Is Monotheism Compatible with Pluralism? Reflections on Richard Rorty's Critique of Religion

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Whatever its object-domain, pluralism replaces the one with the many. *Descriptive* pluralism maintains that, as a matter of fact, the object-domain in question is constituted by a fundamental multiplicity of items or features, items or features that cannot properly be understood as so many expressions of the one thing. Where the object-domain is modes of human enquiry, a descriptive pluralist will maintain that there are many ways of acquiring knowledge, gaining insight, producing truth, or reaching understanding, and will oppose the view that there is one correct method or procedure that unifies the sciences. Where the object-domain is modes of human life, as it is in moral and political theory, a descriptive pluralist will assert that, as a matter of fact, there are irreducibly many values worth pursuing, and irreducibly many legitimate ways of attaining happiness. This thesis stands opposed to the view that apparently divergent worthwhile ends of life really add up to the same thing (say, utility), or are so many expressions of the one good life for human beings, in terms of which they can be commensurated and ranked. *Normative* pluralism, as distinct from descriptive pluralism, commends and exalts the many over the one: it is glad about the 'fact of pluralism' where it exists, and is critical of states of affairs where it does not. Normative pluralism in epistemology, for instance, encourages multiple modes of human enquiry, the better to serve the various goals of enquiry. And normative pluralism in moral and political theory celebrates the diversity of values and ways of life where such diversity exists. It is critical of forms of life that stifle diversity, and it is typically oriented by a utopian vision in which new norms, values and forms of life are allowed to proliferate freely.

Pluralism is popular nowadays in both its descriptive and normative senses, and in epistemology as much as in moral and political theory. A number of thinkers have sought to bring out the connections between the epistemological, moral, political, descriptive and normative dimensions of pluralism. But amongst contemporary philosophers at least, none have done it in a more self-conscious and provocative way than Richard Rorty. Rorty offers us a comprehensively pluralist philosophy in which the one gives way to the many in the conception we have of ourselves both as knowers and as moral beings. While Rorty is less concerned than most other philosophical pluralists by the *problems* of pluralism – for instance, the problem of explaining how a just social order is possible amongst groups with rival conceptions of the good society – his work is exemplary in spelling out the *consequences* of embracing a radically pluralist vision.

In an essay entitled 'Pragmatism, Pluralism and Postmodernism' (the 'Afterword' of Rorty's *Philosophy and Social Hope*), Rorty defines philosophical pluralism as 'the doctrine that there is a potential infinity of equally valuable ways to lead a human life, and that these ways cannot be ranked in terms of degrees of excellence, but only in terms of the contribution to the happiness of the people who lead them and of the communities to which they belong'.[1] Pluralists, on Rorty's conception, reject the thought that human beings share a single nature or essence which provides a 'standard of excellence' against which to measure the worth of any particular way of life. Rather than supposing that there is one true or highest way of being human to which we all should aspire, or one particular form of life that ranks above all possible others, the pluralist has a vision in which individuals are free to pursue their own life projects, and to experiment with new ways of being human (or 'post-human') if they wish, so long as they do not thereby cause harm to others. The pluralist is dedicated 'to the maximization of opportunities for individual variation, and group variation insofar as the latter facilitates the ability of individuals to recreate themselves'.[2] Pluralism embraces the thought that 'the point of social organization is to encourage the greatest possible human diversity',[3] for the reason laid out by J.S. Mill in *On Liberty*, that this is the best way of securing human happiness. For Rorty, the 'liberal utopia' sketched by Mill - in which human beings flourish by being granted as much space for moral experimentation and self-creation as is compatible with the same space being granted to all - is the pluralist's 'highest hope'.[4]

Mill is not the only nineteenth-century source of Rorty's philosophical pluralism. Nietzsche is another. Rorty reads Nietzsche's perspectivism, especially as presented in *The Gay Science*, as a radically pluralist account of knowledge, according to which beliefs gain their value not by corresponding to reality but by serving multiple, non-unifiable human needs. As well as embracing this thought, Rorty also takes seriously Nietzsche's suggestion that the pluralisation of truth fatally undermines *monotheistic* belief. Rorty is sympathetic to Nietzsche's diagnosis of monotheism as a fetishism of the will to truth, whereby the power of the individual to create norms is sacrificed at the altar of a transcendent, non-human authority figure. Rorty adopts Nietzsche's talk of seeking to replace monotheism with 'polytheism', which Rorty relates to the belief that 'there is no actual or possible object of knowledge that would permit you to commensurate and rank all human needs'.[5] Polytheism, in this sense, turns away from the monotheistic and metaphysical urge to claim what the world is 'really like' and what the good life for human beings 'really' consists in.

