RORTY AND JAMES ON IRONY, MORAL COMMITMENT, AND THE ETHICS OF BELIEF

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This paper highlights commonalities in the thought of James and Rorty around a melioristic ethics of belief that foregrounds a distinctly pragmatic interrelation of choice, commitment, and responsibility. Its aim is to develop the combination of epistemic modesty and willingness to listen and learn from others with an account of ethical responsiveness as a signal contribution of their pragmatism. Reading them as philosophers of agency and commitment brings into view shared ethical and epistemological assumptions that have received little attention. Despite differences in perspective, the pluralistic, "unfinished" universe heralded by James and the contingent, linguistically-mediated, endlessly redescribable landscape embraced by Rorty, both authorize a space of freedom that rejects determinism and the philosophically necessary and demands active choice and self-created commitment. Both reject an ethics that appeals to fixed principles; yet they nonetheless combine their fallibilism and pluralism with an account of commitment and responsibility.

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The aim of this paper is to develop the combination of epistemic modesty and willingness to listen and learn from others with an account of ethical responsiveness as a signal contribution of their pragmatism. Both thinkers sought to shatter the self-confident certainty to which we are all given – philosophers, in particular – through an awareness of pluralism and the fallibilism it inspires, and in turn to cultivate a more acute attentiveness to what James called the "cries of the wounded" and the (contingent) obligations that the claims of others place on us. Specifically, I argue that Rortyan irony is best read as a form of antiauthoritarian fallibilism, an instantiation of the pluralist temperament that James most valued. Against certitude and self-righteousness, irony is an inseparable part of their ethical projects, which are built on a recognition of the need in a contingent, pluralistic world for existential commitment, and for the cultivation of responsive sensibilities as a remedy for moral blindness and insensitivity.

Before turning to the issue of irony and the ethics of belief, in the first section I offer a few preliminary remarks to situate my reading of Rorty and James's philosophical affinities around pluralism and contingency. In the second section, I take up the

accounts of ethical commitment and responsiveness that comport with their philosophical positions. In a phrase of Rorty's, they take other human beings seriously – that is, they recognize that others hold values, often different values, as dear to them as ours are to us, and that commensuration cannot be attained without damage for which we must take responsibility. As a result, their respective ethical projects entail not only meliorism and inclusion, but cultivation of awareness and attentiveness toward the suffering of others.

PLURALISM, CONTINGENCY, AND AGENCY
Somewhat surprisingly, the relationship of James and Rorty's philosophies remains relatively unexplored. It has received only a fraction of the attention garnered by Rorty's relation to Dewey, perhaps in part because Rorty gave James little sustained engagement until relatively late in his career (i.e., unlike Deweyans, Jamesians had less time to take offense to his readings). Nevertheless, Rorty's Jamesian tendencies have received occasional recognition, with a few enlightening results.[2] But sustained treatments of their shared commitments are hard to find.

The interpretation on offer here highlights how James's "unfinished" universe and Rorty's recognition of contingency evoke a conception of knowledge in which humans are active participants in the construction of what is right and true. In a word, I read them as philosophers of agency. Their attention to agency is the result of a fundamental shift in orientation that James described as "[t]he attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories', supposed necessities; and of looking toward last things, fruits, consequences, facts."[3] Both James and Rorty eschew appeals to rationality and turn instead to emotions, sentiment, and the imagination. Because they turn away from, in James's words, "bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins,"[4] they also are philosophers of pluralism and irreducible difference, rather than of consensus and commensuration, eschewing any reduction of this heterogeneity to monisms and "The One Right Description" and setting themselves

against dogmatism and authoritarianism, in all their forms. Anything shared names a task, something that must be actively strived for and achieved, rather than posited *a priori* or compelled by ahistorical essences or foundations. In Rorty's parlance, we might call them 'edifying' rather than 'systematic' thinkers.[5]

This shared recognition of a contingent, unfinished universe leads both James and Rorty to a view of truth and knowledge as dynamic. It is standard to recognize James's emphasis on process and flux, on our inability to step out of or transcend the stream of experience, with his pragmatism mediating between old and new resting places. For James, a theory that works must "mediate between all previous truths and certain new experiences." "Truth," he holds, "is *made*, just as health, wealth and strength are made, in the course of experience."[6] Even though he avoided reference to experience, Rorty was no less preoccupied with change, with the growth of knowledge, and with transitioning, if you will.[7] His embrace of the idea that truth is made rather than found is well known. More specifically, what interested Rorty is shifts in linguistic practices or "vocabularies as wholes," moments where heretofore fully functioning vocabularies and assumptions lose their hold on us and we transition from an older, entrenched vocabulary to a new one. Like James, he demonstrated a keen awareness of the pluralism and seemingly endless possibilities of alternative, incommensurable philosophical systems and vocabularies.[8] A central preoccupation of Rorty's pragmatism is these "interesting and important shifts in linguistic behavior" – "changing languages and other social practices" – that result in novel consequences that open up heretofore unglimpsed possibilities.[9] Like James, Rorty was preoccupied with how we move from the old to the new, and from where we derive normative resources to guide us in these transitions to new beliefs that no existing principles or procedures can settle.

