmatist meliorism and the broader way of thinking of which it is a major part owes much to pragmatism’s encounter with, and reception of, Darwin. Pragmatists take from Darwin the idea that ethical, cultural, and political life be regarded as continuous with biological evolution — that “cultural evolution takes over from biological evolution without a break.” (Rorty 1999, 75) From Darwinism Dewey and Rorty learned that individuals and societies were not distinct from nature, but organic extensions of evolutionary processes. Just as the evolution of species admits of no *telos*, no predetermined *raison d’être* beyond the vague “improved fitness” (and “even more improved fitness” thereafter, and so on), so do our individual and social lives lack a circumscribable terminus, some set of beliefs and practices that would conclusively seal the gap between “the actual good” and “the future better”. It is implausible to suppose, after all, that there is a way of life or a politics or a set of beliefs upon which it would be *impossible* to improve, even if only slightly. This idea is summed up in the Deweyan slogans, to paraphrase: “growth is its own end,” and “there is nothing to which growth is relative except more growth”.

For both Dewey and Rorty the invocation of Darwin here is not incidental. Indeed, as Rorty sketched his version of recent philosophical history, the growing plausibility among

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<sup>16</sup> Unsurprisingly, James’s gloss was similar. “There are unhappy men who think the salvation of the world impossible. Theirs is the doctrine known as pessimism. Optimism in turn would be the doctrine that thinks the world’s salvation inevitable. Midway between the two there stands what may be called the doctrine of meliorism... Meliorism treats salvation as neither necessary nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous and actual conditions of salvation become.” (James 1981, 128)

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<sup>17</sup> See Koopman 2009 for a recent (and splendidly wide-ranging) account of the meliorism shared by James, Dewey, and Rorty.

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philosophers of an open, indeterminate future — their increasing skepticism about what Dewey called “philosophy’s search for the immutable” (Dewey 1960, 26-48), its quest for “a certain finality and foreverness” (Dewey 1954, 194-5) — is largely attributed to “Darwin’s theory... [having] become the common sense of European intellectuals.” (Rorty 1999, 264)

After Darwin ... it became possible to believe that nature is not leading up to anything — that nature has nothing in mind. This idea, in turn, suggested that the difference between animals and humans is not evidence for the existence of an immaterial deity. It suggested further that humans have to dream up the point of human life, and cannot appeal to a nonhuman standard to determine whether they have chosen wisely. The latter suggestion made radical pluralism intellectually viable. For it became possible to think that the meaning of one human life may have little to do with the meaning of any other human life, while being none the worse for that. (Rorty 1999, 266)

This is the kernel of wisdom in the pragmatist maxim, hyperbolically expressed by Rorty, that “there is no such thing as the search for truth, as distinct from the search for happiness.”<sup>18</sup> (Rorty 2000, 376) Since “happiness” is not the sort of thing we should expect to get right once and for all — since it will always be possible and desirable to become happier still — pragmatists are always on the look out for something better.

Nowhere was Rorty’s meliorism more evident than in his writings on private irony and individual self-creation. I would argue that Rortyan “irony” is simply what meliorism looks like when it is pointed inward, when it is applied to the creation of an individual self.<sup>19</sup> Rorty thought that genuine moral progress had been made “since the time, with Hegel, we began to think of self-consciousness as self-creation.” (Rorty 1989, 24) He regarded the need to “create new ways of being human, and to dream up new projects” (Rorty 2001, 154) — a need that blooms as religion and metaphysics wane — as the most uplifting achievement of recent intellectual history. Rorty thought of individuality much as

<sup>18</sup> “Happiness” here means something like: “discovering new ways to get the things we want, and inventing splendid new things to want.”

<sup>19</sup> “Irony isn’t a spiritual path you might pursue. It’s just a matter of sitting loose to one’s present self and hoping that one’s next self will be a bit more interesting.” (Rorty 2006b, 56)

Emerson and Whitman thought of America: a wild frontier out of which endless possibilities flow, “the greatest poem,” a locus of hope. He agreed with Dewey that “Individuality is at first spontaneous and unshaped; it is a potentiality, a capacity of development.” (Dewey 1993, 86)

