

# Who's Afraid of Relativism?

*Community, Contingency,  
and Creaturehood*

James K. A. Smith

**B**

**Baker Academic**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2014 by James K. A. Smith

Published by Baker Academic  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Smith, James K. A., 1970–

Who's afraid of relativism? : community, contingency, and creaturehood / James K. A. Smith.

pages cm. — (The church and postmodern culture).

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8010-3973-7 (pbk.)

1. Philosophical theology. 2. Relativity. 3. Pragmatism. 4. Christian philosophy. 5. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 1889–1951. 6. Rorty, Richard. 7. Brandom, Robert. I. Title.

BT40.S656 2014

261.5'1—dc23

2013048241

Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

14 15 16 17 18 19 20 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Relativism*  
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.  
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

If those, however, who are called philosophers happen to have said anything that is true, and agreeable to our faith, the Platonists above all, not only should we not be afraid of them, but we should even claim back for our own use what they have said, as from its unjust possessors.

Augustine

It could all, of course, have been done by the angel; but then no respect would have been shown to our human status, if God appeared to be unwilling to have his word administered to us by other human beings.

Augustine

Now man exists only in dialogue with his neighbor. The infant is brought to consciousness of himself only by love, by the smile of his mother. In that encounter the horizon of all unlimited being opens itself for him, revealing four things to him: (1) that he is one in love with his mother, even in being other than his mother, and therefore all being is one; (2) that that love is good, therefore all being is good; (3) that that love is true, therefore all being is true; and (4) that that love evokes joy, therefore all being is beautiful.

Hans Urs von Balthasar

We should not regret our inability to perform a feat which no one has any idea how to perform.

Richard Rorty



---

# Contents

Series Preface 9

Preface 11

1. “It Depends”: *Creation, Contingency, and the Specter of Relativism* 15
2. Community as Context: *Wittgenstein on “Meaning as Use”* 39
3. Who’s Afraid of Contingency? *Owning Up to Our Creaturehood with Rorty* 73
4. Reasons to Believe: *Making Faith Explicit after Brandom* 115
5. The (Inferential) Nature of Doctrine: *Postliberalism as Christian Pragmatism* 151

Epilogue: *How to Be a Conservative Relativist* 179

Author Index 183

Subject Index 185



---

## Series Preface

Current discussions in the church—from emergent “postmodern” congregations to mainline “missional” congregations—are increasingly grappling with philosophical and theoretical questions related to postmodernity. In fact, it could be argued that developments in postmodern theory (especially questions of “post-foundationalist” epistemologies) have contributed to the breakdown of former barriers between evangelical, mainline, and Catholic faith communities. Postliberalism—a related “effect” of postmodernism—has engendered a new, confessional ecumenism wherein we find non-denominational evangelical congregations, mainline Protestant churches, and Catholic parishes all wrestling with the challenges of postmodernism and drawing on the culture of postmodernity as an opportunity for rethinking the shape of our churches.

This context presents an exciting opportunity for contemporary philosophy and critical theory to “hit the ground,” so to speak, by allowing high-level work in postmodern theory to serve the church’s practice—including all the kinds of congregations and communions noted above. The goal of this series is to bring together high-profile theorists in continental philosophy and contemporary theology to write for a broad, nonspecialist audience interested in the impact of postmodern theory on the faith and practice of the church. Each book in the series will, from different angles and with different questions, undertake to answer questions such as, What does postmodern theory have to say about the shape of

the church? How should concrete, in-the-pew and on-the-ground religious practices be impacted by postmodernism? What should the church look like in postmodernity? What has Paris to do with Jerusalem?

The series is ecumenical not only with respect to its ecclesial destinations but also with respect to the facets of continental philosophy and theory that are represented. A wide variety of theoretical commitments will be included, ranging from deconstruction to Radical Orthodoxy, including voices from Badiou to Žižek and the usual suspects in between (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, Foucault, Irigaray, Rorty, and others). Insofar as postmodernism occasions a retrieval of ancient sources, these contemporary sources will be brought into dialogue with Augustine, Irenaeus, Aquinas, and other resources. Drawing on the wisdom of established scholars in the field, the series will provide accessible introductions to postmodern thought with the specific aim of exploring its impact on ecclesial practice. The books are offered, one might say, as French lessons for the church.



