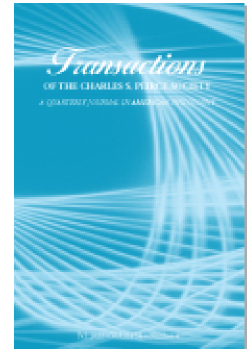
Pragmatism Turned Inward: Notes on Voparil's Reconstructing Pragmatism



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Pragmatism Turned Inward: Notes on Voparil's Reconstructing Pragmatism

David Rondel

Abstract
This article raises a series of doubts about Chris Voparil's reading of Rorty, particularly the claim that what he calls "Rorty's Pragmatic Maxim" represents what is at the heart of his philosophical vision. Those doubts are tied together with some scattered thoughts about how Voparil describes the affinities between Rorty and William James in chapter 2 of *Reconstructing Pragmatism*. Voparil is correct to claim that it is James, more than any other figure in the pragmatist tradition, who shares the most with Rorty in "basic philosophical orientation". Yet I also argue that Voparil fails to correctly puts his finger on what that "basic philosophical orientation" really comes to, due in large part to an excessively political reading of James and Rorty that he relies on.

Keywords: William James, Richard Rorty, Cultural Politics, Irony, Liberalism, Self-Creation, Classical Pragmatism, Neopragmatism

> I take a person's moral character—his or her selective sensitivity to the sufferings of others—to be shaped by chance events in his or her life. Often, perhaps usually, this sensitivity varies independently of the projects of self-creation that the person undertakes in his or her work.
>
> —Richard Rorty, "On Heidegger's Nazism"

Chris Voparil's *Reconstructing Pragmatism* (Voparil 2022) is or will soon become the definitive treatment of Richard Rorty's relationship with the classical pragmatists.[1]

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If Voparil is correct to note in the book's introduction that "there exists no in-depth scholarly treatment of . . . [Rorty's] relation to the classical figures of pragmatism", then there can be no doubt that *Reconstructing Pragmatism* admirably and comprehensively remedies that deficiency (5).

Voparil is Rorty's most committed, enthusiastic defender. While he is assiduous and generous in listing his debts (there are fifty pages of notes in *Reconstructing Pragmatism*, each one packed to the gills with references), it is also not an embellishment to say that Voparil's knowledge of Rorty's work is—in a word—unrivalled. No one in the world has done more to make the case for the value of Rorty's philosophy, both within pragmatist philosophical circles and more broadly. Voparil has read every letter, every book review, every contribution to the vast (and, by his lights, frequently lazy and underwhelming) secondary literature on Rorty (4). In short, there is no one better qualified to advance the argument that the "path forward" for the whole tradition of pragmatism goes through, rather than around or against, Rorty (5).

There are places where the story Voparil tells about Rorty's relation to the classical figures of pragmatism is exaggerated and insufficiently discriminating. Indeed, this is something that is acknowledged on the very first page of the book, when Voparil concedes that he is probably guilty of overemphasizing "sites of positive connection between Rorty and the classical pragmatists" while underselling some of the disagreements (ix–x). But this confirms that Voparil is engaged, at least in part, in a persuasive project. *Reconstructing Pragmatism* is a careful work of exacting scholarship, to be sure, but Voparil is also not shy about the fact that he has an agenda to recommend to the world of American pragmatism: to move the needle in a Rorty-friendly direction and to make the positive case for Rorty's bona fide inclusion in the pragmatist pantheon.

Someone could be forgiven for rejoining that, if pragmatism is like a corridor in a hotel, as William James unforgettably put it, there is no reason why Richard Rorty should or must be waiting in every room (James 2000, 28–29). But I think that kind of rejoinder would miss the pro-Rorty agenda that animates *Reconstructing Pragmatism*. Against what has become the conventional wisdom in certain scholarly corners, Voparil is advancing the positive argument that, "even many of Rorty's most vociferously derided philosophical moves were inspired by or congenial to commitments of Peirce, James, Dewey, Royce, and Addams" and that Rorty "consciously radicalized, rather than misunderstood" what the pragmatists were all about (280).