To put it in another idiom, James and Rorty were especially attuned to the "abnormal," in Kuhn's sense. That is, they were sensitive to phases of philosophical discourse when appeal to "a set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached on what would settle the issue" is not possible.[10] Normal inquiry, as

Rorty explained in an early essay, "requires common problems and methods, professional and institutional discipline, consensus that certain results have been achieved."[11] What distinguishes abnormal discourse is not only the lack of antecedently agreed upon criteria but, in a Jamesian spirit, the absence of the assumption that philosophy "might some day be *finished*," with all the problems solved.[12] Abnormal discourse is necessarily experimental, seeking to "send the conversation off in new directions" in ways that "may, perhaps, engender new normal discourses, new sciences, new philosophical research programs, and thus new objective truths."[13]

The combination of recognizing contingency and the conditions of pluralism and 'abnormal' inquiry led them to what perhaps put them most at odds with their philosophical brethren – their shared interest in the terrain of human existence where appeals to logic and rationality are no help. As James famously put it in "The Will to Believe," we believe "running ahead of scientific evidence."[14] James's list of the "factors of belief" that comprise our "willing" or "non-intellectual" nature includes by and large the things Rorty signaled in his claims about ethnocentrism and about socialization going "all the way down": the historically contingent factors that condition us and our beliefs, both socially and as individuals. For James, this includes "fear and hope, prejudice and passion, imitation and partisanship, the circumpressure of our caste and set."[15] In the introduction to *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth,* Rorty invokes James and notes that "our acculturation is what makes certain options live, or momentous, or forced, while leaving others dead, or trivial, or optional."[16] For Rorty, "We cannot look back behind the processes of socialization"; "*We* have to start from where *we* are."[17]

The point I wish to emphasize here is that both James and Rorty understood that choice of philosophy and philosophical vocabularies takes place on this same thickly-constituted terrain that admits of no transcendence or even neutral ground. As both thinkers variously attest, the history of philosophy itself is our best evidence that we lack any objective or ahistorical set of principles or universal faculty that would guarantee any singular result.[18] There are no intrinsic properties of ideas capable of settling matters, only

"relations to the individual thinker."[19] Hilary Putnam has observed that while James's discussion of choice in "The Will to Believe" is commonly understood as applying to existential decisions, few have appreciated that James meant it to apply to choice of a philosophy as well.[20]

Not unlike James, Rorty too, from his earliest published essays, had an abiding interest in questions that cannot be decided on logical or intellectual grounds that instead are a matter of choice. Rorty's initial interest in pragmatism centered on its recognition, beginning with Peirce, of how "the appeal to practice transfers the question of the acceptability of a philosophical program out of metaphilosophy and into the realm of moral choice."[21] This recognition of the ineluctability of choice for Rorty generates the need for an ethics – "not a 'substantive' ethics, for it would not tell a man which arguments to propound, but rather a 'formalist' ethics which would tell him what his responsibilities were to any arguments which he found himself propounding."[22] This ethical backdrop and concern with the implications of philosophical vocabulary choice, for both ethics and politics, can be seen running throughout Rorty's work.

THE ETHICS OF BELIEF AND RESPONSIVENESS TO OTHERS

The upshot of this far too brief sketch for my purposes here is how the fundamental shift in orientation away from the deterministic, monistic, and essentialistic to the contingent, plural, and contextual by James and Rorty opens a space of freedom, choice, and responsibility that demands our own willed or self-chosen commitment. Let me now turn more directly to ethics of belief they outline. In addition to foregrounding choice and commitment, my reading identifies three other key areas of shared emphasis: first, a shift to an attitude more suited to a recognition of pluralism and contingency – namely, the antiauthoritarian epistemic modesty or fallibilism that Rorty calls irony; second, an account of pragmatic conceptions of obligation, commitment, and responsibility; and third, developing responsive sensibilities as a remedy for moral

blindness through cultivating particular virtues, like a willingness to learn from others.

Irony as Antiauthoritarian Fallibilism
There are interesting parallels between Rorty's figure of the 'ironist' in *Contingency* and James's figure of the 'pragmatist' in his *Pragmatism* lectures. Each one constitutes an instance of the pragmatic virtues that comport best with a recognition of pluralism and contingency, and the eschewal of absolutes. Rorty counters his ironist to the 'metaphysician'; James's contrasts the pragmatist with the 'rationalist'. At issue here are of course attitudes of orientation and temperaments. Both thinkers understood that in philosophy, as in politics, temperaments matter. To neglect the role of temperament, as James knew, is to ignore "the potentest of all our premises."[23] Rorty often talked about these dimensions in the idiom of "self-image."[24]