At the same time, however, Rorty is uncomfortable with Nietzsche's 'militant atheism', not least because he thinks it ends up betraying Nietzsche's own pluralist impulse. Pluralists can, and should, stop short of Nietzsche's debunking of religion. They would be better off,

Rorty maintains, turning to the philosophical pragmatists – James and Dewey especially – for an account of how religion fits within a radically pluralist vision.

In this paper I shall examine the central features of such an account as Rorty presents them.[6] The paper has three sections. In the first, I consider how monotheism fares in light of the pluralist approach to truth proposed by Rorty and the pragmatists. The discussion here deals mainly with the reflexive stance towards belief that pluralism requires of the believer. The second section considers the way Rorty sketches the moral hopes embodied in pluralism, the basic kind of social relations that would typify a pluralist culture, and the capacity of monotheism to orient or sustain those relations. The general conclusion I draw from these considerations is that monotheism – at least in the sense Rorty gives to that term - is structurally at odds with pluralism in the ways Rorty suggests. In the third section, however, I argue that Rorty's case is vitiated by its reliance on utilitarianism. Rorty invokes utilitarianism to show how religion can be made compatible with pluralism, but - as critics of utilitarianism have long argued - utilitarianism is badly suited to this purpose because it is insensitive to the specific normative content of religion.

1. Monotheism and Truth

First, pragmatism provides a way of thinking *about* belief that is congenial to pluralists who think there are many equally legitimate *kinds* of belief. Pragmatism's master-thought, according to Rorty, is that the worth of a belief is determined not by the accuracy of its depiction of something but by the usefulness of the way it deals with a matter. Beliefs are much more like tools than pictures. When we judge a belief, we always do so by considering how well, in connection with other beliefs, it serves a particular purpose. There is no *further* consideration to be taken into account, such as whether the belief truly represents the world. The measure of belief, in other words, is its success in getting something done, and has nothing to do with some putative reality to which it corresponds. If the measure of belief were 'reality', Rorty suggests, we would be entitled to think that true beliefs come in a single package. But that becomes an unreasonable expectation as soon as beliefs are regarded as habitual ways of dealing with things. As soon as one thinks about beliefs as tools for getting things done, as Rorty's pragmatist does, one is relieved of the intellectual responsibility to *unify* one's beliefs - a responsibility that seems incumbent on those who think that their beliefs are accountable to the way things really are. One should not have a bad conscience about having diverse kinds of belief, beliefs that do not add up to a single take on the world, because the purposes beliefs serve vary widely, and rightly so.

Our liability to feel guilty about this kind of pluralism, or to be intolerant towards it even within ourselves, is due in Rorty's view to the baleful influence of two opposing anti-pluralist orientations. On the one hand, there is the homogenising tendency arising from what Gadamer called the 'unassailable and anonymous authority' of modern science.[7] If we take science as the model of intellectually respectable belief, and if our sense of intellectual responsibility impels us to bring unity to our beliefs, we might feel pressured to abandon those beliefs that do not fit the scientific outlook. Pragmatism relieves this pressure not, of course, by questioning the validity of science, but by questioning the idea that all beliefs should fit together into a harmonious whole. It does this by correcting the scientistic misunderstanding of the *authority* of science: for pragmatism, this authority is solid enough, but its source lies not in the one way the world is but in the many effective ways science takes charge of nature. The source of the authority of science is thus plural, and does not exclude the authoritativeness of other kinds of belief; in particular, religious belief. On the other hand, this conclusion should provide no solace for those who claim divine authority for their religious belief. For if there is no non-human authority behind science, *a fortiori* there is none behind religion either. The thought that a particular religion does indeed possess such authority – that it is intellectually unassailable because based on the Word of the one God – informs the second anti-pluralist disposition pragmatism aims to correct. From the pragmatist's point of view, then, scientism and traditional monotheism are two sides of the same difference-hostile coin. The anti-representationalist account of belief proposed by Rorty and other pragmatists favours pluralism by including both scientific and religious beliefs as equally respectable 'habits of action'. But it can only do this by excluding the anti-pluralist meta-beliefs contained in scientism and orthodox monotheism.

