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Stances and Skills to in-Habit the World: Pragmatic Agnosticisms and Religion

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Abstract: This paper explores two routes along which a pragmatic philosophical approach can contribute to reflections on agnosticism. The first of these approaches is developed in dialogue with William James, and it is oriented towards the needs and obligations of individuals and the extent to which agnosticism affects our abilities to lead strenuous lives. The second is developed in dialogue with Richard Rorty. It is oriented towards how agnosticisms can be adopted within particular vocabularies vis-a-vis other vocabularies as a pragmatically helpful strategy or skill. I discuss the extent to which these can contribute to philosophical reflection on agnosticism and propose that they show that the agnosticism debate would benefit from a broadened focus where epistemic and pragmatic considerations are better integrated than presently. This would enable us to discuss different types of agnosticism that come to the fore in various contexts and whether they prevent us or allow us to better handle concrete problems in our interactions with the world.

Keywords: pragmatism; agnosticism; William James; Richard Rorty

1. Introduction: Agnosticism from a Pragmatic Point of View

This paper aims to offer a pragmatic contribution to the contemporary, and mainly epistemically oriented, reflections on agnosticism in the philosophy of religion. I will develop this contribution by exploring, from a pragmatic point of view, the potential pragmatic value(s) of various forms of agnosticism both at an individual and a social level. Pragmatists typically take genuine beliefs to have a close connection to action via the sets of habits on which human beings draw in their interactions with the environment that they *in-habit*, as John Dewey puts it. Charles Sanders Peirce even refers to beliefs as “habits of action” [1,2]. Given that emphasis, agnosticism may look rather uninteresting: are there any pragmatically interesting differences between an absence of beliefs about God’s existence and, for instance, atheism?

The short pragmatic answer is that this depends on the practical differences that different forms of agnosticism have for our efforts to in-habit the world as individuals and as part of various communities. Instead of a blanket verdict on agnosticism, we need to discern the different practical consequences agnosticism may have depending on context and which form of agnosticism we are talking about.

I will develop this short answer along two routes—routes that David Rondel captures well (albeit for other purposes) in his identification of more individually and more socially/culturally oriented strands of pragmatist philosophy.¹ I will suggest that these approaches open for two complementary ways to approach agnosticism pragmatically, where both, however, have in common that they concentrate on the pragmatic consequences—both positive and negative—of various types of agnosticism and that focusing only on one of them oversimplifies the pragmatic approach. Hence, we need to look at both and relate them to each other.

Rondel takes William James as a prime example of a philosopher who understands and deals with philosophical problems as they pertain to individuals—and here, the interesting question concerns which practical differences various religious, secular, and agnostic *stances*



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make in our individual lives. Dewey and Richard Rorty are examples of philosophers who primarily approach philosophical problems as they play out in social life, politics, and culture (there will, of course, always be overlaps between the individual and the communal, but the distinction is helpful for my purposes here) [3] (p. 75ff). I suggest that agnosticism is *also* interesting as a contextually applied *skill* we can use in certain situations and for specific purposes. Here, too, the questions of when and where it should be applied are about the consequences if we integrate it into our habits of action, thought, and judgment in particular practices devoted to specific problems.

To do justice to both these approaches, I shall articulate, in dialogue with James' and Rorty's work, both a more individually oriented and a more communally oriented pragmatic approach to agnosticism. I shall call them *Jamesian* and *Rortian* to emphasize that my aim is not to give complete overviews of James' and Rorty's thought and that I shall take the liberty to integrate points from other thinkers in order—at least in my judgment—to clarify and improve the contributions they offer to reflections on agnosticism and its uses.

2. Agnosticism

In contemporary philosophy, agnosticism is often defined as an attitude toward propositions concerning God's existence, "an answer or actually a failure to answer the ontological question of whether or not there exists at least one god" [4] (p. 2). Although this is an ontological question, the follow-up questions to which it leads regarding *whether* and *how* we can answer it are, Paul Draper emphasizes, epistemological. He takes agnosticism to offer a negative response to the "epistemological question of whether or not theism or atheism is known or has some other sort of positive epistemic status like being justified, rational, reasonable, or probable" [5].

I shall take these two features as capturing the main features of how philosophers tend to understand and approach agnosticism. Agnostics typically hesitate to affirm or reject certain *propositions* about God, and—as Francis Jonbäck points out—at least analytically oriented philosophers take the primary rationale for that hesitation to be *epistemological*. If we adopt a point of view where the epistemic goal of "believing only true propositions" has centre stage, there is just too little evidence to endorse either theism or atheism [4] (p. 2). Agnosticism is then an epistemic judgment of the available epistemic evidence—and Jonbäck suggests that as such, it should function as a "default stance" within the theism/atheism debate—as in any debate between two competing alternatives [4] (p. 8ff).

Pragmatists often caution that considering epistemological investigations as distinct from practical investigations and adjustments can create unhelpful divisions between theory and practice. The epistemic goal to believe true propositions becomes a separate goal isolated from the practical goals of in-habiting the world, though they are, in fact, strongly related. Nicholas Rescher's method pragmatism, to take an example, emphasizes that epistemological standards and norms are most fruitfully comprehended as emerging from and being selected on pragmatic grounds—they have proven helpful for our purposes [6]. There are situations where it is essential to distinguish between endorsing a proposition because it appears to be true and endorsing it because we want it to be true. However, that distinction does *not* resemble the distinction between practical and pragmatic purposes: wishful thinking is, in fact, just as problematic in handling practical problems as in theoretical inquiries.

Methodologically, this means that pragmatists encourage us to integrate the results of various epistemological inquiries, such as those at the centre of the current agnosticism debate, with more practically oriented inquiries about the pragmatic consequences arising within our different efforts to in-habit the world. Pragmatic evaluations are, hence, not in competition with epistemic assessment; instead, they are intimately related and can be integrated in different ways and contexts. Agnosticism is among the possible results of such an integrated consideration, but then, it needs to be understood as concerned with more things than just the lack of decisive epistemic reasons for either theism or atheism. I develop this point with particular regard to individual and communal contexts below.