As we know, Rorty defines the 'ironist' as "the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance."[25] Rorty's figure of the liberal ironist defines the kind of self-identity most suited to the conception of liberalism his work advances: a "mature (de-scientized, de-philosophized) Enlightenment liberalism."[26] To be a liberal ironist is to "see one's language, one's conscience, one's morality, and one's highest hopes as contingent products, as literalizations of what once were accidentally produced metaphors."[27]

Yet as several commentators have noted, two distinct, sometimes inconsistent, senses of irony can be discerned in the pages of *Contingency:* a moderate version and a more acute, hyper-version.[28] William Curtis captures the difference nicely: "The first sense is the civic virtue that all liberal citizens should ideally possess because it helps them be tolerant, adaptable, and just. The second sense is the more active and radical mental habit that 'ironist intellectuals' exhibit as they challenge the conventional wisdoms of

the cultural domains in which they work."[29] Rorty holds that in his liberal utopia, "ironism, in the relevant sense, is universal."[30] The relevant sense here is the first sense. Citizens would be "commonsense nonmetaphysicians" in the same way that increasing numbers of people are "commonsense nontheists."[31] They recognize the contingency of their own beliefs and values, but lack the kind of radical and continuing doubts that trouble the ironist intellectual.

Distinguishing these two senses of irony as distinct points on a spectrum makes it possible to reconcile the apparently conflicting statements in *Contingency* about the importance of irony for liberal citizens, on the one hand, and claims that irony is "an inherently private matter," on the other.[32] It also clarifies that the "radical and continuing doubts" and fear that one is "a copy or replica" beset ironist intellectuals rather than liberal citizens, who merely are "commonsensically nominalist and historicist" and fallibilist.[33] We will see below how the moderate version of irony opens us up to others and is part of the remedy for overcoming the "blindness" that James diagnosed. What I want to underscore here are the forms of dogmatism and undemocratic authority against which both Rorty and James distinguish their ironic and pluralistic temperaments.

In his essay "Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism," Rorty highlights commonalities between his own views and James's antirepresentationalism, pluralism, and tolerance. He affirms James's "realization that the need for choice between competing representations can be replaced by tolerance for a plurality of non-competing descriptions, descriptions which serve different purposes and which are to be evaluated by reference to their utility in fulfilling these purposes rather than by their 'fit' with the objects being described."[34] Yet he doesn't recognize James's own antiauthoritarianism; instead, Rorty praises Dewey for his greater attentiveness to this issue. On Rorty's view of what James should have said – his later position on James is basically thumbs up for "The Will to Believe" and thumbs down for *The Varieties* – he would have followed Dewey in carrying his democratic commitments through to a complete rejection of nonhuman authority.[35]

Here I think Rorty overlooks a key dimension of James's position in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life." James evidenced his own version of antiauthoritarianism, decrying moralists who function as "pontiffs armed with the temporal power, and having authority in every concrete case of conflict to order which good shall be butchered and which shall be suffered to survive."[36] As Frank Lentricchia has observed in his reading of James, James was "against the political authority which masks itself in rationalist certitude and self-righteousness." That is, the Roman Catholic church, the army, the aristocracy, and the crown – "James named these institutions as the true enemy of his philosophic method."[37] Also like Rorty, James inveighed against the authoritarianism inherent in philosophers unable to put up with a pluralistic moral universe – those who think there must be, among competing ideals, "some which have the more truth or authority; and to these others *ought* to yield, so that system and subordination may reign."[38]

James and Rorty both preached the epistemic modesty inherent in fallibilist, pluralist, and ironist temperaments, and shared an opposition to dogmatism and fanaticism in all their forms. We see this in their paeans to tolerance and warnings that we resist the impulse to judge alien lives and meanings. Recall here the epigraph that opens *Contingency* from Milan Kundera that extols the "imaginative realm of tolerance" where "no one owns the truth and everyone has a right to be understood." James of course asserted this memorably in numerous places: for instance, "No one has insight into all the ideals. No one should presume to judge them off-hand. The pretension to dogmatize about them in each other is the root of most human injustices and cruelties, and the train in human character most likely to make the angels weep."[39] The temperamental desire to "go straight to the way things are" is what in Rorty's view accounts for the way "religion and philosophy have often served as shields for fanaticism and intolerance."[40]