The argument so far has been that pragmatism provides an intellectual space within which respect for science can sit alongside respect for religion in one and the same self. But the argument is easily extended to apply to a culture. Pragmatism is pluralist insofar as it does not force a choice between science and religion, but allows both kinds of belief to co-exist peacefully within the life of an individual or a culture. The key move involves a redescription of the aim of belief that takes us away from thinking that belief aims at the Truth, and towards the thought that it provides recipes for action. This has further implications for the pragmatist philosophy of religion. For one, it discourages us from seeking to map cultural forms according to their capacity to put us in touch with 'the Truth'. It therefore also deters us from supposing that some cultural forms are superior to others on account of realising that capacity more fully. There is no distinct 'need to know the truth' for a culture to satisfy, and so no higher place for a culture to occupy in virtue of satisfying that need. Nor is there anything specially edifying about the so-called 'love of

truth', which would be less misleadingly described, Rorty suggests, as the love some people have for winning arguments, or reaching agreement with others, or making successful predictions, and so forth.[8]

Rorty's deflationary, de-edifying redescriptions of the 'need to know the truth' and the 'love of truth' are often addressed to those who have a one-sided or exclusionary conception of the cognitive achievements of Western science. But religious believers who delight in the deconstruction of science would be wrong to draw comfort from them, as if such redescriptions *in*flated the case for religious worldviews. For Rorty's point is that the fetishisation of truth characteristic of exclusionary scientism has its original home nowhere else than in monotheism itself.[9] The idea that beliefs are made good by bringing us in contact with a reality that transcends human practices, like the idea that lives are made good through such contact, is at root an onto-theological one. When believers in science talk of the love of truth, or the need to know the truth, or of cultural forms that capture the truth or satisfy the human longing for it, they merely reproduce the onto-theological vocabulary of their religious adversaries. In other words, Rorty's 'postmodern' critique of science is at once a critique of religion, or more precisely, a critique of the self-understanding of religion embodied in orthodox monotheism. Rorty wants to get rid of the fetishism of truth in all its forms. It has no place, he suggests, in a pluralist culture.

On account of his anti-representationalist, pragmatic conception of truth, Rorty is routinely accused of irrationalism and facile relativism. But while Rorty often allows his polemic against the fetishisation of truth to get the better of him, the charge largely misses the mark and fails to appreciate the significance of pragmatism as a cultural intervention. For one thing, Rorty by no means collapses the distinction between truth and falsity. And he does not propose that cultures or systems of belief are immune from rational criticism, or that they are on an equal footing in regards to their truth. The point is rather that the *authority* of beliefs – the authority possessed by beliefs when they are true – does not reside somewhere beyond human practices, a point that needs making because we inhabit a cultural situation marked by an inclination to project and 'thingify' that authority. For Rorty, the God of monotheism is the archetype of such fetishisation of authority, and its legacy summons our vigilance. And on this Rorty surely has a point: it *is* a typical feature of monotheism that it posits not only the existence of one God, but the one divine, human-transcendent authority behind such positing. Where human authority is acknowledged, it is typically as a proxy for God's. It is also typical of monotheism to ontologise the truth, to picture it as One and unchanging. Rorty has good grounds to suggest that this is not an accidental feature of monotheism, but is internally connected to the core monotheistic idea that the one God is the ultimate source of meaning and

being, a source that brings unity to all the truths that really matter to human beings.

Rorty presents pragmatism as an alternative to the traditional monotheistic view that beliefs are made authoritative by something more-than-human. But why, one might ask, does *that* feature, of itself, lend pragmatism a more pluralist character? Is pragmatism not just replacing one approach to truth with another, one that excludes its rival just as effectively as monotheism excluded it? And to the extent that pragmatism does function that way, is it not as hostile to pluralism as the position it opposes? It is not clear from what has been said so far why what we might call the anthropocentric orientation of pragmatism lends itself to *pluralism* more readily than a theocentric one. After all, a great many people with religious belief do rely on a sense of divine authority and would resist the move to redescribe that authority in anthropocentric terms. Would they not be just as entitled to resist such redescription in the name of pluralism? Rorty can respond in two ways. First, he can say that the *questioning* of authority will be an integral part of a pluralist culture, and that appeals to a putatively divine source of a belief's authority can only bring such questioning to a stop arbitrarily. In a context of pluralism, authority has to prove its worth in and only in the argumentative exchanges between humans.[10] And it will only be the outcome of such interaction – and not the word of God – that bestows on beliefs whatever authority they have. Second, the pragmatist view of authority contrasts with the monotheistic one by granting a role to *the many* in its composition. That is to say, whereas in monotheism authority emanates from the one voice, in pragmatism it is unintelligible apart from the many voices that participate in human conversation. Pragmatism's dialogical model of truth lends it a pluralist character lacking in the approach to truth typical of traditional monotheism.