---

## Preface

Like the title of Jussi Adler-Olsen’s crime novel, I sometimes feel like “the keeper of lost causes,” the patron of bad ideas. I have a habit of affirming what other Christians despise (and vice versa!). I tend to be nonplussed by the supposed resources offered to Christian thought by “mainstream” philosophy, which puts me on the outs with most trends in contemporary Christian philosophy (e.g., evidentialist apologetics or “analytic theology”). Instead, I try to give a fair hearing to schools of thought that seem not only unhelpful to Christian understanding but downright inhospitable and antithetical—often only to discover that the script is flipped and these “godless” philosophers might actually have something to teach us. Even more strongly, their work might be a catalyst for us to remember aspects of Christian orthodoxy that we have forgotten—a forgetting that sometimes happens in the name of defending orthodoxy.

In *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?* I took up the unholy trinity of Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Michel Foucault as allies in the task of formulating a “catholic” postmodernism. Rather than seeing them primarily as threats or “defeaters” of the faith, I explored the ways that their philosophical critique of modernity was a catalyst for the church to remember what it had forgotten. I did so in the Augustinian spirit of “looting the Egyptians”—stealing philosophical insights from the pagans and putting them to service in worship of the Triune God, hoping

to avoid melting them down into golden calves. This strategy of bringing “every thought captive” to Christ has long marked Christian engagement with philosophy. I just exported it from Greece to France.

I see this book as an extension of that project, now staging a heist of the pragmatists Ludwig Wittgenstein, Richard Rorty, and Robert Brandom to help us grapple with a phenomenon often associated with postmodernity: relativism. But once again, I’m staking out a position that is not likely to be popular, or will at least seem counterintuitive, if not downright dangerous. My thesis is that Christians *should* be “relativists,” of a sort, precisely because of the biblical understanding of creation and creaturehood. I leave it to the remainder of this book to actually try to make a case for that intuition, and to tease out its implications (which might not be what you think they are).

Engaging pragmatism is also a belated demand for me. It is a philosophical tradition that points out some of the problems with French phenomenology, which has shaped my thinking hitherto. In many ways, I was prompted to finally undertake this line of research because of the exemplary work of Charles Taylor, who has been my philosophical north star over the last several years.

While this book has a constructive project of advancing a “Christian pragmatism” and exploring the implications of that for theology and ministry, I also hope it can serve a pedagogical purpose as an accessible introduction to an important philosophical tradition and three key philosophers whose works are notoriously difficult and slippery. Much of the book simply offers a clear exposition of these philosophers and a representative text from each: Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), and Robert Brandom’s concise work *Articulating Reasons* (2000). Together, these comprise an ongoing conversation in the late twentieth century that continues to reverberate in the twenty-first. In a way, this book should be read alongside these primary texts; but it might also be that this book could first be read as a portal to these challenging primary works. Some more technical points are pushed down into footnotes so that undergraduate students need not be distracted by more arcane issues. But graduate and seminary students, as well as scholars, will want to look carefully at the qualifications and extensions suggested in the notes. In order

to try to illustrate key philosophical concepts and to help students “picture” the issues under discussion, each of the first four chapters includes expositions of a film: *Wendy and Lucy* (chap. 1), *Lars and the Real Girl* (chap. 2), *Crazy Heart* (chap. 3), and *I’ve Loved You So Long* (chap. 4). Just as readers would do well to have the primary texts alongside this book, so too I hope readers might watch these films as artistic parallels to my argument. I hope those professors who use the book as a textbook might find ways to incorporate the films into their pedagogy.