What is fundamental to both James and Rorty is not only their affirmations of temperaments and virtues more conducive to tolerant, pluralistic democratic life, but their efforts to manifest such

changes in their readers by undermining our contrary, nondemocratic habits and commitments. Too often commentators on both thinkers have failed to appreciate these edifying efforts. For instance, when Scott Aikin and Robert Talisse point to the inability of James's perspective to handle scenarios of diametrically-opposed moral commitments that entail the necessary rejection of other moral commitments.[41] It is not that James overlooks this problem but rather that James's pluralism seeks to undermine the assumptions that lead us to view such conflicts as total in the first place. When James cites the example of "ordinary men" "disputing with one another about questions of good and bad," he locates the problem in the assumption that there exists "an abstract moral order in which the objective truth resides."[42] It is precisely this belief in a pre-existing abstract order to which our own ideas conform that causes one to think, in authoritarian fashion, the other person should submit. James notes that these "imperatives" are "tyrannical demands" that result from belief in an abstract casuistic scale: "It is in the nature of these goods to be cruel to their rivals."[43] Similarly, Rorty held that taking the 'intrinsic nature of reality' and representationalist philosophies less seriously would "change our attitudes toward these practices" and take "away a few more excuses for fanaticism and intolerance."[44] As we shall see, against these authoritarian stances both pragmatists advocate Socratic virtues, including "a willingness to talk, to listen to other people, to weigh the consequences of our actions upon other people."[45]

Obligation, Commitment, and Responsibility
I have been arguing that both James and Rorty's philosophical perspectives recognize the adaptability and agency that adhere in the constitution of belief. If truths are plural, as James held, under conditions of pluralism we must choose among alternatives: "sometimes alternative theoretic formulas are equally compatible with all the truths we know, and then we choose between them for subjective reasons."[46] If, as they held, there is no "abstract moral order in which the objective truth resides,"[47] no "order beyond time and chance" to which we can appeal for "a hierarchy of

responsibilities,"[48] the question arises as to how we choose and how we can account for obligation and responsibility in this nominalist and historicist milieu.

As Rorty once responded to a critic who saw an irreconcilable dualism between irony and commitment, the ultimate objection to "commonsensically nominalist and historicist" perspectives like his, and James's, typically is, "can an anti-foundationalist have deep moral commitments?"[49] Rorty and James offer a strikingly similar response. Rorty's is given in the "fundamental premise" of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*: "a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance."[50] For James, a "genuine pragmatist is willing to live on a scheme of uncertified possibilities which he trusts; willing to pay with his own person, if need be, for the realization of the ideals which he frames."[51]

Clearly, both James and Rorty saw moral commitment as possible. An important clue as to how resides in the way both thinkers understood the recognition of contingency and pluralism to authorize forms of freedom and agency, and hence responsibility, that were closed off by the determinism and necessity of absolutist and rationalist systems. Rorty gives a good account of this in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, where he casts traditional, epistemology-centered philosophy as "the attempt to see [patterns of justification] as hooked on to something which *demands* moral commitment—Reality, Truth, Objectivity, Reason."[52] The problem with this view for Rorty is that if we see truth as a matter of necessity and knowledge as "something as ineluctable as being shoved about […] then we should no longer have the responsibility for choice among competing ideas and words, theories and vocabularies."[53] Like James, he calls our attention to questions of choice and responsibility that are "preempted by the tacit and 'self-confident' commitment to the search for objective truth on the subject in question."[54] If we understand knowledge not as the product of agential discursive dealing or coping with contingencies but as "something as ineluctable as being shoved about" it absolves us of

"the responsibility for choice among competing ideas and words, theories and vocabularies."[55] Rorty's embrace of continued conversation, rather than commensuration, as the goal of inquiry for him is a way to preserve the possibility of "confront[ing] something alien which makes it necessary for [us] to choose an attitude toward, or a description of, it."[56]

Like Rorty, James abjures the possibility that some "common essence" could be discovered that would provide a scale capable of ranking all competing goods and guiding our choices.[57] So how are we to choose? James recognizes that philosophers seek "an impartial test" and more or less agrees. But he adds, "That test, however, must be incarnated in the demand of some actually existent person; and how can he pick out the person save by an act in which his own sympathies and prepossessions are implied?"[58] As we know, the cornerstone of James's position in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" is his grounding of moral valuation and obligation in the living demands of concrete beings. "Nothing can be good or right," he tells us, "except so far as some consciousness feels it to be good or thinks it to be right." As a result, "*without a claim actually made by some concrete person there can be no obligation*," and "*there is some obligation wherever this a claim.*"[59]

However, if every *de facto* claim creates an obligation, we still lack a basis for choice and commitment. As Sergio Franzese notes, for James "The feeling of obligation is subjective and common to several objects and goods, and it does not contain in itself criteria for determining which of these values and goods are 'better.'"[60] James's understanding of obligation stops short of compelling or prescribing a response. None of these claims carries any *a priori* authority over the others; for James, all demands ought to be satisfied by virtue of their having emanated from a concrete person. For James, "*the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand.*" The "guiding principle for ethical philosophy (since all demands conjointly cannot be satisfied in this poor world)," he concludes, must then be "simply to satisfy at all times *as many demands as we can.*"[61]

It is here that both James and Rorty move outside of philosophy to an existential grounding of our commitments. One of the reasons why James understood that logic or reason or intelligence is beside the point for these choices is because they require an antecedent existential commitment on the part of the individual. As Putnam explains, on James's view I have to decide in ethics "not whether it is good that someone should do that thing, but whether it is good that I, Hilary Putnam, do that thing."[62] James was acutely aware of the importance of aligning our commitments with our best energies. As he put it, "impulses and imperatives run together, and the same act may seem imperative to one man, but not so to another… So far as I feel anything good I make it so. It is so, for me."[63]