3. The Individual Predicament and the Will to Believe

The best-known pragmatic discussion of agnosticism is, without a doubt, *The Will to Believe*, in which James famously argues against a form of agnosticism based on the demand that we should only believe propositions for which we have sufficient evidence by asserting each *individual's* right to let their “passional nature”—that is, personal needs and hopes—determine what to choose in certain situations in which the evidence does not clearly favour either side (and nothing indicates that more evidence is forthcoming any time soon). He writes the following:

Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, “Do not decide, but leave the question open”, is itself a passional decision—just like deciding yes or no,—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth. (James’ emphasis) [7] (p. 20)

I shall get back to the type of agnosticism that he attacks and how to evaluate that attack shortly; first, I will provide some clarifications. One thing that is not always noted is that James intends his essay for a particular audience, one with an ambivalent relationship with religious commitments. In the preface, he writes: “Academic audiences, fed already on science, have a very different need [than a conservative Christian audience]. Paralysis of their native capacity for faith and timorous *abulia* in the religious field are their special forms of mental weakness” [7] (p. 7). Conservative religious audiences need, instead, the opposite: to have their faith “broken up and ventilated”; so, he addresses problems that arise for persons set in a rather particular context [7] (p. 7).

Another critical point is that James limits the right’s scope significantly by saying that the choice *cannot* by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds (I shall assume that this covers the “standard” methods of settling matters epistemically on which we draw in everyday life but also scientific and philosophical inquiry). The question of who murdered the Swedish prime minister Olof Palme in 1986 is thus *not* among the questions that we can answer by making a passional decision, even though no murderer has ever been identified and nothing indicates that the police are making any progress. Neither are questions such as whether human-caused emissions of CO₂ are changing the climate or whether to adopt the law of non-contradiction. Note, however, that “decided” is used in a rather strict sense here: we need not assume that evidence of various types has *no* relevance at all; it suffices that it does not favour either side (and that we are not likely to get much more substantive evidence soon).

James adds further qualifications for when the will to believe can come into play. For one thing, the situation in question must contain at least two options that are *live* for the subject, where “liveness” refers to whether we can see ourselves endorsing a particular option at all [7] (p. 14). If there is only one live option, then our choice is already determined, and if there are no live options, we will not be able to bring ourselves to commit to any of the alternatives, no matter what we decide. Liveness strongly connects to our standing vis-à-vis evidence—a bedridden person with rheumatic fever cannot will themselves out of the predicament by telling themselves that they are perfectly healthy—but it is not only about that. It also has the practical dimension that we can see ourselves living out a specific “option”—be it religious or of some other kind. James takes the belief in the (possible) return of the Mahdi as an example: for his nineteenth-century North American and relatively homogeneously Christian/agnostic/atheist audience, this is a dead hypothesis, no matter how ingeniously someone might argue for it.² Again, we see the strong connection between liveness and our “willingness to act” [7] (p. 14).

James emphasizes, in addition, that the choice should be such that something is at stake in it—that it is *momentous*, as James puts it—and that it is *forced* in the sense that the choice cannot be postponed indefinitely. Belief in the existence (or non-existence) of Russell’s famous orbiting teapot is hence *not* a candidate for choices based on the will to believe because neither alternative affects our lives in any way. James exemplifies this with

an offer to join Fridtjof Nansen's polar expedition: whether you say yes or no, the answer will significantly affect your future life (for good or ill). It is an offer you almost certainly get only once in a lifetime, and if you hesitate for too long, the offer will have gone to someone else. Not choosing is, hence, itself, a choice *not* to join the expedition [7] (p. 15).

4. The Jamesian Trouble with Agnosticism

Now that we have a clearer view of James' thesis in "*The Will to Believe*", I want to suggest that the *problem* he attempts to solve is with an agnosticism which takes epistemological considerations to be so central that even in cases where the evidence is, in principle, insufficient taken by itself, we should let that insufficiency dictate the way we in-habit the world. This, he suggests, deprives many people of significant energizing practical resources that they no longer feel entitled to draw on in their lives. Such a comprehensive agnosticism, as I call it here, is someone's stance³ toward an entire religious tradition (or secular counterpart) that is the only or at least the most live option among religious traditions for them. Central to that stance is that they *abstain* from drawing on that religious tradition or secular counterpart. This agnosticism is comprehensive in two further senses. First, agnostics of this type do not resort to some *other* religious tradition (or secular counterpart) instead. Second, it significantly affects how you practically in-habit the world compared to if you had adopted another, more accepting, stance. Religious beliefs (and secular counterparts), if seriously held, strongly affect how you in-habit the world. A comprehensive agnosticism is, hence, a stance that causes us to leave these potentially transforming resources unexplored.

In an interesting comparison between James and Richard Dawkins, Scot Yoder points out that both thinkers share a vital presupposition: that agnosticism itself cannot be a *pragmatically* valuable asset in our attempts to in-habit the world. It becomes either unbelief in disguise (and thus helps itself to atheistic existential resources and should acknowledge that fact) or it peters out in a paralysing stance devoid of resources. I find Yoder's critique both fair and interesting and worth pursuing further. Pragmatists ought to consider more closely the potential positive consequences of agnosticism for *certain* human beings' life orientations (without forgetting the negative that may arise for others).

James is well aware that *some* people are perfectly content with agnosticism. However, self-proclaimed agnostics such as W. K. Clifford and Aldous Huxley do not, he holds, forfeit any energizing resources from some religious tradition by adopting an agnostic stance. For them, there are no live religious options to start with, and as I understand James, this means that they draw on other, thoroughly secular, instead [7] (pp. 21–22). People who *do* need those energizing resources suffer, however, adverse consequences: they are paralysed by an epistemically motivated agnosticism that, in their lives, takes a comprehensive form. To see more clearly why James is sceptical of agnosticism, we need to consider more closely the pragmatic philosophical anthropology which underlies his thought. There are, according to James, three factors that make philosophical systems lose their appeal. He writes the following:

Either it has dropped out of its net some of our impressions of sense—what we call the facts of nature—or it has left the theoretic and defining department with a lot of inconsistencies and unmediated transitions on its hands; or else, finally, it has left some one or more of our fundamental active and emotional powers with no object outside of themselves to react-on or to live for. [7] (p. 100)

To capture this practice-oriented philosophical anthropology in relation to religious commitments, I have suggested elsewhere that we can understand religious traditions (and their secular counterparts; more on that below) as transmitting, in stories, myths, artistic expressions, rituals, architecture, and so on, a host of *paradigmatic responses*. Adherents strive, in different ways, to integrate these paradigmatic responses into their *life orientations*—that is, the set of habits by which they in-habit the world. Life orientations transform our lives quite concretely by transforming the habits on which we draw in our interactions with the world—particularly concerning its existential dimensions [9] (Chapter 2).