2. Pluralist Social Hope

The considerations so far suggest that it is not so much belief in the one God that is incompatible with pluralism, but a certain way of taking that belief. It is the idea that belief in God owes its authority to the existence of God that is problematic. The suggestion is that monotheists should drop their claim to have divine backing for their beliefs if they are to fit well within a pluralist culture. But even if monotheism makes that amendment, there may be other reasons for thinking that it does not sit easily with pluralism, reasons that suggest further reform may be required. In Rorty's view there are such reasons, which I now want to consider.

As I indicated at the outset, Rorty's critique of monotheistic religion is targeted not just at its understanding of truth – the consequences of which, we have just seen, are in certain ways inimical to pluralism - but at its conception of the human ideal, that is, the best thing

one may hope for. For philosophical pluralism, as Rorty defines it, the highest hopes are well served by the idea that there is no single hierarchy of values by reference to which human beings can orient themselves in pursuits of happiness. Rather, 'there is a potential infinity of equally valuable ways to lead a human life', and the pluralist is committed to maximizing 'opportunities for individual variation' so that each person can find the particular way of leading a human life that best suits them. Clearly, if monotheism *entails* commitment to an overarching moral order by reference to which the worth of all human lives can be objectively ranked, then by definition it is incompatible with philosophical pluralism. But even if monotheism does not rule out pluralism quite so straightforwardly, Rorty suggests, it works against the pluralist conception of the human ideal in other ways.

It might help at this stage to distinguish between those features of monotheism that allegedly conflict with the pluralist ethos at what we might call the 'subjective' and 'intersubjective' levels. An example of the former kind of conflict – that is, of how the life-orientation of an individual can be detrimentally turned away from pluralism by monotheism – would be the exclusion of possibilities for self-development arising from the belief that love of God and obedience to His commandments suffices for the individual's self-realisation.[11] To the extent that monotheism posits a single source of the good, so to speak, it can blind the individual to the many, diverse, though potentially conflicting goods that can contribute to the individual's happiness. Admittedly, Rorty is averse to any talk of 'the good', and his worry would be better put by saying that monotheism encourages all individuals to believe that their happiness consists in essentially the same thing. It is no coincidence that singular designatives such as 'the Way', 'the Word', 'the Good' and so forth are so readily associated with religion, or that they typically feature in the vocabulary of religiously minded people. Moreover, the traditional monotheistically mapped path to self-realisation is in principle fixed in advance of any human individual's understanding of and striving for it. Pluralism, by contrast, allows and encourages individuals to imagine that their happiness might consist in something quite different from whatever it is that makes other people happy. Indeed, it allows us to think that 'the meaning of one life may not have anything to do with the meaning of another'.[12] It also enables individuals to relate to their lives as their own invention, as having a meaning that is made rather than found. And in having this thought or life-orientation, Rorty implies, the individual is more likely *to be* happy, or to attain the personal ideals they secretly aspire towards.

The claim that philosophical pluralism rather than monotheism is conducive to individual happiness, and that this is the decisive point in its favour, is crucial for Rorty and I'll return to it at the end. But there is another consideration we must briefly attend to first. For monotheism's

alleged tendency to inhibit the capacity of individuals to imagine themselves differently, and to explore diverse aspects of their humanity in a way that enhances their chances of happiness, would not be so bad if it were not for a parallel tendency to inhibit the individual's capacity to imagine *other* people's lives as equally legitimate expressions of *their* humanity. And indeed it is the conflict between monotheism and pluralism at this intersubjective or social level that most concerns Rorty. After all, if some individuals find that monotheism is right for them – in the sense that it provides them with the most satisfactory orientation for living – it is not the job of philosophical pluralism to instruct them otherwise. Pluralism, on Rorty's conception, does not *prohibit* monotheism as an individual creed: it only requires that monotheism sees itself as one among many equally legitimate such creeds. Philosophical pluralism, according to Rorty's formulation, provides a conceptual framework within which to regard others as equally entitled to their own path to happiness as oneself. Granting each individual as much room for self-definition and self-exploration as is compatible with the same room being granted to everyone is the most effective means, Rorty suggests, of realising the pluralist ideal. It provides the best recipe for human diversity and so for human happiness.