This book is best understood as an essay: a focused, idiosyncratic angle on some themes and issues. There are, no doubt, vast literatures that could have been consulted that don’t appear in the footnotes. I make no claims to have “mastered” the field in this regard. This is but a foray. My task is exploratory and programmatic, not exhaustive and pedantic. The book simply grows out of first-hand encounter with primary texts, discussed with students over the past several years, with a view to addressing a challenge often bandied about at youth retreats: the specter of relativism. The orienting conviction is that if, even on a “popular” level, we are going to invoke philosophical concepts—even if only as philosophical bogeymen—we have some responsibility to make ourselves accountable to philosophy. So think of this little book as an exercise in philosophical accountability.

The core of this book was worked out in two renditions of my senior philosophy seminar, Philosophy of Language and Interpretation. I’m profoundly grateful to the students at Calvin College—both philosophy majors and not—who are willing to sit around that seminar table, prepared and eager to discuss difficult texts and grapple with disconcerting questions, all while tolerating my ridiculously muddled “diagrams” that are *intended* to make things clear. I have learned much from them, and this book is in many ways a fruit of teacher-student collaboration.

I also enjoyed the opportunity to crystallize a first draft of several chapters when I was invited to give the 2013 H. Orton Wiley Lectures at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego, California. I’m grateful to Professor Brad Kelle, Provost Kerry Fulcher, and the entire PLNU community for their hospitality and gracious reception of the lectures. Conversations there helped me hone points of the argument. Turning those lectures into a book was made possible by the generous sabbatical afforded me by Calvin College in

the spring of 2013. I then received helpful critical feedback on the manuscript from Ron Kuipers, Chad Lakies, and Tommy Graves, to whom I'm grateful.

The completion of this book was not without its challenges. And like so many authors, I wish I had more time to let it percolate, ripen, mature—pick your metaphor. But then I was reminded of Wittgenstein's comment in a 1945 preface to the book that would be published as the *Philosophical Investigations*: "I should have liked to produce a good book. This has not come about, but the time is past in which I could improve it."<sup>1</sup> It seemed fitting that a book that argues for a Christian appreciation of contingency, finitude, and dependence should be sent off into the world with some fear and trembling, but also hope and trust.

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1953), vi.

---

# “It Depends”

## Creation, Contingency, and the Specter of Relativism

### The Specter of Relativism

If there is any clear and present danger in our postmodern world, surely it is “relativism.” Identified as the enemy by everyone from youth pastors to university presidents, relativism is both a universal threat and common rallying cry. It is the monster that will make away with our children while at the same time eroding the very foundations of American society (apparently relativism is going to be very busy!).

In fact, for some Christian commentators, postmodernism just *is* relativism. J. P. Moreland, for example, claims that postmodernism “represents a form of cultural relativism about such things as reality, truth, reason, value, linguistic meaning, the self and other notions. On a postmodern view, there is no such thing as objective reality, truth, value, reason, and so forth. All these are social constructions, creations of linguistic practices, and as such are relative not to individuals but to social groups that share a narrative.”<sup>1</sup> In

1. J. P. Moreland, *Kingdom Triangle: Recover the Christian Mind, Renovate the Soul, Restore the Spirit's Power* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 77.

a similar vein, D. A. Carson shares Moreland's worry and succinctly assesses the situation: "From the perspective of the Bible," he concludes, "relativism is treason against God and his word."<sup>2</sup>

This isn't just an evangelical worry either. In a homily just before the conclave that elected him pope, Joseph Ratzinger decried what he described as the "dictatorship of relativism": "Today," he noted, "having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church is often labeled as fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be 'tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine,' seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires."<sup>3</sup>

We seem to have an ecumenical consensus here: relativism is the very antithesis of the "absolute truth" (Absolute Truth) we proclaim in the gospel. Relativism is something we should be worried about, even afraid of. So who in their right mind would sign up to defend such a monster?