The negative Jamesian evaluation of agnosticism thus rests on the idea that, for many (most?) people, agnosticism transmits no paradigmatic responses for us to either adopt or reject. Agnostics are left devoid of the energizing resources and paradigmatic responses that could enable them to lead strenuous lives, lives in which they could endure suffering and setbacks and still carry on [10] (p. 151).

James takes the third factor above to particularly favour *religious* life orientations and the will to believe to entitle those who need a religious “object” like God to adopt a religious life orientation despite the lack of sufficient intellectual grounds. This focus on religion is understandable, given James’ audience and the times he lived. Still, it becomes problematic, Yoder emphasizes, if it is unreflectively passed on in pragmatist thought. There is a range of other “objects” besides gods—such as gender equality, the nation, anti-discrimination, or the classless society—that we can both fight against and live for. Hence, the religious option should not be seen as a forced choice because, at least for some people, other resources can play a similar role [10] (pp. 152–153). The energies James talks about here are, after all, energies that arise within *us* in our encounters with a world of problems, ideals, and opportunities.

5. Passivity as Constitutive of a Life Orientation

The Jamesian concern here is thus that agnosticism that permeates our life orientations risks passivizing us. That is undoubtedly a *pragmatic* shortcoming of any life orientation, but it is also, I would add, an *epistemic* problem. To see this, let us turn to an example from fiction (which is not itself explicitly about an agnostic) of a kind of passivity-constituted life orientation that, from a Jamesian point of view, is problematic: Albert Camus’ protagonist Meursault in *The Stranger (L’Étranger)* [11].

Camus’ novel portrays a person who, after a series of events involving losing his mother, commits a murder and is sentenced to death. Several commentators point out that the death sentence is not so closely related to the murder itself, and the novel indicates that it would have been relatively easy for Meursault to get a milder or even no sentence. (Here, the colonial background of a Frenchman being tried by his colonizing countrymen for murdering an “Arab” in the French colony Algeria is the dark main reason that such a harsh penalty is so unlikely.) It is his behaviour after his mother’s death on which the prosecutor concentrates.

Matthew Bowker suggests that the court’s and the public’s outrage concern intertwined features of Meursault’s life, or ways of in-habiting the world, to use my terminology. The protagonist just drifts along with the big, small, good, or bad things that happen to him: his mother passing away, spending time with his girlfriend, working, helping a friend who abuses his mistress, killing, and so on. He also yields to impulses without reflection and shows no interest in explaining or justifying himself to others [12] (pp. 211–212). George Heffernan notes the following: “Meursault is reflective enough to know the difference between right and wrong, but not resolute enough to conform his actions to right” [13] (p. 82). We could add to Heffernan’s comment that Meursault is in no way *concerned* about this lack of orientation or resolution. The stranger is a stranger not just to others but even to himself [14].

I find these “estrangements” pragmatically interesting. James’ main argument in “*The Will to Believe*” concerns itself mainly with one pragmatic and epistemic loss such estrangement may bring: the lack of commitment (in the agnosticism of which James is critical) leads to a risk of “losing truth”. Practically, this means losing the opportunity to improve one’s way of in-habiting the world by acknowledging particular objects to react upon and live for—and integrating new habits of action, thought, and judgment. Practice is not a “side effect” of our life orientations: it is an indispensable part of a whole by which we in-habit the world.

This implies that from a pragmatic point of view, immunization also incurs a *second* loss: you are robbed of opportunities to discover, in practice, both advantages and problems in your current habits of action, thought, and judgment. Meursault’s way of drifting

through his life indicates that “losing truth” also means losing the opportunity to discover that we are mistaken in some respects.

Why is that? Well, a pragmatic philosophical anthropology typically seeks to balance two pragmatic values: a general anti-scepticism on the one hand and fallibilism on the other. Anti-scepticism allows us to in-habit the world confidently, even in ways that do not meet Clifford’s demands. There is simply no general obligation—epistemic or otherwise—to justify our ways of in-habiting the world as long as no problems arise within or from them.

Such confidence, however, presupposes a fallibilistic attitude—that is, that we are prepared to revise our habits of action, thought, and inquiry, even radically so, once we encounter problems. Fanatics, be they religious or secular, immunize their life orientations by helping themselves to anti-scepticism with regard to their central elements while dismissing fallibilism. Meursault’s life orientation is immunized (and thus infallible) in a different sense: events and experiences pass by without reflection or even attention, which means that *nothing* speaks either for or against it. It would be an overstatement to say that he *refuses* to take things into account and to learn from them: that would have amounted to at least one stand (and turned him in the direction of a fanatic).

The emphasis of pragmatic philosophical anthropology on the relations between practice and epistemology suggests that a life orientation such as Meursault’s is inevitably both practically *and* epistemologically problematic. Meursault effectively closes himself off from the best sources of novelty and challenge that we have, namely, action and experience. This means that he can neither develop his life orientation in what he takes to be more promising directions nor discover that there is something wrong with it. A Jamesian talk of “losing truth” is thus about more than that we may happen to chance upon the truth—we will be in a much better position to make considered judgments about when we appear to be in the right and in the wrong. The concrete and practical risk of losing truth is essential for our ability confidently to in-habit the world and for detecting problems within our life orientations.

Pragmatically speaking, Meursault’s “agnostic” life orientation is quite problematic. However, as Yoder points out, there are no strong reasons to believe that agnosticism must take such a comprehensive and paralysing form or that only *agnosticism* can have such adverse effects on our life orientations. Let us look at some life orientations that arguably qualify as agnostic without falling into anything resembling Meursault’s passive stance toward life.