It is arguable that this kind of social orientation is more difficult to achieve for someone under the sway of monotheism. For monotheism, at least as traditionally conceived, lays claim to a moral truth that applies to the other as much as to oneself, and it claims to encompass all that is good under the one comprehensive, substantive vision. Furthermore, as the authority of the vision emanates as it were *from above*, it does not lend itself to negotiation between people. For pragmatism as philosophical pluralism, by contrast, there is no moral authority other than that provided by people negotiating with each other about how to maximize their happiness in and through human diversity. Pragmatist philosophical pluralism thus provides a framework for enabling due recognition of the separateness of persons, or if you like, the singularity of each individual, and is better suited for that purpose than monotheism.

Rorty shares the view of many liberals that a pluralist philosophical outlook must be based on a recognition of the fundamental separateness of individuals. But unlike some liberals at least, he wants to say that pluralism is just as much a matter of recognising and fostering social connectedness. To say that, in a liberal utopia, the meaning of one life may have nothing to do with the meaning of another must not be taken to mean that in such a society individuals will be *indifferent* to each other. This worry - that the liberal's emphasis on the separateness of individuals provides a licence for mutual indifference – can trigger the countermove that some appreciation of a shared human nature, or of the universal authority of the moral law, must be built into the moral culture of a good or decent society. By contrast, Rorty maintains that an ungrounded but

overarching commitment to projects of social cooperation, and in particular to democratic institutions, provides all the solidaristic energy a pluralist society needs.[13] Philosophical pluralism requires individuals to love and take pride in their democratic, pluralist life form, and it is the flourishing of such a form of life that defines the pluralist's highest hope. Rorty contrasts this with 'the traditional religious hope that allegiance to something big, powerful and non-human will persuade that powerful being to take your side in your struggle with other people'.[14] For this too is 'a betrayal of the ideal of human fraternity' that pragmatism is better positioned to express than traditional monotheism.

Of course, Rorty's point here is not that monotheism does not, still less cannot, provide a vehicle for the same hopes that inform philosophical pluralism. Rorty himself is deeply impressed by those strands of monotheistic religion (such as the social Gospel movement) that elevate love for the other person and social justice above all other ideals. And he urges all leftists – be they Christian, liberal or socialist – to rally together around such hopes and ideals. They would be particularly well equipped to do this, Rorty suggests, if they were to drop their adventitious metaphysical convictions, and their sense of being on the side of Truth, and were to adopt instead a de-transcendentalised pragmatist outlook according to which there is no authority higher than the free agreement of human beings and no purpose higher than the building and consolidation of democratic institutions, institutions that provide 'maximal space for individual variation'. Religion would feature *within* this variation – it would be one among many sources of private meaning or happiness – but it would by no means oversee the variation and/or provide it with justification. Under conditions of pluralism no one's private concerns have that status. As we have seen, philosophical pluralism is based on the premise that there is no limit to the number of valuable ways to lead a human life and it rejects the idea that lives as a whole can be ranked in terms of their value. Rather than being oriented by a particular notion of human perfection it is geared to the maximisation of variation: while traditional monotheism may have been well-suited to the former conception of morals and culture, the latter, pluralist utopian vision is better served by pragmatism.

3. Romantic Utilitarianism?

Rorty uses the term 'romantic utilitarianism' to describe this conception of pragmatism. He notes that the term derives from René Berthelot's 1911 study of pragmatism, but whereas Berthelot thought that romanticism and utilitarianism were too different 'to admit of synthesis', and that pragmatism was therefore doomed to failure, in Rorty's view this conjunction of ideas is pragmatism's underlying strength.[15] Whatever Berthelot's own reasons for rejecting pragmatism on this score were, I

now want to suggest that he may have had more of a point than Rorty grants. For in the approach to religion we have been considering, there are instabilities at work that have their roots, I believe, in a tension between utilitarian and non-utilitarian elements. Furthermore, utilitarianism is notoriously weak in accounting for the specific hopes and aspirations that religion, however adequately, has traditionally served to express, and a philosophy of religion that leans too heavily on utilitarian considerations is prone to reproduce that weakness. It seems to me that Rorty's approach suffers in this respect too. In the remainder of the paper I shall offer a brief amplification of these critical remarks.