[N]o past achievement, not Plato’s or even Christ’s, can tell us about the ultimate significance of human life. No such achievement can give us a template on which to model our future. The future will widen endlessly. Experiments with new forms of individual and social life will interact and reinforce one another. Individual life will become unthinkably diverse and social life unthinkably free. The moral we should draw from the European past, and in particular from Christianity, is not instruction about the authority under which we should live, but suggestions about how to make ourselves wonderfully different from anything that has been. (Rorty 1998b, 24)

Rorty’s “liberal ironist” is someone who delights in expanding her ethical horizons by learning about different goods, interesting modes of life, and new ways of being human.<sup>20</sup> Above all, the ironist is consumed by the prospect of making things new, rather than discovering what has always been there. She is forever trying to enlarge her sympathies, extend her loyalties, and seek out new modes of life with which to experiment. She exhibits an almost religious “willingness to refer all questions of ultimate justification to the future, to the substance of things hoped for.” (Rorty 1999, 27) The ideal is to be ironic about one’s self, to take one’s present self lightly (ironically) in the hope of a yet better future self, “to shift attention from the eternal to the future,” to substitute hope for knowledge (Rorty 1999, 29). “[T]here is no center to the self,” Rorty argued in impeccable meliorist fashion, “there are only different ways of weaving new candidates for belief and desire into antecedently existing webs of belief and desire” (Rorty 1989, 83-4), and that the point of being human

<sup>20</sup> Rorty placed much more emphasis on the private, idiosyncratic, inward side of our nature than did Dewey. As Ryan makes the point, “The individual in Dewey always seems to be going outward into the world; ‘the bliss of solitude’ is not a Deweyan thought, even though Wordsworth was one of his favorite poets...It is not only the *vie intérieure* that gets shortchanged; one result of this lack of interest in the private, the intimate, and the sexually charged is that family life gets shortchanged as well...this is rather a loud silence.” (Ryan 1995, 368)

therefore — at least in private<sup>21</sup> — is to weave together the best, most interesting self that one can.

### Cultural Politics

What Rorty called “cultural politics” is a term that covers arguments about what words to use, as well as “projects for getting rid of whole topics of discourse.” (Rorty 2007, 3) Arguments about what words to use were, on Rorty’s view, a crucial element in campaigns for social progress. This is because “rather than... an attempt to grasp intrinsic features of the real...redescription...[is] a tool for social or individual change.”<sup>22</sup> (Rorty 1999, 220) This is the basis for Rorty’s suggestion that certain novels — *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; *Bleak House*; 1984; *Lolita*, and others— can serve as sources of acute moral learning. It is also the basis for his suggestion that young people be encouraged to read the New Testament and the *Communist Manifesto* for the reason that “[they] will be morally better for having done so.” (Rorty 1999, 203) The main reason is that literature and poetry — in Rorty’s capacious sense of those terms — aid in the process of popularizing alternative descriptions, a process which is the driving force both for private projects of self-creation and a more humane (less cruel) public culture. Popularizing alternative descriptions in accordance with

long-term cultural and political hopes is what “cultural politics” is all about.

Something traditionally regarded as a moral abomination can become an object of general satisfaction, or conversely, as a result of the increased popularity of an alternative description of what is happening. Such popularity extends logical space by making descriptions of situations that used to seem crazy seem sane. Once, for example, it would have sounded crazy to describe homosexual sodomy as a touching expression of devotion or to describe a woman manipulating the elements of the Eucharist as a figuration of the relation of the Virgin to her Son. But such descriptions are now acquiring popularity. At most times, it sounds crazy to describe the degradation and extirpation of helpless minorities as a purification of the moral and spiritual life of Europe. But at certain periods and places — under the Inquisition, during the Wars of Religion, under the Nazis — it did not. (Rorty 1998a, 204)

In addition to providing grist for projects of idiosyncratic self-creation, Rorty thought that certain books can help us become less cruel. The latter sort of book, wrote Rorty, “can be divided into (1) books which help us see the effects of social practices and institutions on others and (2) those which help us see the effects of our private idiosyncrasies on others.” (Rorty 1989, 141)