6. Alternative Agnostic Life Orientations and What We Can Say Pragmatically about Them

Yoder’s critical points above suggest that we should consider whether there are forms of agnosticism that can avoid the passivizing comprehensive form exemplified by Meursault. In the contemporary literature on agnosticism, one common approach that, without making much mention of James, lies rather or even very close to a Jamesian approach is to argue that it is possible to remain epistemologically agnostic while adopting other elements of a religious life orientation. Paul Draper refers to people adopting this approach as *practicing agnostics* [15]. Practicing agnostics integrate specific religious paradigmatic responses into their habits of action, thought, and judgment but do not intend that this should lead to a type of “Pascalian” conversion toward more substantial religious commitments: they are content with remaining undecided while they, to some extent, lead a religious life. Emil Nielsen and Michael Mørch develop a similar approach by arguing that longing or hoping that there is a God may be sufficient to awaken the emotions and trust necessary for a religious (Christian) life form. Hence, epistemic agnosticism suffices for a religious life that can serve other important functions in a person’s life [16] (p. 8f). Gary Gutting, finally, emphasizes that at least for more philosophically oriented believers, religious belief can have the virtue of producing *understanding*, a “fruitful way of thinking about things, without implying that there are no alternative ways of thinking (both theistic and nontheistic) that would be equally fruitful” [17] (p. 63). Each thus emphasizes that

even with an agnostic stance, it is possible to access *some* energizing religious resources that transform their ways of in-habiting the world in *some* respects while retaining a mainly agnostic stance in others. All the above approaches strongly tie practicing agnostics to a single religious tradition (Christianity), but which one that will be depends, of course, on what each of us takes to be the most live option.

A Jamesian approach need not quarrel with any of these approaches, but I believe two things are worth emphasizing, nevertheless. First, the view that the alternative to a comprehensive agnosticism is to endorse *one* particular religious tradition oversimplifies things, not least with regard to the contemporary religious landscape where various forms of multiple religious belonging and secular outlooks that lack a similar focus on some particular object of reverence are becoming increasingly common (more on this below).

Second, even on approaches such as the above, we should remember Meursault's estrangement and the degree to which our confidence in a way of in-habiting the world depends on its ability to keep the path of inquiry open. Epistemic agnosticism indicates that one of our primary ways of taking responsibility for our commitments is set aside. Draper even points out that religious "practice might ultimately lead to belief by leading first to new evidence" [15] (p. 206). From a pragmatic point of view, we also reach a point where, if someone in-habits the world religiously, the fact that this person does not "believe" with any confidence in that religious tradition's central claims, becomes moot. What is, after all, the pragmatic difference?

In light of that, it is important to emphasize that a Jamesian approach will bring pragmatic evaluations to the fore and remind us that this requires that we cultivate our sensibilities to the problematic consequences our commitments have for us and others [9] (Chapter 3). This is a point that I will return to as I relate the Jamesian and Rortian perspectives below. James reminds us of the intimate relation between life orientations and moral values when he writes that the "gods we stand by are the gods we need and can use, the gods whose demands on us are reinforcements of our demands on ourselves and one another" [8] (p. 264). Whether a combination of an epistemically agnostic position with various life orientation commitments is acceptable or not depends, then, on how we, in light of those commitments, in-habit the world. Laying epistemic doubts to rest is more like a starting- than an end-point as regards questions about our obligations to undertake critical inquiries into our life orientations when problems arise. To deafen oneself to the cries of the wounded for the sake of some benefits is, from this perspective, another way of "losing truth".

Let me return now to my first point about the degree to which a discussion of agnosticism needs to see commitment to one religious tradition or secular counterpart as the only option worth taking seriously. Richard Rorty, to whom I shall return shortly, sketches, in one of his later essays, a "decentred" form of agnosticism that he labels "romantic polytheism".⁴ He primarily discusses its cultural and social manifestations (which I shall return to), but I retain the individual focus here. Rorty claims that romantic polytheism "frees us from the responsibility to unify all our beliefs into a single worldview" [18] (p. 34). Where a single worldview requires coherence among the things we believe and cherish, a view of beliefs as closely integrated with habits of action, thought, and judgment allows for a variety of only vaguely related goals and values. Since "the purposes served by action may blamelessly vary, so may the habits we develop to serve those purposes" [18] (p. 34). Rorty goes on as follows:

You are a polytheist if you think that there is no actual or possible object of knowledge that would permit you to commensurate and rank all human needs. . . . To be a polytheist in this sense, you do not have to believe that there are non-human persons with the power to intervene in human affairs. All you need to do is abandon the idea that we should try to make everything hang together, which will tell all human beings what to do with their lives and tell all of them the same thing. [18] (p. 30)

Returning to the initial characterization of agnosticism as a "failure to answer the ontological question", as Jonbäck put it, we can say, then, that romantic polytheism is an

answer of sorts to the ontological question, namely, one that questions the point of pursuing *one* answer to any such questions. Of course, this does not mean that people cannot *choose* to, in Vincent Brümmer's words, "strive to keep their lives 'whole' by making one master the primary determinant of meaning", only that there is no obligation to do so [19] (p. 136). Values such as "wholeness", or "unity and consistency" as Brümmer calls it elsewhere, are, from this Rortian perspective, important for specific individuals and their life orientations but not an inherent good that every life orientation should be considered a virtue [19] (p. 133).