But why would such an argument need to be made in the first place? Why would anyone think that the most famous pragmatist philosopher of the second half of the twentieth century didn't properly understand pragmatism? And why would anyone want to see Rorty marginalized or

excluded from the pragmatist canon? One kind of argument for Rorty's exclusion is bound up with a desire to make pragmatism look respectable among elite analytic philosophers, to rescue pragmatism from the frivolous and not so respectable path Rorty has supposedly taken it down (Rondel 2018, 4n4). Insofar as Rorty is judged to have stopped doing serious analytic philosophy in the late 1970's and early 1980's and began "frolicking with Derrida in Paris" (as the late Kai Nielsen once put it), his importance within the tradition of pragmatism should to that extent be downplayed.[2]

A different kind of argument for Rorty's exclusion or marginalization has it that Rorty played fast and loose with the pragmatist figures he claimed to admire and draw inspiration from. A frequently-aired complaint from scholars of American pragmatism is that Rorty was a sloppy, careless reader of Peirce, James, and Dewey (to say nothing of figures outside of "the big three"). Instead of fine-grained scholarship and careful, slow-going analysis, Rorty preferred to trade in sweeping generalizations, promiscuous name-dropping, and dramatic historical narratives. This is what lies behind Voparil's obviously correct observation that, "if you came to pragmatism through the classical thinkers and the scholarship on them, you were taught to be reflexively critical of Rorty" (2), and that most of the work about Rorty from scholars of classical pragmatism has been "overwhelmingly negative", "critical", and "hostile" (4). Shunning Rorty seemed to represent a way for such scholars to preserve the integrity of their little vineyard, to keep pragmatism safe and insulated from philosophical developments outside the annual meetings of the *Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy*.

It is interesting that the guiding argument in *Reconstructing Pragmatism* mirrors a central claim advanced in Voparil's first monograph, *Richard Rorty: Politics and Vision* (Voparil 2006). At the beginning of that earlier book, Voparil writes: "I contend that Rorty can be fruitfully approached as a political theorist concerned . . . with promulgating a new picture of the political world . . . [Rorty's] brand of political theory . . . values the imagination and the ability to come up with new metaphors and new angles of vision" (Voparil 2006, 3). That same basic claim is at the center of the new book too, in what Voparil describes as "Rorty's Pragmatic Maxim", the idea that philosophers should take sides on various philosophical controversies only insofar as doing so might make a difference to their long-term social hopes. According to this maxim, which Voparil takes to be at the very heart of Rorty's vision, philosophers should be in the "cultural politics" business. Rather than coldly dispassionate inquirers, philosophers and other intellectuals should be engaging in a kind of cultural activism. They should be, wherever possible, putting their fingers on the scales of social and cultural change. In Rorty's own famous words,

they should be "putting politics first and tailoring a philosophy to suit" (Rorty 1991a, 178). Reading Rorty and the American pragmatists through a political lens is, by now, something like Voparil's signature philosophical move. And there is a tremendous amount to learn from this kind of reading. But sometimes, foisting this distinctively political reading on Rorty and other pragmatists has its drawbacks and actually obfuscates more than it illuminates.

In what follows I raise some doubts about Voparil's reading of Rorty, particularly the claim that "Rorty's Pragmatic Maxim" represents what is at the heart of his philosophical vision, and I tie those doubts together with some scattered thoughts about how Voparil describes the affinities between Rorty and William James in chapter 2 of *Reconstructing Pragmatism*. I agree with Voparil that it is James, more than any other figure in the pragmatist tradition, who shares the most with Rorty in "basic philosophical orientation" (95). Yet due in large part to the excessively political reading of James and Rorty he relies on, I have doubts that Voparil accurately puts his finger on what that "basic philosophical orientation" really comes to.

James and Rorty obviously have a tremendous amount in common. Beyond agreeing on a large number of philosophical claims and theses, they are the most poetic and literary of the pragmatists (easily the two best prose stylists from the pragmatist tradition, although people can and do disagree about such things). James and Rorty are also the two pragmatist philosophers most attuned to the "tragic" element in human affairs, to the inescapability of moral loss, to the deep truth expressed in James's unforgettable phrase, "some part of the ideal must be butchered" (James 2000, 255). They also share in common—along with Dewey and others—a disdain for the arcane professionalism of academic philosophy. Both James and Rorty were profoundly humanistic thinkers. Both believed that philosophy should direct its energy toward issues that actually matter to ordinary people, rather than focussing on the recondite puzzles of specialists with advanced degrees.