Well, I'd like to give it a shot. Or, at least, I would like to introduce some nuance into our reactionary dismissals and caricatured fear-mongering—particularly because I'm concerned with what is offered as an antidote: claims to "absolute" truth. In some ways, the medicine might be worse for faith than the disease. Should we be afraid of relativism? Perhaps. But should we be equally afraid of the "absolutism" that is trotted out as a defense? I think so. And not because it violates the dictates of liberal toleration, but because it harbors a theological impulse that might just be heretical. The Christian *reaction* to relativism betrays a kind of theological tic that characterizes contemporary North American Christianity—namely, an evasion of contingency and a suppression of creaturehood. In this respect, I think "post-modern relativism" (a term that would only ever be uttered by critics, with a dripping sneer) often appreciates aspects of our finite creaturehood better than the Christian defenses that seem to inflate our creaturehood to Creator-hood. In other words, I

2. D. A. Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 132.

3. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Mass for the Election of the Supreme Pontiff, St. Peter's Basilica, April 18, 2005, [http://www.ewtn.com/pope/words/conclave\\_homily.asp](http://www.ewtn.com/pope/words/conclave_homily.asp).

think relativists might have something to teach us about what it means to be a *creature*.

But “relativism” is a pretty hazy figure, and there is nothing like a unified “school” of “relativist thought” (despite how some critics might talk).<sup>4</sup> So to focus our target, and thus avoid throwing misguided haymakers at a vague sparring partner, I’m going to consider a specific case: the philosophical school of thought described as “pragmatism.” My reasoning is simple: whenever critics begin to decry “postmodern relativism” (say it out loud, with a gravelly scowl), inevitably we know whose name is going to come up: Richard Rorty, whipping boy of middlebrow Christian intellectuals and analytic philosophers everywhere, the byword for everything that is wrong with postmodernism and academia. The Rorty scare is like the red menace, giving license to philosophical McCarthyism and rallying the troops in defense.

Now, I think many of these critics *should* be worried by Rorty. He calls into question some of our most cherished shibboleths and clichés, pulling out the rug from beneath some of our most fundamental philosophical assumptions. I’m not out to show that Rorty is no threat, nor is my goal to disclose the “real” Rorty who will turn out to be a tame friend of the philosophical status quo. To the contrary, Rorty’s pragmatism *does* have all the features of the “relativism” Christians love to castigate and fume against. That’s why, when Christian scholars are looking for a foil, Rorty inevitably appears.

However, I also think it is important to situate Rorty within a philosophical lineage—and that lineage is what he describes as “pragmatism,” a school of thought he (rather idiosyncratically) saw stemming from the triumvirate of Ludwig Wittgenstein, John Dewey, and Martin Heidegger.<sup>5</sup> We might think of pragmatism as postmodernism with an American accent: a little more

4. If anyone uses the plural noun “postmoderns” to describe a group of people, you can be pretty confident that person is working with a caricature.

5. Later pragmatists like Robert Brandom and Jeffrey Stout see the heritage as even older, going back to Hegel—not the Hegel of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* but more the *ethical* Hegel—the Hegel of *Elements of a Philosophy of Right*. See, for example, Robert Brandom’s invocations of Hegel in his afterword to *Between Saying and Doing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 216–17. But Rorty also tips his hat to Hegel in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 135.

straightforward and a little less mercurial than French theory, but still a radical critique of the modern philosophical project.<sup>6</sup> Inspired by the later Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is a stark but serious articulation of "relativism."<sup>7</sup> And the work of Rorty's student Robert Brandom has extended this "pragmatist" project even while also offering a critique of both Wittgenstein and Rorty.

So if we want to take relativism seriously, we can't rail against a chimera of our own making, congratulating ourselves for having knocked down a straw man. To avoid this, I'm suggesting that we engage this pragmatist stream in Anglo-American philosophy as a serious articulation of "relativism." This will make us accountable to a body of literature and not let us get away with vague caricatures. So my procedure is to offer substantive expositions of works by Wittgenstein, Rorty, and Brandom, which are not often provided by their critics who love to pluck quotes out of context in order to scandalize (or terrify) the masses. We will see how their arguments unfold, why they reach the conclusions they do, and *then* assess how we ought to think about it all from a Christian perspective. As I've already hinted, I actually think there is something for us to learn from these philosophers—that pragmatism can be a catalyst for Christians to remember theological convictions that we have forgotten in modernity. Granted, none of these pragmatists have any interest in defending orthodox Christianity; I won't pretend otherwise. But I will suggest that taking them seriously might actually be an impetus for us to recover a more orthodox Christian faith—a faith more catholic than the modernist faith of their evangelical despisers.