For Rorty, as we have seen, happiness is the fundamental criterion for assessing the merits of religion. When evaluating religion, we should eschew futile argumentation about the truth or falsity of its assertions concerning the existence of God. A number of considerations motivate Rorty's position, including the pervasiveness of 'reasonable disagreement' in matters of religious belief and the pragmatist epistemology discussed above. These considerations suggest we should leave onto-theology behind and attend instead to the contribution religion makes to human happiness. Let us agree with Rorty that the *existence* of God cannot be settled by argument and that the energy expended by believers and atheists alike in onto-theological discourse is misspent. Does it follow that the worth of religion lies solely in its utility? Only, of course, if there is no alternative to the utilitarian construal of what it is to have practical worth, which is far from obvious. It is one thing to elevate the practical significance of religion over the theoretical worth of onto-theological discourse, it is quite another to cash out that practical significance in utilitarian terms. We can accept that the practical difference religion makes is crucial for a proper understanding and assessment of it without accepting that the measure of that difference is utility. Too often Rorty makes it seem as if practical consequences are all there is to practical significance, as if utility and practical import were one and the same. Rorty doesn't always talk this way, but it is a simplification his utilitarianism encourages.

Moreover, a similar point can be made about the value of pluralism. The value of pluralism is not just a matter of the happiness it brings, or of its useful consequences, even on Rorty's own account. For according to Rorty, the inhabitants of a liberal utopia possess a dignity and a degree of moral maturity that is lacking in traditional religious cultures, and these virtues are not obviously just one element of happiness amongst others. Rorty does argue that a culture based on the sole authority of the free consensus of its members is more conducive to human happiness than one based on extra-human authority. But this is not the only admirable thing about it: the people of the culture are praiseworthy because they are no longer driven by the childish desire to obey. They are self-reliant and no longer feel the need for non-human interventions on their part. Rorty's

position requires that these virtues are valuable in themselves irrespective of utilitarian considerations. Admittedly, Rorty suggests that pride in belonging to and participating in such a culture would consolidate people's allegiance to it, which in turn would help make them happy. But whether this type of allegiance is as rich a source of happiness as the happiness derived from allegiance to God is another matter.

This raises the prospect that if happiness were to be the criterion for evaluating religion, traditional monotheism might fare better than the de-transcendentalised, privatised version of religion at home in Rorty's liberal utopia. For this version of religion lacks the means for gratifying the religious impulse available in orthodox religious practices. Rorty is more ready than many of his fellow liberals to acknowledge the depth of this impulse. He certainly does not think it is based merely on an error, and he does not think it is merely a useless remnant of a less enlightened, less rational, pre-scientific age. At the same time, he is confident that the impulse can be redirected in a way that makes the human democratic life form, rather than some non-human power, the object of religious awe and worship. Whether or not this confidence is well-grounded is a matter of philosophical anthropology. Rorty is reluctant to engage in that kind of reflection because he fears it would re-introduce the iniquitous vocabulary of the 'essence' of the human, human 'nature' and so forth. But without it, Rorty is open to the charge of anthropological naivety that was the counter-enlightenment's stock-in-trade objection to classical utilitarianism.

Part of the problem here is that Rorty doesn't really engage with the thought that religion might express needs and aspirations that utilitarianism is bound either to marginalise or discount altogether. One way of thinking about the specific needs and aspirations religion provides a vehicle for is in terms of a desire for meaning that transcends happiness. Even if happiness is the most desirable end, for the religious mind it does not necessarily exhaust the realm of the desirable or the humanly significant. Religion can be seen as an attempt to see good even in things – such as suffering and defeat - that are unqualified bads in the utilitarian outlook.[16] If we think of religion as giving expression to a normativity beyond happiness, then it would clearly be inappropriate to measure its worth by the standards of utility. Rorty might reply that religious redemption, say, in the face of suffering and defeat ought to be a private matter, and that the privatised (and ironised) religions of a liberal utopia will satisfy all that needs to be satisfied in the desire for redemption. But it is not clear that the happiness of individuals is all that is really at stake here, or that the religious impulse can so readily be compartmentalised into self- and other-regarding elements. Critics of Enlightenment individualism and utilitarianism have for a long time insisted that a culture in which social meaning is determined *exclusively* by individual happiness is self-undermining. While Rorty is well aware of the counter-

Enlightenment distaste for the utilitarian ideal of maximised happiness, and while he acknowledges that this distaste is backed up by a rival anthropology, he has shown little interest in challenging that anthropology or in demonstrating the superiority of his own.