The transformative power of words and language suggests that, “we look at relatively specialized and technical debates between contemporary philosophers in the light of our hopes for cultural change.” (Rorty 2007, x) While most professional philosophers will think this suggestion both reckless and wrongheaded, I think that Rorty’s idea can be made to look more sensible when viewed — as is proper — against the background of the open-ended experimentalism that both he and Dewey shared.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Dewey would surely have been unhappy with Rorty’s bifurcation of public and private. As Westbrook argues, correctly: “For Dewey...democracy was ‘a way of life’ not merely a public way of life...and he would not have accepted Rorty’s contention that ‘there is no way to bring self-creation together with justice at the level of theory’ for that would have required him to give up a principle article of his democratic faith. Rorty contends that the belief that ‘the springs of private fulfillment and of human solidarity are the same’ is a bothersome Platonic or Christian hangover. If so, Dewey suffered from it.” (Westbrook 1991, 541) Nevertheless, Dewey’s commitment to “the chance to become a person” makes it clear that he valued an individual’s ability to be originally self-authoring no less than Rorty did.

<sup>22</sup> This adds plausibility to Christopher Voparil’s observation that Rorty performs a clever refutation of Marx’s Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach, viz., “The philosophers have only interpreted the world...the point, however, is to change it.” According to Voparil, “Rorty’s stance responds to Marx’s thesis by refuting it. Reinterpreting the world, or to use Rorty’s term, redescribing it, contra Marx, is a way of changing it. Redescriptions have the power to change minds because seeing our world in a transformed light is part and parcel of action to transform it.” (Voparil 2006, 183)

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<sup>23</sup> I do not claim that the “experimentalism” that Dewey and Rorty shared was identical. On the contrary, Dewey thought that a commitment to experimentalism required philosophers to become more scientific, whereas Rorty defended his experimentalism — and attributed the same view to Dewey — in terms of something called “pragmatism without method”. Yet the experimental “method” was extremely important for Dewey. “When we say that thinking and beliefs should be experimental, not absolutistic,” Dewey wrote in the *Public and Its Problems*, “we have then in mind a certain logic of method, not, primarily, the carrying on of experimentation like that of laboratories.” (Dewey 1954, 202)

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For pragmatists, fallibilism and experimentalism are mutually enforcing doctrines. The recognition that we may always be wrong (fallibilism) engenders an open-minded, scientific, and deliberate approach to inquiry (experimentalism). Since “no concrete test of what is really true has ever been agreed upon,” since we lack an “infallible signal for knowing whether [a proposition] be truth” (James 2000, 207-8), the most fruitful method of inquiry is to treat beliefs as hypotheses to be tested and assessed in experience. In “The Will to Believe,” James made this connection explicit:

Objective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to play with, but where on this moonlit and dream-visited planet are they found? I am, therefore, myself a complete empiricist as far as my theory of human knowledge goes. I live, to be sure, by the practical faith that we must go on experiencing and thinking over our experience, for only thus can our opinions grow more true; but to hold any one of them — I absolutely do not care which — as if it never could be reinterpretable or corrigible, I believe to be a tremendously mistaken attitude, and I think the whole history of philosophy will bear me out.<sup>24</sup> (James 2000, 207)

If we construe our fallibility in terms of the idea that improved habits and beliefs are always possible and desirable (that is, melioristically), then it is plausible to view inquiry, not as the search for absolute truth or unmovable certainty, but as the generation of hypotheses to be used and tested in projects of reform (cf. Dewey 2000). To “test” in this context does not mean to “look and see”. On the contrary, as Barry Allen writes, “To experiment calls for controlled intervention, contrived observation, deliberately changing the normal conditions of perception.” (Allen 2004, 52) Pragmatist experimentalism’s “essential feature,” according to Dewey, “is to maintain the continuity of knowing with an activity which purposely modifies the environment...to adapt the environment to our needs and to adapt our aims and desires to the situation in which we live.” (Dewey 1997, 344) Otherwise put, it is a matter of deliberately aligning our means with our ends, while also bringing our ends into a more intelligent configuration with the means currently at our disposal. To experiment in the

pragmatist sense, then, is to mediate between what Dewey calls “The Art of Acceptance” and the “Art of Control” (cf. Dewey 1960, 74-107)

If this sounds a lot like the so-called “scientific method,” there is good reason for that: “Pragmatism was born of Peirce’s conviction that...[w]hat is philosophically pregnant in the new science is... the admission of experiment as a way, a method, even the preferable method of knowledge.” (Allen 2004, 52) Pragmatist experimentalism rejects the disinterested “contemplationism” common to Plato and Descartes, as well as the “look and see” empiricisms of Locke and Hume. Instead, pragmatists take inspiration from the experimentalists of the new science — “Galileo, Bacon, Boyle, Hooke, Newton, Franklin, Faraday, Helmholtz, and others.” (Allen 2004, 52) Knowledge is not the fruit of passive contemplation; we don’t get it by pondering axioms in front of the fireplace. The “actual procedures of knowledge,” Dewey wrote, “interpreted after the pattern formed by experimental inquiry, cancel the isolation of knowledge from overt action.” (Dewey 1960, 48) It is worth remembering that the subtitle to Dewey’s most important work about knowledge, *The Quest for Certainty*, is “A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action”.