Let me clarify from the outset: I can pretty much guarantee I'm one of the most conservative people in the room, so to speak. So please don't think I'm trotting this out as a prelude to offering you a "progressive" Christianity. Indeed, I will argue that if pragmatism helps us understand the conditions of finitude, then our trajectory should be "catholic."<sup>8</sup> The end of my project is not an eviscerated, liberal Christianity but, in fact, a catholic conservatism.

6. Cf. Nancey Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity: Philosophical Perspectives on Science, Religion, and Ethics* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997).

7. Rorty is even more explicit about this in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

8. In this sense, my argument here parallels the conclusions I reached (via different channels) in *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*



## The Kids Are Not All Right: Relativism, Social Constructionism, and Anti-Realism

In order to motivate our immersion in Wittgenstein, Rorty, and Brandom, I would like to try to concretize this “specter” of relativism a bit more seriously—though that’s a bit like trying to catch a ghost. To do so, I will engage two sober, scholarly critics of relativism: sociologist Christian Smith and philosopher Alvin Plantinga. Both exemplary Christian scholars, they share a common critique of the bogeyman of postmodernism as a form of relativism. So rather than trotting out easy targets that could be easily dismissed, I want you to hear critiques of relativism characterized by both scholarly rigor and Christian concern.

### *Christian Smith on Social Constructionism*

Relativism traffics under other names and mutates into different forms. One of those is “social constructionism” (or “constructivism”): the notion that we somehow *make* our world. Rather than being a collection of brute facts that we bump up against, social constructionism emphasizes that “the world” is an environment of our making. So rather than being accountable to a “real” world that imposes itself on our concepts and categories, in fact our concepts *create* “reality.” Christian Smith is concerned with its strongest<sup>9</sup> form, which claims something like the following:

9. Smith distinguishes between what he calls “weak” social constructionism and “strong” social constructionism in *What Is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 121–22. He actually affirms “weak” social constructionism (he calls it a “realist” version of the claim) as simply recognizing that “all human knowledge is conceptually mediated and can be and usually is influenced by particular and contingent sociocultural factors such as material interests, group structures, linguistic categories, technological development, and the like—such that what people believe to be real is significantly shaped not only by objective reality but also by their sociocultural contexts” (122). It is tempting to deflect his critique of postmodernism by showing that folks like Rorty hold to something like this. But I won’t do so. I think Smith is right to hear in Rorty something more radical, closer to what he calls “strong” social constructionism. However, below I will suggest that this weak/strong distinction is very unstable and ultimately untenable.

Reality itself for humans is a human, social construction, constituted by human mental categories, discursive practices, definitions of situations, and symbolic exchanges that are sustained as “real” through ongoing social interactions that are in turn shaped by particular interests, perspectives, and, usually, imbalances of power—our knowledge about reality is therefore entirely culturally relative, since no human has access to reality “as it really is” . . . because we can never escape our human epistemological and linguistic limits to verify whether our beliefs about reality correspond with externally objective reality.<sup>10</sup>

Now that *does* sound like something to be worried about. Social constructionism, you might say, is the scholarly rendition of relativism that Smith sets out to critique. Notice its features: it begins with the assumption that humans *constitute* our “reality”; that this act of “making” our world is inevitably *social* and thus depends on a community or society or “people”; that our knowledge of reality is therefore *relative to* the categories and concepts that our community gives us; and that this means we can never “know” whether our beliefs *correspond* to reality because there would be no way to step outside a community to check whether our categories “match” an *external* reality.