In a very early essay cited above, Rorty similarly held that "one does not simply 'find oneself' propounding philosophical arguments; on the contrary, these arguments are part and parcel of what, at the moment of propounding them, one essentially *is*."[64] The absence of this deeper commitment is exemplified by "sophists" who, because uncommitted to their own arguments in this fundamental way, can simply shrug off all counterarguments. In *Contingency*, Rorty, not unlike James, understands commitment in terms of volitional agency: if "the demands of morality are the demands of a language, and if languages are historical contingencies, rather than attempts to capture the true shape of the world or the self, then to 'stand unflinchingly for one's moral convictions' is a matter of identifying oneself with such a contingency."[65] Citing Nietzsche's powerful "Thus, I willed it," Rorty explains in a rather Jamesian passage:

> Anything from the sound of a word through the color of a leaf to the feel of a piece of skin can, as Freud showed us, serve to dramatize and crystallize a human being's sense of self-identity. For any such thing can play the role in an individual life which philosophers have thought could, or at least should, be played only by things which were universal, common to us all […] Any seemingly random

constellation of such things can set the tone of a life. Any such constellation can set up an unconditional commandment to whose service a life may be devoted – a commandment no less unconditional because it may be intelligible to, at most, only one person.[66]

Here the self-authorized existential commitment that Putnam underscores in James and that Rorty sees in Nietzsche underwrites a conception of contingent ethical responsibility and obligation consistent with their fallibilism and irony, and their ethical pluralism. The measure of the moral philosopher's connection to the moral life resides in the "dumb willingness or unwillingness of their interior characters" to acknowledge, hear, and learn from the "alien demands" subjugated in this moral life to which we turn next.[67]

Moral Blindness and Responsive Sensibilities
We have noted how their respective recognitions of pluralism lead both James and Rorty to advocate tolerance and noninterference with "alien" lives different from our own. This is a common view of James and Rorty – as "hands off," live-and-let-live Millean liberals.[68] At the same time, both go beyond passive tolerance to promote active engagement with others and the cultivation of virtues and habits that facilitate such engagement. Indeed, in this last section I want to make a stronger case for the ethics of attention and responsiveness that is intimately tied to their understanding of a pragmatic orientation than typically is advanced.[69] Here I see their contribution as twofold: not only making us more aware of and responsive to others, but teaching us about the impact of our own (philosophical) self-understandings on others.

Though I don't have room to develop this fully here, by making the suffering of others and what James called "the cries of the wounded" the centerpiece of their ethical projects, James and Rorty offer insights into what recent scholars have called epistemic injustice.[70] In other words, James and Rorty go beyond simply opening us up to the meanings and experiences of others; they grasp

how our own epistemological assumptions and orientations can be responsible for the suffering of others. By shifting our attention away from representationalist views of knowledge and toward our relations to other concrete human beings, they understood that a live interest in the concerns – specifically, the suffering – of others is needed for the self-correction of belief to take place. They advocate not only noticing but taking a sympathetic interest in the lives of others, including in the ways in which our own habits and practices may wrong them.

One of the underappreciated aspects of Rortyan irony is the extent to which the ironist *needs* others. Rorty is quite explicit about this: the ironist "needs as much imaginative acquaintance with alternative final vocabularies as possible, not just for her own edification, but in order to understand the actual and possible humiliation of the people who use alternative final vocabularies."[71] Or, again: "the ironist [..] desperately needs to *talk* to other people, needs this with the same urgency as people need to make love. He needs to do so because only conversation enables him to handle these doubts, to keep himself together, to keep his web of beliefs and desires coherent enough to enable him to act."[72] The moral imperative of Rorty's ironist is "enlarging our acquaintance."[73] The project of making us more aware of forms of cruelty and suffering we may not have noticed is what authorizes Rorty's method of "redescription" or "recontextualization." Alternative perspectives from which to see things are precisely what break the hold of our current, often unquestioned, lenses in order to bring the previously occluded into view.[74]

For James, like Rorty, other-regarding inclinations have both ethical and epistemological significance. As he writes of a pluralistic universe, "Nor can you find any possible ground in such a world for saying that one thinker's opinion is more correct than the other's, or that either has the truer moral sense."[75] As a result, "the question as to which of two conflicting ideals will give the best universe then and there, can be answered by him only through the aid of the experience of other men."[76] For James, even a glimpse into the inner significance of one of these "alien lives" has an immense power:

"the whole scheme of our customary values gets confounded, then our self is riven and its narrow interests fly to pieces, then a new centre and a new perspective must be found."[77]