Returning to the Jamesian concern about agnosticism, it seems clear that both practicing agnostics and romantic polytheists are generally far from Meursault. They seem to find and utilize energizing resources in a "here and there" fashion that motivates them to lead (relatively) strenuous lives, and hence, they can also discover problems in those ways of in-habiting the world. Maybe the resources they draw on are not as robust, systematized, or focused as they are in specific religious and secular life orientations. Still, pragmatically, that is probably often an advantage rather than a lack—it is, for instance, hard to see why or how a romantic polytheist would become a fanatic. Before I move on, I would like to point to two other important things:

First, I have already suggested that pragmatists should be wary of the framing of agnosticism in terms of a failure to answer "the ontological question" as if there is always a single choice that a subject has to make *first* while standing back and assessing both life and the world they in-habit as wholes. Draper's and Rorty's alternatives indicate that we make many choices within our different engagements with the world we in-habit, which *aggregate* into a life orientation. If we see life orientations as wholes built from below, agnosticism results from a gradually shaped way of in-habiting the world. The very image of an epistemic choice made first as we stand back from the world we strive to live in naturally leads to a worry, such as James's, that we rob ourselves of significant existential resources. That *can* but need not happen, and here, Yoder's proposal to seriously consider agnosticism's positive potential helps nuance the picture.

Second, in that aggregation of habits of action, thought, and judgment, there is, arguably, a pragmatic need for wholeness, but unlike the kind of wholeness that Brümmer talks of above, this is then a wholeness in practice built gradually from below rather than something we must adopt *before* we can confidently in-habit the world. It is not a given that adopting a primary determinant of meaning will simplify this pursuit.

The Jamesian point I find worth particularly emphasizing, then, is that at an individual, personal level, the interesting philosophical questions regarding agnosticism arise *once it is adopted*. What do various types of agnosticism do to us as beings striving to in-habit the world? And what do we *let* them do to us? Agnosticism *can*, arguably, have a problematic influence on our life orientations, especially if you take epistemic reasons to be the only relevant source of critical input. Then, it can become an immunizing excuse for not critically considering the elements in your life that you *in fact* "re-act on or /.../ live for" [7] (p. 100). Following the Jamesian approach sketched above overcomes this passivizing risk, but we should also acknowledge the Jamesian point that we can "lose truth" in other ways than simply by abstaining from making judgments, like if we fail to consider the many different types of consequences our ways of in-habiting the world have. Hence, the emphasis on an increased sensitivity to other types of consequences must accompany any endorsement of a Jamesian approach (and, I would add, this goes for more evidentially/epistemically oriented approaches like Clifford's as well).

So far, I have stayed within the confines of the individual perspective taken in most contemporary discussions of agnosticism. However, emphasizing the pragmatic, that is, practical consequences of our life orientations rather than the epistemic credentials of various beliefs suggests that we cannot limit attention to the consequences for individuals; we also need to consider what this implies at a communal level. I will explore one such route via a community-oriented Rortian perspective which suggests that we understand

human life as constituted by “vocabularies” that we put to use in different contexts and for various purposes.

7. Rorty: Social Practices, Vocabularies, and the Uses of Meta-Level Agnosticism

In a recent paper on agnosticism, Sami Pihlström draws attention to meta-level agnosticism, and mainly “meaning agnosticism”, which he characterizes as a form of lingering uncertainty among, for instance, religious believers about whether “they are so much as able to make sense by using their religious expressions” [20] (p. 8). Arguably, corresponding forms of agnosticism can occur if you opt for secular life orientations (or so I shall assume). Such uncertainties can have both religious grounds—such as reverence for the transcendent—and human grounds, as an acknowledgment of “the inevitable fragility of . . . sense-making activities” [20] (p. 8).

I shall not discuss meaning agnosticism in particular detail here; instead, I wish to draw attention to the idea of meta-level agnosticism itself. Meta-level agnosticism does not engage with the evaluation of specific propositions within, for instance, a religious tradition but rather asks the question of whether a religious way of in-habiting the world is meaningful as a whole. This ability itself presupposes that we *can* stand back from various parts/families of practices of our lives and, temporarily, consider them from a relatively speaking more external standpoint. This is not a view from nowhere, however, but the standpoint afforded us by the *other* parts/families of practices that are not currently under consideration.⁵ I propose that we talk about the kind of contextual meta-level agnosticism in terms of a *skill*. By this, I mean that it is a technique we can consciously adopt to handle specific problems and situations, while we omit from applying it in others. Here, I will, following Rorty, discuss it as a skill we can employ with regard to our life orientations as we enter the public (and particularly political) sphere.

Christopher Voparil points out that one important element of Rorty’s way of discussing the relation between different vocabularies and parts of human life is his claim that justifications are thoroughly social and communal affairs. Justification is always directed towards a *specific* group of “others” and located in contexts where specific purposes take centre stage. Voparil writes the following: “Rorty’s particular understanding of the social justification of belief rests on an alternative account of normativity that locates norms and standards within social practices and the web of communal relations in which we find ourselves, rather than outside of them [like in an overarching set of epistemological norms]” [22] (pp. 90–91). This implies, Rorty argues, that questions about “how to get in touch with ‘mind-independent and language-independent reality’” should give way to questions like “What are the limits of our community? Are our encounters sufficiently free and open? Has what we have recently gained in solidarity cost us our ability to listen to outsiders who are suffering? To outsiders who have new ideas?” [23] (p. 23). That is, questions at a meta-level about whether the shared norms and standards serve us well in developing practices within which we can handle specific problems. In these reflections, moral and epistemological questions are intertwined.

The norms and standards that regulate social practices are hence built inductively from below in close interaction with both other participants and the environment that we in-habit. This is a central element in a pragmatic philosophical anthropology, which sees human beings as interacting with their environments to uphold or restore a state of equilibrium that makes future life possible. Since both the environments and the purposes strived for may look very different, we can assume that different norms and standards take shape within the various social practices by means of which we in-habit the world.

The kind of meta-level agnosticisms that I find interesting here is thus a range of skills we acquire in the course of practical problem-solving and where we, in specific contexts and for certain purposes, avoid engaging with, and thus also to take a stand on, particular questions and propositions that *may* be considered relevant for present purposes but which are nonetheless left aside. To grasp this kind of position, we need to clarify the pragmatic idea of what Rorty calls different *vocabularies*—different frames of

articulating, thinking about, and handling problems connected to various human practices. Other common pragmatic alternatives here are *conceptualizations* or *conceptual schemes*, but I stick with Rorty's terminology. I shall use Voparil's "norms and standards" to refer to the normative components related to assessment, critique, and justification within any particular vocabulary. However, I want to emphasize that vocabularies are intimately related to the habits of action, thought, and judgment by which we in-habit the world.