In this description you can also hear Smith’s worry: if social constructionism were true, then there are no checks and balances, no “outside” that could curb our inventions and preferences. We could just make up the world any old way we want—and if “we” want horrible things or want to create a “reality” in which slavery or racism or pedophilia are “good,” there’s nothing to stop us. This is why the specter of relativism becomes scariest when we get to morality: rather than being a vague, almost trivial puzzlement about mundane matters (“You mean some people don’t think there really *are* pelicans outside of my cranium?!”), things start to get serious, and scary, when we start talking about moral issues (“You mean some people think we can just make up our own morality—that there’s no right or wrong?!”).

Smith’s account gets there soon enough. If social constructionism is true, he concludes, then there are no “objective” moral facts

10. *Ibid.*, 122. (And yes: that was one sentence in the original!)

or standards “outside” of us and our communities.<sup>11</sup> And if that’s the case, then “anything goes.”<sup>12</sup>

You can see where this is going. If our moral categories are nothing more than the expressions of some community’s preferences, then there will be no recourse to critique a *bad* community’s bad morals. So, for example, “racism and injustice are indexed as morally wrong for us. But what if some other person or community constructively ‘indexes’ the social patterns behind those ‘wrongs’ as morally acceptable—as some in fact do? The constructionist, by virtue of the innate intellectual limitations of his or her own theoretical system, has no more persuasive leverage to apply.”<sup>13</sup> Constructionism and relativism seem to leave us in the position of being unable to prevent racism, oppression, and other forms of injustice because they can’t avail themselves of moral “facts.” “All that is in fact left in this approach for the making of moral

11. Smith actually trots out the “self-defeating” critique at this point—that strong constructionism is morally self-defeating because most social constructionists actually have very strong views about what a *better* society looks like; but to advocate for a *better* society “presumes the possession of real moral standards” (ibid., 138); yet of course it is just such moral standards that strong constructionism eradicates “by denying the existence of real moral facts” (139). So Smith effectively says to the constructionist/relativist: you can’t have your cake and eat it too. But there is another option—namely, an account of how one could have *moral* standards without having to claim that they are “objective.” As we’ll see, this is precisely what Rorty hopes to offer. (We’ll have to see whether his account is adequate.)

Finally, Smith has a bit of a habit of assuming what he’s supposed to be proving: so social constructionism is taken to be wrong *because* it precludes “real moral facts” (139)—even “real moral standards” (138). But that’s not an *argument* against social constructionism. You can’t say social constructionism is wrong *because* it doesn’t get you what “moral realism” does, since the difference between them is precisely what’s at issue. We’ll return to this below.

12. Consider, for example, how Smith defines “moral relativism” elsewhere.

By “moral relativism” we mean the descriptive belief that moral standards are culturally defined—that the truth or falsity of moral claims and judgments is not universal or objective but instead relative to the particular historical and cultural beliefs, views, traditions, and practices of particular groups of people, which leads to the normative belief that everyone ought to tolerate all of the moral beliefs and belief-justified behaviors of others, even when they are very different from our own cultural or moral standards, since no universal or objective moral standard exists by which to judge their beliefs and behaviors. (*Souls in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2011], 251n4)

13. Smith, *What Is a Person?*, 140.

commitments are personal preference, arbitrary choice, and power to enforce and impose.”<sup>14</sup>

It is in this context that Smith makes his pitch for “moral realism” as an antidote to the relativism of (strong) social constructionism.<sup>15</sup> But one might ask whether he immediately overreaches, since he puts it this way: “It is *only* a belief in the existence of truths that are independent of our thinking about them that can motivate the desire to subjugate our desires, preferences, ideologies, and politics to the search for truth as best as we can grasp it.”<sup>16</sup> Only a “realism” that accounts for our beliefs as “corresponding” to an “objective” reality can really be *moral*. Smith continues: “The fact that for most of us the world is not the way we would like it to be tells us that a largely objective reality exists that powerfully affects our lives, which is much more than simply the product of human interactions. If so, then our knowledge of that reality should be shaped as much as possible by the objective nature of its being, not by our projected desires and preferences for it. That is realism.”<sup>17</sup>

It's the “*only*” that is the problem here. First, Smith's claim is largely stipulative and unwarranted—asserted as if it were just “obvious,” but not demonstrated. But second, it just seems empirically false.<sup>18</sup> For example, Richard Rorty is very much committed to the amelioration of suffering, and *motivated* to change the shape of our society; indeed, he's a veritable evangelist for democracy. But he has this desire and motivation *without* the “realist” ontology that Smith says is a *requirement* for such reform. For Smith to retort

14. *Ibid.*, 141.