These efforts nevertheless face the obstacle of the "ancestral blindness" toward others that James so perceptively depicts. The only place in *Contingency* where James receives more than passing mention is an affirmation of the irreducible pluralism of meaning James recognizes after his interaction with the settler responsible for one of the "coves" he observed in the North Carolina mountains in "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings." Rorty likens the Freud-inspired account of the contingency of self-identity he has been elaborating, the idea that any idiosyncratic constellation of things can "set the tone of a life," to overcoming "what William James called 'a certain blindness in human beings.'"[78] Rorty credits James for recognizing that it is possible "to juggle several descriptions of the same event without asking which one was right […] to see a new vocabulary not as something which was supposed to replace all other vocabularies, something which claimed to represent reality, but simply as one more vocabulary, one more human project, one person's chosen metaphoric."[79] For Rorty, as for James, there is no neutral ground, only "different paradigms of humanity" and an "indefinite plurality of standpoints."[80]

That passage marks the extent of the commentary on James in the book. Nonetheless, Rorty remains preoccupied with the form of blindness exemplified in self-absorbed aesthetes like Nabokov's characters Humbert Humbert and Charles Kinbote. Indeed, this comes out most clearly in Rorty's brilliant reading of Nabokov, which can be interpreted as a lesson about James's "cries of the wounded." In discussing *Lolita* Rorty asserts, "the moral is not to keep one's hands off little girls but to notice what one is doing, and in particular to notice what people are saying. For it might turn out, it very often does turn out, that people are trying to tell you that they are suffering."[81]

For both James and Rorty the remedy for blindness is not just sight but sympathetic interest. Certainly noticing details of others' lives that previously had been overlooked is necessary. But we must

be ethically oriented toward the other – open to listening and learning from her – in order to hear the "cries of the wounded." The edifying character of their work is directed toward bring about this shift in our ethical orientation. As we have seen, for James claims made by "concrete" persons create an obligation. Yet he also notes that we will hear the cries of the wounded only "so far as we are just and sympathetic instinctively, and so far as we are open to the voice of complaint."[82]

This project entails the development of what James called "responsive sensibilities" through the cultivation of sympathy toward an increasingly wide circle of human beings that both thinkers advance.[83] The centerpiece of this project, for both James and Rorty, is not only fostering a willingness to learn from others but the epistemic modesty endemic to irony and fallibilism that makes us willing to be instructed by the other. In his early references to ethics in the context of philosophical conversation, Rorty claimed that "Fruitful philosophical controversy is possible only when both sides have the patience to investigate their opponents' criteria of relevance" and intimated the notion of "bilateral responsibility" offered by Henry Johnstone wherein "whoever undertakes to correct or supplement what another asserts in the name of knowledge must be willing to be instructed by that other person."[84]

CONCLUSION
I have argued that we read both James and Rorty as prompting philosophers to recognize our agency, and hence our responsibility for our choices and for taking other human beings and their suffering seriously. Like James, for Rorty this recognition of meaning's contingency and pluralism and openness to endless redescription lead to an ethics of cultivating responsive sensibilities toward others and the details of their lives, as well as the need for a willingness to alter one's own beliefs and to see things from the perspective of others. Their shared eschewal of fixed principles and shift away from rationalism and absolutes can be seen as more than philosophical positions; they are an attempt to foster temperaments and self-images, virtues and habits, that are more conducive to the

pluralistic, fallibilistic, and epistemically-modest practices of a democratic culture and way of life.

Bringing the shared territory occupied by James and Rorty into view has required approaching their writings in a spirit of hermeneutic charity that perhaps risks minimizing points of disagreement. Having hopefully sparked greater appreciation of their philosophical affinities, it now becomes necessary to bring a fresh perspective to areas where their thinking is divergent. Certainly Rorty's impatience with James's mysticism is undeniable; yet they both understand the pragmatic role religion plays in people's lives.[85] There also may be ways that their understandings of truth align more than generally recognized.[86] Against the criticism that Rorty fails where James succeeds in offering "a satisfactory model for both democratic discourse and action,"[87] their ethical and political projects of cultivating democratic dispositions that attune us to others and to the need for action project new avenues for pragmatist political theory. Above all, reorienting ourselves to Rorty and James opens up ways to rethink the most entrenched of recent dualisms: the experience vs. language debate.[88]

In the end, I hope to have demonstrated that their shared preoccupations with the ethics of belief, moral commitment, and responsiveness contain resources that promise to award our own attention. While we may read them both as adhering to what James Campbell has called the "method of inclusion," both James and Rorty understood that this is only possible where an active willingness to listen and to be instructed by the other exists.[89] Few have understood better than James that in pluralistic settings there will always be a "pinch": "The good which we have wounded returns to plague us with interminable crops of consequential damages, compunctions, and regrets."[90] James and Rorty teach us that ethical sensitivity and responsiveness to this damage must be actively cultivated and practiced.