8. Conceptualizations and the Conceptual Relativity of Vocabularies

Rorty's talk of vocabularies is continuous with a long-standing tradition within pragmatism, which emphasizes that since human beings encounter many situations and seek to meet many different needs and satisfy a multitude of interests, it is only natural to assume, as Rorty does above, that they also develop several different vocabularies, conceptualizations, or conceptual schemes. H. S. Thayer writes the following:

We say, "Here is a pen", pointing or otherwise expanding the directive for "here". A geometer, with purely professional interest for the moment, might report his observation of a cylinder, geometry knows no pens. A psychologist will see a stimulus object. . . . What is of importance pragmatically is not a futile declaration of probity or superiority between contexts [cf. Rorty's social practices], but the grounds and validation of judgments [i.e., norms and standards] within the respective contexts. The contexts thus acknowledged do not have to be taken as mutually competitive attempts to dominate the market of reality. We can make our choices among the conceptual schemes that have evolved and proved effective in different contexts. [24] (p. 353f)

The pragmatic claim that vocabularies need not be seen as competing with one another has some repercussions for the way we frame an agnostic position. From a pragmatic point of view, talk of answers to an ontological question should hence not be seen as attempting to offer a "metaphysically privileged" description of reality, as Hilary Putnam calls it, a vocabulary which would somehow describe the world we seek to in-habit in the world's "own" terms. An idea of such a metaphysically privileged account seems to underlie Arthur Eddington's famous discussion of two tables (one common-sense and one scientific), where he writes the following: "modern physics has by delicate test and remorseless logic assured me that my second scientific table is the only one which is really there" [25] (p. 4). Dewey's response to Eddington was to remind readers that if physicists would thus privilege a single vocabulary (as Eddington at least *seems* to be doing here) to the extent that it is taken to describe the only reality which "is really there", their inquiries would get nowhere because they could not even rely on their own measuring devices [26] (p. 193).

Dewey's point is not about metaphysics, that there are more objects in the world than Eddington wants to acknowledge. He opposes the view that descriptions made in different circumstances and for different purposes somehow conflict and/or that one of them has to take precedence over the other. Instead of creating simplistic oppositions, it is more beneficial to consider the usefulness of specific vocabularies in solving particular problems at specific times and places.

Rorty frequently expressed the pragmatic point that there is no vocabulary that gives us privileged access to reality in a rather drastic anti-representationalist form, according to which we should not see vocabularies as aiming to *represent* an independent reality (as that is in itself). This is also why he emphasizes the communal character of justification. Any attempts to substantiate claims by appealing to something other than the problems we seek to solve in a given situation and the norms and standards available to us in different vocabularies—like appealing to what an independent reality is like—founders on the fact that we cannot "step out of our skins" to check whether any vocabulary or the claims made within it *actually* represent an independent reality. This means, Rorty adds, that it is also impossible to claim that certain claims about reality represent reality as it is independent of us [27] (p. xxiv). This is why he holds that conflicts between vocabularies should—as we will see below—be resolved within the frame of cultural politics, not by checking what an

independent reality is “really” like. There is simply no way to bypass the communal nature of the claims we make and how they are evaluated.

The questions of representationalism and anti-representationalism, as well as questions of realism, anti-realism, and relativism, have been hotly discussed both within and outside the pragmatic tradition—not least concerning Rorty’s work. I shall not enter these debates here. I do believe, however, that Rorty’s relatively strong anti-representationalism stands in the way of some of his most interesting contributions to the present paper and that it, fortunately, is possible to articulate a more moderate approach along lines developed by Hilary Putnam. In my view, Putnam has convincingly shown how Rorty’s anti-representationalism trades on a problematic understanding of “represent” that we—and Rorty—are better off without. Hence, I shall be content here to offer a pragmatic account that can preserve the idea of a multitude of vocabularies serving different purposes without dropping the common-sense notion that the claims we make seek, in various ways, to represent reality as we encounter it within different social practices and conceptualize it in different vocabularies.

Putnam repeatedly attacked Rorty’s anti-representationalism for its reliance on an unrealistic (and un-pragmatic) understanding of what it would mean for claims to represent an independent reality and not least that claims would thus also be made true by it. Putnam agrees that reality as we encounter it is always conceptualized by us but argues that the problem here is not that we cannot step out of our skins, as Rorty puts it, to compare our claims with independent reality but that the whole discussion of whether it is possible or not makes no sense. He writes the following: “If we agree that it is *unintelligible* to say ‘We sometimes succeed in comparing our language and thought with reality as it is in itself,’ then we should realize that it is also unintelligible to say ‘It is *impossible* to stand outside and compare our thought and language with the world’” (Putnam’s emphasis) [28] (p. 299). This implies that the conception of representation that underlies Rorty’s anti-representationalism is incomprehensible. We cannot even comprehend what a point of view would be like that would represent the world in the world’s own vocabulary. Thus, we cannot meaningfully discuss whether it can be attained.

Once we abandon incomprehensible conceptions of “representations”, Putnam suggests that we can develop a more promising conception that acknowledges our practical need to talk of better and worse representations. For instance, he points out that the claim that the sky is blue indeed represents an independent reality better than the claim that the sky is red—within a particular vocabulary—but “better” is then not a verdict on the claim’s relation to some radically independent reality. Putnam reminds us that “In any sense of “independent” I can *understand*, whether the sky is blue is independent of the way we talk” (my emphasis) [28] (p. 301). I agree and would suggest that the fact that we use many different vocabularies is not a shortcoming of any kind nor should it lead to a general scepticism about their ability to faithfully represent the world we in-habit. Within different vocabularies, it makes perfect sense to say that true propositions represent reality in a way that false ones do not, as long as we acknowledge that they belong in different vocabularies worked out to deal with somewhat different matters.

The idea of a multitude of vocabularies that we draw on in our interactions with each other and the world we in-habit suggests, though, that we need to attend to the ways we relate different vocabularies that have evolved in response to various needs and purposes. Such negotiations occur in the sphere Rorty calls “cultural politics”.