15. In addition to the question raised below, this raises another question: If relativist constructionism is a relatively new phenomenon, displacing age-old “realism” and the tradition of “moral absolutes,” then isn't it fair to ask, How did good old traditional realism fare in preventing racism and injustice? Indeed, what do we make of those racists who are realists—who are confident that they see things “the way they are,” who believe that their conceptual categories correspond to “reality?” What of those who take it as a “moral fact” that whites are the superior race? It seems that realism might not be much of a pragmatic or moral advantage in this respect.

16. *Ibid.*, 143–44, emphasis added.

17. *Ibid.*, 145. Yes, “that” is realism; but “realism” includes some epistemological and ontological commitments *beyond* what's just been stated. As I will show in chap. 3, Rorty can affirm almost everything Smith says here, but wouldn't thereby commit himself to “realism.”

18. I use the term “false” knowing that Smith might object, but as we'll see later, realists are not the only ones who can avail themselves of the terms “true” and “false.”

that Rorty is trapped by incoherence is not very persuasive; Rorty is a pretty smart guy, and he’s heard this before, so maybe—just maybe—there’s more to this?

Here we get to one of my core concerns in this book. The “realism” that Smith invokes and defends is not just an ethical theory. It is ultimately rooted in a metaphysics and a philosophy of language. Smith himself recognizes that what’s at issue here is a *philosophical* question “of the relation among language, reality, and knowledge.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, we’re bumping up against fundamental issues in philosophy of language—and Smith concedes that he’s no philosopher of language.<sup>20</sup> Nor does he consult philosophers of language or school himself on the state of the question in their field. So what we get is a bit of freelance philosophizing by a sociologist, making quite grand claims about the need to recover a “referential theory of language” and a “correspondence” theory of truth, with nary attention to the *philosophical* challenges to such a theory over the past fifty years.

Now I’m the last person to decry interdisciplinary efforts. So I am not criticizing Smith for traipsing on the turf of philosophers. He’s absolutely right: the questions posed by social constructionism in the social sciences lead to fundamental issues in philosophy of language and metaphysics—questions of how we understand the relation between language and reality. I applaud him for recognizing this and tackling the issues. But our interdisciplinary forays need to make themselves accountable to the state of the conversation in those relevant fields, and it’s here that I find Smith’s account lacking. While this book will amount to a critique of his proposal, I hope it might also be viewed as something of an assist: a philosopher of language taking up the issues that Smith has rightly raised.

And this is where the pragmatism of Wittgenstein, Rorty, and Brandom is directly relevant. In fact, I agree with much of Smith’s critique of the incoherence of “strong” constructionism, which really just ends in skepticism.<sup>21</sup> But I think there is a form of

19. Smith, *What Is a Person?*, 154.

20. *Ibid.*, 159.

21. Smith focuses on the incoherence of many forms of strong constructionism by noting that most proposals stem from an acceptance of Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of language (*What Is a Person?*, 153–57). I think Smith is right to point out incoherencies in this school of thought, which retains the basic shape of a “representationalist” epistemology but then denies any role for a “referent.” Indeed, I think the

constructionism (you might even say “relativism”) that Smith has not actually addressed—a form that stems from Wittgenstein and is characteristic of the philosophical tradition known as “pragmatism.” The only social constructionism that will be able to evade Smith’s critique will be a pragmatist version that emerges from Wittgenstein’s more radical critique of *representationalism* (or *referentialism*). These are roughly synonymous ways of describing a particular view of the relationship between language, reality, and knowledge as a relation of ideas (“representations”) in my mind that “correspond” to reality “outside” my mind. Charles Taylor, commenting on Wittgenstein’s critique, calls this the inside/outside picture of knowledge (the “I/O picture,” for short): knowledge is a matter of getting something “inside” our minds to hook onto things “outside” our minds.<sup>22</sup>