Another way of thinking about the specific normative content of religion relevant here is that it harbours a radical historical hope. According to this interpretation, monotheistic religion (at its best) expresses a desire not so much for a meaning that transcends happiness, as for a happiness that transcends current social understandings and practices. Religion, on this view, provides a means of keeping alive 'the social virtue of hope'.[17] It can do this by envisaging the future in terms of as yet unknown potentialities for happiness and the good life contained in the present. This is clearly the main feature of religion that Rorty himself wants to keep hold of. This 'faith in the future possibilities of moral humans, a faith which is hard to distinguish from love for, and hope for, the human community', Rorty calls 'romance'.[18] But if Rorty's pragmatism is 'romantic' on this account, it is hard to see how it can also be 'utilitarian'. For utilitarianism is hostile to the very idea that the 'good' or 'true' life is absent, except insofar as utilitarian principles are not fully instituted in the social world. For the utilitarian – including Rorty in his utilitarian moments – the future good is and can only be a more fully realised version of the present good, that is, the good as conceived and embodied in modern liberal societies. Utilitarianism claims to know already what the good life for human beings consists in, and in doing so it reflects the self-confidence and sense of *historical closure* of the epoch to which it belongs.

The tension between utilitarian and non-utilitarian elements in Rorty's pragmatism is nowhere more stark, in fact, than in this attempt at reappropriating the radical social hope of religion. Rorty the romantic speaks of 'a sense that the humanity of the future will be, although linked with us by a continuous narrative, superior to present day humanity in as yet barely imaginable ways'.[19] Rorty the utilitarian says that 'John Stuart Mill has already said pretty much everything there is to say about what sort of society to hope for'.[20] It is hard to see how 'romantic utilitarianism' can involve anything but an unstable oscillation between these outlooks.

This instability is linked to Rorty's reluctance to reflect systematically on the anthropological presuppositions of pragmatism, and to confront the rival anthropological presuppositions of pragmatism's critics. It is hard not to see Rorty's quietism on these matters as an impediment to his larger goal of elaborating a philosophical pluralism that is inclusive of religion. Rorty's critique of religion, we have seen, is guided by the idea that there is a discrepancy between the self-descriptions embedded in traditional monotheism and the central aspirations of philosophical pluralism. He is convinced that talk of obedience to something non-human, or of divine authority, or the love of truth etc. gets

in the way of the important business of imagining and building a liberal utopia. The task he sets himself is to provide alternative descriptions of monotheism, descriptions that are more congenial to the philosophical pluralist. But if these descriptions are to be anchored in something more than a groundless hope that the ideals of pluralism are realisable, we need some further anthropologically and historically informed account of the nature of the religious impulse and its modes of mutation. I do not see what favours we do philosophical pluralism by adopting a quietist stance on the nature of the human.

Notes

1. Rorty, 1999, 268.
2. Ibid, 237.
3. Ibid, 267.
4. Ibid, 272.
5. Rorty, 1998b, 23.
6. For present purposes I shall confine myself mainly to the pragmatist philosophy of religion sketched by Rorty in 'Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism' (Rorty, 1998b). While this sketch attempts to convey the spirit of pragmatism, it is not meant as a summary of the views actually held by James and Dewey. As Rorty makes clear, his own take on religion is closer to Dewey's than James's, and he explicitly rejects some of the central conclusions of James's seminal *Varieties of Religious Experience.*
7. Gadamer, 1976, 3.
8. Rorty, 1998b, 28.
9. See eg. Rorty, 2001.
10. See eg. Rorty, 2002a.
11. Rorty, 1998b, 22.
12. Rorty, 1999, 266.
13. Rorty sometimes writes as if commitment to democracy in general suffices as a source of solidaristic energy, but at other times, and more commonly, he anchors this abstract ideal in a specific democratic life-form, or what he takes to be democracy in its highest stage, namely the US (see Rorty, 1998a).
14. Rorty, 1998b, 29.
15. Rorty, 1998b, 21.
16. See eg., Taylor, 1999.
17. See eg., MacIntyre, 1995, 142.
18. Rorty, 1999, 160.
19. Rorty, 1999, 52.
20. Rorty, 2002b, 152.

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