Voparil reads both James and Rorty primarily as "philosophers of agency" (102), who espouse a "shared ethics of belief" (101) and "converge in providing a practically grounded conception of normativity geared to bringing about a shift in our ethical and epistemic orientations" (96). None of that is incorrect as far as it goes. But the emphasis, I think, is put in an odd place.

Rorty and James were sensitive and compassionate human beings. They both obviously cared a great deal about reversing perspectives with other people and trying to cultivate, in Voparil's words, an "awareness and responsiveness toward the suffering of others" (97). Both were interested in overcoming what James memorably called "a certain blindness in human beings" (James 2000, 267). But it seems odd to identify *that* as the main preoccupation in their work. This strikes me as a case

of first having a conclusion in hand (*viz.*, Voparil's twist on the "priority of democracy to philosophy" thesis) and then searching for an argumentative route to support it. It is much more plausible to read both James and Rorty as centrally preoccupied with individual inwardness and self-creation, with what James's godfather, Ralph Waldo Emerson, called "the infinitude of the private man" (Emerson 1984, 236). James and Rorty are most centrally philosophers of individualism and the *vie intérieure*. Both are rightly placed in the great American individualist tradition of Emerson, Thoreau, and Walt Whitman.[3] Yet because Voparil leans so heavily on reading James and Rorty through his signature political lens, these private, inward sensibilities do not receive the coverage in *Reconstructing Pragmatism* that they are rightly due.[4]

Voparil does a nice job highlighting the affinities between James and Rorty on religion and religious belief. And here too the individualism they share shines brightly through. Rorty's qualified embrace of James's argument in the "Will to Believe" essay is not really something that comes from a straightforward rejection of Cliffordian evidentialism. The right to believe without adequate evidence is justified for Rorty, if it is, by the difference such belief makes in and to our lives. "We know what religious faith is, we know what it does for people," Rorty wrote. "People have a right to have such faith, just as they have a right to fall in love, to marry in haste, and to persist in love despite endless sorrow and disappointment. In all such cases, our 'passional nature' asserts it rights" (Rorty 1999, 153). The right in question, for Rorty even more than for James, is personal rather than epistemological—more importantly about what we choose do with our solitude than about the norms of responsible doxastic practice.

I agree with Voparil that both Rorty and James "understood that in philosophy, as in politics, temperaments matter" (109). But I have doubts that what Rorty calls "self-image" is merely what James calls "temperament" expressed in another idiom, as Voparil claims. For James, the idea of temperament is often deployed to pick out something deep about us, something about our constitutional makeup. This reading of James on temperament is especially salient in the discussion of "sick souls" from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. There are some people, James writes, "for whom evil is no mere relation of the subject to particular outer things, but something more radical and general, a wrongness or vice in his essential nature, which no alteration of the environment, or any superficial rearrangement of the inner self, can cure (James 1982, 134). By contrast, when Rorty uses the term "self-image" (and he does use it extensively throughout his work) he is always stressing its impermanence and malleability. Our self-image is always "up for conversational grabs" (Rorty 2000, 236). It can always be changed. So, for instance, in "Ethics Without Principles", Rorty says that pragmatism itself is an attempt "to alter our self-image

so as to make it consistent with the Darwinian claim that we differ from other animals simply in the complexity of our behaviour" (Rorty 1999, 72). And analogously, in the essay, "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism", Rorty argues that the arts "serve to develop and modify a group's self-image by, for example, apotheosizing its heroes, diabolizing its enemies, mounting dialogues among its members, and refocussing attention" (Rorty 1991a, 200). What all of this shows, if I am right, is that the power of redescription really does go all the way down for Rorty in a way that it does not for James.