9. Agnosticisms and Their Roles in the Cultural Politics of Religion

Rorty suggests that the topics that preoccupy much of the traditional philosophy of religion, such as ontological and epistemological questions about religious core propositions, are relatively uninteresting except for a few people who combine an interest in religion and a commitment to Clifford’s demands on evidence. Philosophers have neglected more relevant and pressing cultural-politics-oriented questions about which different roles religions

can and should play in individual lives and social contexts, including contemporary liberal democratic societies [29] (p. 39).

The Rortian approach sketched here opens for a form of pragmatically or practically based communal/contextual agnosticism. Here, the participants engaged in a social practice acquire the skill of avoiding engagement with a range of other social practices/vocabularies simply because it serves specific pragmatic purposes important to the practice itself to do so. It is agnostic in that it avoids attempts to answer “ontological questions” related to these other practices either affirmatively or negatively. It is communal in that this agnosticism is constitutive of the norms and standards of a shared social practice. It is contextual in that it lays no—or very few—restrictions on each individual’s choices in *other* settings. It is a skill in the sense that participants in the practice need to learn to set aside even the profoundly personal commitments they may have. Let us see how Rorty applies this type of agnosticism to various questions related to religion, especially concerning politics and public deliberation.

With regard to questions concerning the relation between science and religion, Rorty is critical both of fundamentalist attempts to undermine science *and* of the kind of atheist critique of religion which is “simply trotting out the same sorts of arguments about the irrelevance of any particular empirical state of affairs to the existence of an atemporal and nonspatial being as were used by Hume and Kant” [29] (p. 32). He holds that very few people are concerned about the relation between these practices because we have simply learned to use them for separate purposes, and no need exists to bring claims made within one of these contexts into conflict with claims made within another: “Being religious, in the modern West, does not have much to do with the explanation of specific observable phenomena” [29] (p. 33). Of course, not everyone would agree with Rorty here. Still, even here, the main Rortian point is, I take it, that questions about, for instance, the teaching of evolution in schools are not philosophical questions in a traditional sense but questions of cultural politics, namely, how to balance different interests within the shared arena of education. This is, I take it, a typical feature of Rortian proposals: how contextually adopted agnosticism can assist us in our efforts to practically handle problems that have often been taken to require theoretical solutions.

Moving on to Rorty’s central sphere of interest, the role of religion in the public sphere, Rorty proposes that we distinguish between cooperative, collective projects on the one hand and individual, perfection-oriented projects (from now on “*cooperative projects*” and “*projects of private perfection*”) on the other. I treat “*cooperative projects*” more or less as a synonym to social practices as described above: they are typically oriented toward shared problems that we need to work together to come to terms with, and in that course, vocabularies take shape. Science and politics but also families of social practices like construction, medicine, economics, and so on can thus be seen as cooperative in this sense, and the shared norms and standards that regulate them are central to their ability to function. Without them, there is little room for any effective cooperation or handling of problems. Of course, these norms and standards do not rule out long-standing disagreements; however, even then, the shared norms and standards function as a roughly shared framework within which such disputes play out. Such epistemic norms and standards thus arise and solidify (as Rescher suggested above) within concrete practical problem-solving situations.

There is hence some room for agnosticism *within* cooperative projects regarding particular questions, but at some point, where the agnosticism extends broadly and even begins to concern the whole range of norms and standards used in the vocabulary, you are effectively adopting a type of meta-level agnosticism where you begin to question the relevance of the entire practice.

The agnosticism interesting from a Rortian point of view is different because it concerns our (meta-level) ability to let different vocabularies operate independently of one another. This means that you disengage contextually from commitments that you endorse in certain areas of life as you strive to solve a particular problem in another area. The pragmatic “cash value” such contextually adopted agnosticism has at a social level is that it allows us to

avoid engaging with a whole range of vocabularies that divide us as we seek to resolve a shared problem.

Rorty seeks to develop this contextual disengagement approach by arguing that besides cooperative projects, there are also what he calls projects of private perfection that are significantly different. As justification is a social affair where norms and standards are importantly shared, private projects lack shared norms and standards *because* they are private. As long as people accept the distinction between different projects, they should, Rorty holds, be free to make any private choices they may prefer based on any norms and standards that they wish to apply [18] (p. 35).

In Western liberal democracies, religion has, according to Rorty, gradually migrated from being a (or several) cooperative project of extreme significance, where norms and standards were fiercely upheld, to private projects with significance only for some individuals. It is, he writes, “one of the morals to be drawn from that history of Europe and America” that “religion can and should retreat” from the “epistemic arena”, that is, the area of vocabularies that constitute public debates, including politics, jurisdiction, public administration, and so on, and that inevitably raise questions about which norms and standards to adopt [29] (p. 36).

However, Rorty opposes the view that this gradual shift is based on any philosophical discovery about the lack of solid evidence in favour of religious belief. It is a shift in the cultural politics of religion in societies that have gradually come to endorse freedom as a political core value. In such societies, the problem with religious interferences in the public sphere is that they are “politically dangerous” to “the health of democratic societies”—that is, to the core value of freedom with regard to whom one is allowed to live and which God if anyone is allowed to worship [29] (p. 33). This is not atheism, Rorty insists, but *anticlericalism*. It neither endorses nor rejects religious vocabularies and the claims made either within or based on them—it simply disregards them in this particular context. Anticlericalism thus seeks to limit the range of practices and settings in which various religious/theistic vocabularies are allowed to play a role. The fact that some vocabularies transform certain peoples’ lives while they leave others indifferent is of as little importance as the fact that people fall in love for different reasons and with different people. Using the term *faith* for such projects of private perfection, Rorty writes the following, concerning James:

We know what religious faith is, we know what it does for people. People have a right to have such faith, just as they have a right to fall in love, marry in haste, and persist in love despite endless sorrow and disappointment. In all such cases, our “passional nature” asserts its rights. [30] (p. 89)

That right thus applies at an individual level. Anticlericalism is located at a social level and can be understood as a way of ensuring that people will continue to have the right to make such choices at an individual level. It is, hence, a position within cultural politics that presupposes the above-mentioned skill to apply, contextually, agnosticism with regard to certain commitments that you endorse in other contexts. I suggest that we see it as a suggestion regarding how we can take responsibility for the exercise of our will to believe in the individual sphere. We thus reduce, according to Rorty, the risk of *cruelty*: the risk of harming people by letting our life orientations shape society in ways that prevent them from leading the kind of life they wish to lead.