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NOTES

1. James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," 610.

2. One of the most sustained positive engagements is Gavin, et al., "Language and its Discontents," who claim "Rorty is closer to James and

classical pragmatism than some of his commentators seem to suppose" (118). Cormier refers to "Jamesians like Rorty" and offers some helpful moments of side by side discussion in *The Truth is What Works*, 145. Other work that one-sidedly contrasts James and Rorty includes: Cull, "The Betrayal of Pragmatism?"; Koopman, "William James's Politics of Personal Freedom"; Malachuk, "'Loyal to a Dream Country"; Stob, "Pragmatism, Experience, and William James's Politics of Blindness;" and Ward, "Therapy to Apocalypse."

3. James, *Pragmatism*, 510.

4. Ibid., 509.

5. See Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 40. On the distinction between systematic and edifying, see *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature.*

6. See, for instance, Rorty, "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre." For a broader interpretation of the pragmatist tradition via this motif, see Koopman, *Pragmatism as Transition*.

7. James, *Pragmatism*, 580-1.

8. In *Contingency* Rorty establishes this via the idea that we "substitute Freedom rather than Truth as the goal of thinking and of social progress" (xiii). For Rorty there is no possibility of adopting a "metavocabulary which somehow takes account of *all possible* vocabularies," no "convergence toward an already existing Truth," only "an endless process – an endless, proliferating realization of Freedom" (xvi). Truth, in sum, is made rather than discovered, and we are always in the process of making and re-making it, as new beliefs and vocabularies emerge that need to be reconciled with old ones.

9. Rorty, *Contingency*, 47, 7.

10. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 316.

11. Rorty, "Derrida on Language, Being, and Abnormal Philosophy," 679. Kuhn of course is central to the latter third of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* as well.

12. Rorty, "Derrida on Language, Being, and Abnormal Philosophy," 681.

13. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 378-9.

14. James, "The Will to Believe," 731.

15. Ibid., 721.

16. Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth,* 13. His point here is that "no description of how things are from a God's-eye point of view, no skyhook provided by some contemporary or yet-to-be-developed science,

is going to free us from the contingency of having been acculturated as we were" (13). This "inescapable condition" is what Rorty refers to as our ethnocentrism. In fact, being "insufficiently ethnocentric" is the criticism he makes of Peirce's notion of an 'ideal end of inquiry' and Habermas's notion of an 'ideally free community' (23n).

17. Rorty, *Contingency*,198.

18. As James puts it, "the intellect, even with truth directly in its grasp, may have no infallible signal for knowing whether it be truth or no"; "no bell in us tolls to let us know for certain when truth is in our grasp," "The Will to Believe," 726, 734.

19. James, "The Will to Believe," 718.

20. Putnam, "A Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy," 235.

21. Rorty, "The Limits of Reductionism," 111. For an in-depth discussion of this early work and its sustained influence on Rorty's positions, see Voparil, "Taking Other Human Beings Seriously."

22. Rorty, "Recent Metaphilosophy," 315.

23. James, *Pragmatism*, 489.

24. See, for example, "Ethics Without Principles," in *Philosophy and Social Hope*.

25. Rorty, *Contingency*, xv.

26. Ibid., 57.

27. Ibid., 61.

28. Pettegrew describes these as the "moderate" and "romantic" or "pure" versions of irony, and seeks to "restore 'irony' as a key word in the pragmatist lexicon," "Lives of Irony," 107, 104. He frames Bourne's more sociable conception of irony, which links the person with the political, rather than privatizes it, as a "corrective" to Rorty, though he notes that Rorty's work in the *Achieving Our Country* period serves as its own corrective to the detached romantic solitude of *Contingency*. See also the discussion of irony in Curtis, *Defending Rorty*.

29. Curtis, *Defending Rorty*, 93.

30. Rorty, *Contingency*, xv.

31. Ibid., 87

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., 43, 73, 87.

34. Rorty, "Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism," 262.

35. See Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 34-38.

36. James, "The Moral Philosopher," 623.

37. Lentricchia, "On the Ideologies of Poetic Modernism," 230, 242.

38. James, "The Moral Philosopher," 615-6.
39. James, "What Makes a Life Significant," 645.
40. Rorty, "Redemption from Egotism," 395.
41. Aikin and Talisse, "Three Challenges to Jamesian Ethics,*"* 8.
42. James, "The Moral Philosopher," 616.
43. Ibid., 627.
44. Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, 83.
45. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 172.
46. James, *Pragmatism*, 581.
47. James, "The Moral Philosopher," 616.
48. Rorty, *Contingency*, xv.
49. Rorty, "Response to John Horton," 31.
50. Rorty, *Contingency*, 189.
51. James, *Pragmatism*, 618.
52. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 385. Emphasis added.
53. Ibid., 375-6.
54. Ibid., 382.
55. Ibid., 376.
56. Ibid., 315.
57. James leaves no doubt about this: "No single abstract principle can be so used as to yield to the philosopher anything like a scientifically accurate and genuinely useful casuistic scale," "The Moral Philosopher," 621.
58. James, "The Moral Philosopher," 620.
59. Ibid., 616-7.
60. Franzese, *The Ethics of Energy*, 30.
61. James, "The Moral Philosopher," 621, 623.
62. Putnam, "A Reconsideration," 237. He adds, "The answer to that question cannot be a matter of well-established scientific fact, no matter how generously 'scientific' is defined."
63. James, qtd. in Franzese, *The Ethics of Energy*, 12-13.
64. Rorty, "Recent Metaphilosophy," 315.
65. Rorty, *Contingency*, 60.
66. Ibid., 37.
67. James, "On a Certain Blindness," 629, 623.
68. The basis for this reading of James is likely his "Hands off" admonition at the end of "On a Certain Blindness," 645. Those who read James's ethics as a relative of Mill's include Aiken, "William James as a Moral and Social Philosopher"; Roth, *Freedom and the Moral Life*; and