Rorty was much more overtly a political philosopher than was James.[5] But even for Rorty, political questions were almost always expected to take a back seat to questions of Romantic, individual self-creation. Why else would Rorty so frequently express exasperation (or maybe it was boredom) with the debates of political theorists? As if there was some important new political-theoretical breakthrough we were all patiently standing by to receive? Why else would he claim that nothing conceptually significant has been learned since *On Liberty*, that "J.S. Mill's suggestion that governments devote themselves to optimizing the balance between leaving people's private lives alone and preventing suffering" seems like "pretty much the last word"? (Rorty 1989, 63)

I am arguing that, for Rorty, self-creation is the highest, most important end—the *summum bonum*, as it were—from which it follows that politics and government, vital and important though they obviously are, are designed to be in its service. Here is an important argument from *Contingency*:

> the point of social organization is to let everybody have a chance at self-creation to the best of his or her abilities, and that goal requires, besides peace and wealth, the standard 'bourgeois freedoms' . . . In such an ideal society, discussion of public affairs will revolve around (1) how to balance the needs for peace, wealth, and freedom when conditions require that one of these goals be sacrificed to one of the others, and (2) how to equalize opportunities for self-creation and then leave people alone to use, or neglect, their opportunities (Rorty 1989, 84–85).

The point of a just liberal state, Rorty has it, "is not to invent or create anything, but simply to make it as easy as possible for people to achieve their wildly different private ends without hurting each other. . . ." (Rorty 1991b, 196). To quote Rorty on this point one more time: "societies are means to an end—namely, aesthetic enhancement, the creation of a world in which, as Dewey wrote, 'the arts and the sciences will be the unforced flowers of life.' In that world, every human being will be able, as Whitman said, to invite his or her soul (Rorty 2010, 21). Crucially, not everyone's soul will or should be liberal and

democratic. Nor should we worry too much if they are not. Provided some basic liberal ground rules of non-interference and toleration are being honored, there is space in the world Rorty is envisaging for all kinds of different selves to be invented and nurtured (including those like Nietzsche, Heidegger, and some of the Romantic poets, people who are *at best* indifferent and *at worst* openly hostile to liberal democracy). In short, even if Rorty advocated for "the priority of democracy to philosophy" there is simply no way he would have endorsed the priority of democracy to self-creation.

But what then of Rorty's Maxim? Candidly, I think Voparil makes much too much of this. It is true, as Voparil reminds us throughout his book, that Rorty's last published volume of essays, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, proclaims that philosophers should choose sides in technical philosophical debates in light of their hopes for cultural change (Rorty 2007, x). But it would be a mistake to inflate this claim into something like Rorty's master idea. It pays to remember that the phrase "cultural politics" is invoked fairly infrequently in Rorty's work, and arises as an overt metaphilosophical prescription pretty much only in the lead essay in that last volume of essays, where it is used to frame some of Rorty's thoughts on the question of God's existence, on William James's views of religion, and on a series of questions having to do with the ontological status of consciousness and philosophical zombies. It's hard to avoid the thought that, in virtue of the fact that *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* was Rorty's final published work, Voparil concludes that the prescription, "Philosophy as cultural politics" is also the decisive characterization of what Rorty was all about. I have a hard time believing that. (It's worth remembering that in the *very* last thing he wrote, Rorty movingly expressed regrets that he hadn't spent more time reading poetry).[6]

I am not claiming that Rorty did not commend cultural politics. He did. But it is also true that he didn't really practice it all that much himself. In a paper called "The Intellectuals and the Poor" Rorty draws a distinction between "political intellectuals and philosophical intellectuals. Political intellectuals . . . are people who take sides on concrete questions which are to be decided by organs of government. Philosophical intellectuals are those who usually do not descend to this level of concreteness, and confine themselves to more abstract reflections on the nature of the state, of power, of Otherness, of virtue, of morality, of history, and the like." Rorty admits that the distinction between political and philosophical intellectuals is "crude", but there can be no doubt that Rorty himself is rightly placed on the philosophical end of that crude binary (Rorty 2022, 121–22).

Consider a thought-experiment. Rorty would be 91 years old if he were alive today. Now imagine that scholars and activists invite the 91-year-old Rorty—the elderly sage who predicted the rise of Donald

Trump—to weigh in on some of the vital cultural-political issues of the moment. One such scholar-activist would then ask him: "In your opinion, Professor Rorty, are transwomen women?" If I know Rorty's work and instincts and temperament at all, his answer would almost certainly be something like this. *The battles between those who say that transwomen are indeed women and those who say that they are not* (and now I quote a passage from Rorty's essay, "Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God")

> are analogous to arguments between opposing counsel, presenting appellate briefs to a court. Both sets of lawyers will claim to have the authority of 'the law' on their side. Alternatively, it can be analogized to the battle between two scientific theories, both of which claim to be true to the 'nature of reality' . . . Only when the community decides to adopt one faith rather than another, or the court decides in favor of one side rather than another, does the idea of 'authority' become applicable. The so-called 'authority' of anything other than the community (or some person or thing or expert culture authorized by the community to make decisions in its name) can only be more table-thumping (Rorty 2007, 9).