Another practical advantage of anticlericalism is, Rorty argues, that when private convictions of a religious or strongly ideological kind are left aside, the public conversation can continue without interruptions. He exemplifies this point with a person who argues, on religious grounds, for outlawing pornography and claims that their discussion partners will meet that claim with silence. The problem here is not the lack of epistemic credentials for the claim *per se* but that the subject sets aside the shared norm that we should avoid introducing arguments based on our personal religious convictions into public policy discussions. Such appeals have increasingly become unconstructive conversation-stoppers that fail to advance the conversation in any way [31].

Two *caveats* regarding Rorty's cultural politics are in order here. First, there is a degree of oversimplification in Rorty's way of portraying what the alternative to anticlericalism would amount to. Jeffrey Stout, for instance, points out that there are much more nuanced ways of introducing and arguing against religiously based arguments than Rorty's simple example suggests [32]. Second, Nicholas Wolterstorff emphasizes the degree to which many citizens actively oppose anticlericalism because they are convinced they *should* let their religious convictions permeate their political standpoints [33]. This is certainly right. What is interesting, though, for present purposes is that even Wolterstorff agrees that Rorty sketches an *understandable*, albeit not desirable, position that *can* be adopted, a skill that we *can* acquire for specific purposes. I shall, as already stated, neither defend nor attack Rorty's cultural politics of religion but suggest that his cultural politics approach and the broader pragmatic vocabularies approach of which it is part helps us discern the practical roles that various forms of contextual agnosticism can play in our different ways of in-habiting the world.

10. Summing Up: The Pragmatic Perils and Use of Agnosticism

The Jamesian and Rortian approaches that I have sketched apply to rather different kinds of situations that human beings encounter, but there are interesting connections. First, agnosticism is, in both approaches, fruitfully viewed as part of a way of in-habiting the world—it is not primarily interesting because of what it *lacks* but because of what it makes possible for human beings. Second, agnosticism should also be pragmatically evaluated along the lines that we evaluate ways of in-habiting the world. This means asking questions such as the following: What consequences do different forms have for our efforts to in-habit the world both as individuals and as communities? In which contexts is it helpful and in which harmful? When should this skill be practiced at a communal level, and for which purposes? Once we stop treating agnosticism as either concealed disbelief or as an inevitably empty shell devoid of energizing resources, we can also begin to ask questions about which forms are helpful and for which purposes.

This approach presupposes a form of meta-level agnosticism according to which the inconclusiveness of our ordinary ways of settling problems via epistemic evaluations offers up a range of opportunities to human beings, agnostic stances being among them. This goes both at an individual and a communal level, and the meta-level approach sketched above suggests that we can also treat these levels differently and apply different criteria within them.

With regard to the contemporary agnosticism debate, this entails that pragmatists need not quarrel with either its method, scope, or output: it is hardly un-pragmatic to ask where the current evidence is pointing, even in complex questions concerning, for instance, God's existence. What pragmatism *does* remind us, however, is that fruitful versions of agnosticism are those that enable us to in-habit the world both as individuals and communities. To access energizing resources, we need to avoid Meursault's passivizing, almost nihilistic, stance. This need comes, however, with obligations: we must also realize that we integrate paradigmatic responses in our life orientations that have consequences for both ourselves and others. It is here that the interesting pragmatic contributions lie, in my view. Both at an individual and a communal level, we need to consider carefully how we can and should evaluate pragmatically the consequences of different ways of in-habiting the world. Agnosticism is not the end-point but rather the starting-point of critical inquiry. This goes both at an individual and a communal level.

The important pragmatic lesson is thus to avoid immunizing the stances we adopt. An agnostic stance, just like any other life orientation stance, is an interim way of in-habiting the world that summarizes the experiences and contexts we have encountered *thus far*. This goes for both individual and communal levels. The habits of action, thought, and judgment that comprise it are, like all habits, open to change in the future, and the important thing is to avoid blocking the path of inquiry. We can acknowledge this point without falling into

the trap of treating agnosticism differently from religious or atheistic life orientations if we remind ourselves that this goes for *all* life orientations.

Pragmatists should thus resist the temptation to treat agnosticism as a monolithic (or, for that part, inherently problematic) whole that we must either take or leave. Although it has its problematic forms, this is a feature that it shares with other types of life orientations, both of a religious and secular type. Which forms to consider problematic and which to adopt is, of course, a matter of controversy. As is so often the case with philosophical topics, we can conclude that just as there is no single form of agnosticism for beings constantly engaged in a range of individual and communally shared endeavours, there are no uncontroversial criteria to use when evaluating various agnosticism and determining in which parts of life they should play a role. Pragmatists will insist that pragmatic criteria should and will have a central role here, but that is itself more a way of pointing out a direction than any final word within these debates.

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Notes

- ¹ Rondel makes even more fine-grained distinctions in his work, but this condensed account suffices for present purposes.
- ² Ref. [7] (p. 14). At times, James suggests that the review of evidence in cases where something concerns us is hardly completely disinterested: philosophy finds arguments for the things we endorse “because it has to find them” [8] (p. 345). A strong interpretation of that claim would make the will to believe superfluous, because we would always commit to the things we want to commit to and then go on to find the evidence we need. A more moderate interpretation, according to which we tend to assign more weight to some grounds than to others, but where arguments still affect our commitments, goes better with the argument made in “*The Will to Believe*”.
- ³ In this paper, I follow *The Oxford Dictionary’s* definition of stance as “An attitude adopted in relation to a particular object of contemplation; a policy, ‘posture’”.
- ⁴ Rorty mainly discusses its cultural and social manifestations, but I shall apply it to an individual perspective here.
- ⁵ Readers familiar with pragmatism will recognize that I am inspired, here, by the pragmatic account of inquiry as developed in, for instance, ref. [21] (pp. 108–122).

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