Experimentalism is not just a corrective to the prevailing biases of epistemologists, not just a repudiation of what Dewey calls the “spectator theory of knowledge”. On the contrary, it is presented (especially by Dewey and Rorty) as a method of inquiry and problem solving, in the widest possible senses of “inquiry” and “problem solving”. Experimentalism goes all the way down; there is nothing that should not be viewed as another experiment, something fixed and permanent, to which experimentalism shall reliably lead us. Experimentalism is not a handy way to arrive at enduring truths. It does not constitute a helpful new answer to an old metaphysical problem — a promising new method with which (at last!) to cut past mere appearances and arrive at Reality. Rather, pragmatist experimentalism is predicated on the assumption that there are no such things as eternal truths or enduring Reality. As Dewey and Rorty understood it, moreover, experimentalism bears on the resolution of every kind of human problem. Whether the issue is delivering electricity to crowded cities,

<sup>24</sup> James does allow that we might be infallible with respect to “abstract propositions of comparison (such as two and two are the same as four)”. Unfortunately, such propositions “tell... us nothing by themselves about concrete reality.” (James 2000, 207)

feeding the hungry, building more fuel-efficient cars, deciding whom to vote for, considering the comparative merits of disparate utopian visions, devising educational strategies for overcoming racism and homophobia, or, as we saw earlier, “trying to move people away from the notion of being in touch with something big and powerful and non-human” (Rorty 2006a, 49), the best way to proceed is experimentally. In this respect, then, ethics, aesthetics, and political philosophy should be no less “experimental” than chemistry, psychology, or biology.

Taking “cultural politics” and experimentalism seriously, as Dewey and Rorty both did, is effectively to locate knowledge and truth in the world of our problems and challenges, align them with our needs, set them within practical human life — ground them in “what works,” as the old slogan has it. It is to construe theory and practice, not as adversarial opposites, but as coalescent, integrated, interdependent domains of intelligent inquiry. In one of pragmatism’s many metaphors of the marketplace, it is to hone in on the “cash-value” of our habits and ideas.

### Conclusion

Anti-authoritarianism, meliorism, and cultural politics buttress one another, standing together in a sort of mutually reinforcing triangulation. Once we abandon the idea that we are answerable to a non-human authority, the appropriate response is neither despair nor cynicism nor optimistic delusion. A universe that is cold, indifferent and godless is to be responded to — melioristically — with the idea that the future *can* (but might not) be made wonderfully better by human hands alone. Neither Dewey nor Rorty thought that a better future was inevitable. Such a future (if we shall have it at all) must be planned for, intelligently organized, deliberately and experimentally cultivated, and this requires, in turn, careful reflection about all sorts of things — and even then, surely, there are no guarantees. The best way to try to address these problems, both Dewey and Rorty agreed, is experimentally. Indeed, it is *the only way left* once one takes seriously the conclusion that “philosophy’s search for the immutable” has been, for better or worse, a fool’s errand.

Despite important dissimilarities that remain between them, and despite Rorty’s occasional misappropriation of Deweyan ideas, it has been my argument here that the Deweyan deposit in Rorty’s pragmatism is best accounted for in terms of the broad, fuzzy, cultural-political vision that was fundamental for both philosophers — a vision that is best described, I have been suggesting, by the thematic trinity of anti-authoritarianism, meliorism, and cultural politics. That fundamental vision strikes me as an uplifting blend of sober inquiry and Romantic dreaming; an inspiring mediation between our inexorable finitude on the one hand, and a boundless future on the other; a uniquely American *mélange* of prudence, intelligence, courage, cooperation, and hope. William James was right: “If death ends all, we cannot meet death better.” (James 2000, 218)<sup>25</sup>

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