Fiala, "Toleration and Pragmatism." Edmonds discusses this reading of James as advocating "a passive ethics of tolerance" in order to counter it, "Toward an Ethics of the Encounter," 134; as does Throntveit, "William James's Ethical Republic;" and Smith, "William James and the Politics of Moral Conflict." Somewhere in between is Miller's reading of James as emphasizing mutual respect and "tolerance for the causes of others," *Democratic Temperament,* 5. Cull reads Rorty in this light as permitting conflicting opinions to "be simply ignored," "The Betrayal of Pragmatism?," 93. See also Mara and Dovi, "Mill, Nietzsche, and the Identity of Postmodern Liberalism." Some of Rorty's own formulations lend credence to this view; cf. *Contingency,* 63; and Voparil, *Richard Rorty,* chapter 5. For a broader view of Rorty's stance, see Voparil, "Taking Other Human Beings Seriously;" and Curtis, *Defending Rorty*, chapter 2.

69. Edmonds convincingly argues that the implications of James's stance in "On a Certain Blindness" extend beyond the passive ethics of tolerance the essay endorses to what Edmonds calls an "ethics of the encounter." See Edmonds, "Toward an Ethics of the Encounter." As I intimate here, James's attentiveness to "the cries of the wounded" portends an ethics that goes beyond even mere encounter. For an account of Rorty's move beyond mere tolerance, see Voparil, "Taking Other Human Beings Seriously."

70. See, for example, Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*; and Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*. We can identify in James and Rorty a heightened awareness of what Medina has called the "cognitive-affective functioning" that sustains oppressive normative structures, like the philosophical absolutisms and monistic epistemologies they both critiqued. At the core of the idea of epistemic injustice are the forms of inattentiveness and insensitivity that most preoccupied James and Rorty.

71. Rorty, *Contingency*, 92.

72. Ibid., 186.

73. Ibid., 80. Rorty tends to emphasize this imperative in the context of books – "every book likely to provide candidates for a person's moral vocabulary" – than other people, though Rorty certainly does not leave out the latter: Ironists "reweave their webs of belief and desire in light of whatever new people and books they happen to encounter," Ibid., 80–85.

74. See ibid., 173.

75. James, "The Moral Philosopher," 615.

76. Ibid., 625. Lentricchia highlights this as "a complex Jamesian imperative which urges us to seek and to preserve radical difference," "On the Ideologies of Poetic Modernism," 248.

77. James, "On a Certain Blindness," 634.

78. Rorty, *Contingency*, 37-8.

79. Ibid., 39.

80. Ibid., 51.

81. Ibid., 164.

82. James, "The Moral Philosopher," 626. Pettegrew describes James's "sympathetic interest" as a "conflation of individual comprehension of truth with knowledge of and through others," "Lives of Irony," 118. See also James, "On a Certain Blindness," 645.

83. James, "On a Certain Blindness," 642. James makes a plea "to enlarge his sympathetic insight into fellow-lives," "What Makes a Life Significant," 655. See also Rorty's project of expanding our loyalties in "Justice as a Larger Loyalty," in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*. For an account that highlights the importance of Jamesian responsive sensibilities in the context of deliberation, see Smith, "Communication and Conviction."

84. Rorty, "Recent Metaphilosophy," 318; Johnstone, *Philosophy and Argument*, 133–4. Johnstone's is one of two books Rorty reviews in this essay.

85. See Curtis, *Defending Rorty*, chapter 5; and Malachuk, "Loyal to a Dream Country." If James was more attentive to the psychological side of religious belief, Rorty came to appreciate the social and political benefits. See Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square."

86. Cormier makes some suggestive remarks along these lines: see *The Truth is What Works*, 25–6, 76, 145, 158. Cf. Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 6–7.

87. Throntveit, "William James's Ethical Republic," 276.

88. See Koopman, "Language is a Form of Experience;" and Gavin, et al., "Language and its Discontents."

89. See Campbell, "William James and the Ethics of Fulfillment," 228.

90. James, "The Moral Philosopher," 626-7.