In short, Rorty would praise cultural politics at a second-order, abstractly metaphilosophical level, but he rarely if ever participated in it at a first-order, concretely specific level.

But then it seems like an exaggeration to claim, as Voparil does, that "Rorty's Pragmatic Maxim" is the "fundamental commitment" in which Rorty's whole "project of reconstruction in philosophy" is grounded (13). I think a more plausible story—while admittedly much less dramatic and sexy than Voparil's story—is that Rorty should be read in pretty much the same way that Rorty himself read many of the philosophers he cared the most about: as an "ironic" intellectual engaged in a lifelong quest for authenticity and self-creation by reading and recontextualizing lots of different authors and books. This is basically how Rorty insisted on reading Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and Foucault, and I am suggesting that more or less the same reading makes quite a bit of sense applied to Rorty's own work too (Patton 2021). As Rorty poignantly wrote, not long before his death:

> I have spent my life rummaging through libraries, hoping to be bowled over—transformed—by some fiercely imaginative, utterly original book. Exalted by one such book, I would then come upon another, hard to reconcile with the first. Then I would try to bridge the gap between them, to find ways of restating what was said in each so as to allow for what was said in the other, to do what Gadamer calls 'fusing horizons' (Rorty 2010a, 3).

In short and to sum up, if Voparil reads Rorty as advocating the "primacy of the political" (260), my counter reading is that Rorty, like James, is most fundamentally a Romantic intellectual, someone who cared more about "wordsworthian moments" in which one feels "touched by something numinous, something of ineffable importance" than he did about cultural politics (Rorty 1999, 8–9). To the extent that cultural politics does matter for Rorty (and it certainly does), that is mainly because it might help us fashion a world in which greater numbers of people will have the time and means and leisure to engage in their own idiosyncratic projects of self-creation.

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NOTES

1 All references to this book will be by parenthetical page number.

2 Cheryl Misak goes so far as to argue that the label "pragmatist" should be wrested from Rorty (Misak 2013, 237).

3 For more on James's individualism, see Albrecht 2012, Bush 2017, Gale 1999, Koopman 2005, Marchetti 2015 and Taylor 2003. I address some of these issues in Rondel 2017 and 2021. Pawelski 2007 is the most extensive book-length treatment of James's individualism. Goodman 2008 is an important source on Rorty's individualism and Romanticism, but to-date this has been an under-explored aspect of Rorty's work.

4 Voparil's signature political lens is pervasive throughout his book. Voparil even puts an overtly political gloss on Rortyan irony, which he describes, following an argument of Tracy Llanera, as part of a project of "self-enlargement in the service of collective moral self-reform". (215). See Llanera 2016. Elsewhere he describes Rortyan "ironism" as a form of "antiauthoritarian epistemic modesty or fallibillism" (109). Well, it is certainly that. But fundamentally Rortyan irony is "epistemic modesty" pointed inward, toward the self. In Rorty's own words, "Irony isn't a spiritual path you might pursue. It's just a matter of sitting loose to

one's present self and hoping that one's next self will be a bit more interesting" (Rorty 2006, 56).

5 As I wrote elsewhere, "William James was not a political philosopher by any conventional measure. If James's philosophical thought has any political relevance or applicability, that is not because he contributed in the familiar ways to the familiar debates of political philosophers . . . There is no worked out theory of justice, or equality, or political freedom, or democracy, or rights in his corpus. Nor are there any sustained thoughts on the relationship between the state and citizen, or between law and morality. Nor does his work offer any novel or interesting theoretical insights about the nature and workings of power, privilege, class, or social advantage. . . . When one thinks about the contributions of classical American pragmatism to political theory, John Dewey and Jane Addams are much more likely to spring to mind—and with good reason—than is William James" (Rondel 2022, 211).

6 See https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/68949/the-fire-of-life.