But for pragmatists like Wittgenstein, Rorty, and Brandom, this “picture” is precisely the problem. “A *picture* held us captive,” Wittgenstein remarked in the *Investigations*. “And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.”<sup>23</sup> “Realism” of the sort Christian Smith is touting is the answer to a question we shouldn’t be asking, precisely because it is predicated on this I/O picture. And this I/O representationalist picture has even become sedimented into our “folk” epistemologies, our everyday assumptions about how we relate to the world. Because the I/O picture has settled into our

---

work of Jacques Derrida (who has been influential for some of my own earlier work) remains captive to a “picture” here that is precisely the problem—which is why some forms of deconstruction never quite escape a representationalist paradigm and end up as a kind of skepticism. But as I will show, following Charles Taylor, there is a more radical stream of social constructionism that rejects this whole representationalist “picture” of knowledge and beliefs.

22. Charles Taylor, “Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 26. In a related article, Taylor points out that this epistemological picture is mechanistic: “If we see [perception] as another process in a mechanistic universe, we have to construe it as involving as a crucial component the passive reception of impressions from the external world. Knowledge then hangs on a certain relation holding between what is ‘out there’ and certain inner states that this external reality causes in us.” Taylor, “Overcoming Epistemology,” in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 3–4. This is why, below, we’ll often find Rorty and Brandom talking about thermostats and photocells.

23. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1953), §115.

“everyday” attitude, it is “natural” for us to have “realist” worries. Indeed, the picture fools us into thinking that if we reject correspondence or representationalism, we’re rejecting reality. And it is very hard to break out of this picture. As Taylor comments, “It is not enough to escape its activity just to declare that one has changed one’s opinion on these questions. One may, for instance, repudiate the idea of representation, claim that one has no truck with this, that nothing lies between us and the world we know, and still be laboring within the picture.”<sup>24</sup>

This is precisely the situation when it comes to Christian Smith’s attempt to revive realism, albeit a “critical” realism. More critically, Smith’s rather naïve invocation of the need to recover a “referentialist” account of language seems blithely unaware of the force and features of the pragmatist critique of reference and representation.<sup>25</sup> The only relativism worth its salt—the only relativism worth engaging, and from which we might have something to learn—will be a relativism that calls into question this picture—calls into question just the referentialism that Smith extols.<sup>26</sup> But does that mean that *truth* is called into question? Or that core claims of the Christian faith are eviscerated? Is “realism” the only way to affirm something as *true*? I don’t think so, and it is the hasty assumption otherwise that I want to contest in this book.

### *Alvin Plantinga on Anti-realism*

I’ve suggested that relativism wears many masks. At times it shows up as sophomoric, popular renditions like, “Well, that might

24. Taylor, “Overcoming Epistemology,” 28. Taylor goes on to consider how this picture remains operative in the work of Donald Davidson, even though Davidson is a radical critic of “foundationalism” (28–30).

25. Taylor goes on to explain how it is representationalism and the I/O picture, not pragmatism, that leads to skepticism (*ibid.*, 38–39).

26. This is why, ultimately, the distinction between “weak” and “strong” social constructionism is irrelevant. “Weak” social constructionism—or Smith’s “critical realism”—is still *referentialist* and *representationalist*, continuing to accept the “inside/outside” anthropology that undergirds this epistemology (Taylor). It is this picture that pragmatism calls into question, and I suggest that (1) nothing about Christian faith *requires* that we accept representationalism, and (2) there might be good theological reasons to reject such a representationalism and thus agree with the pragmatists—to a point. Rorty would say that critical realism is the answer to a question we should stop asking.

be wrong for you, but not for me.” There are also more sophisticated forms, as we saw in social constructionist accounts of reality. Another scholarly or “academic” form of relativism traffics under the banner of “anti-realism.”<sup>27</sup> As you might guess, anti-realism is “against”—or at least denies—just the sort of “realism” that Christian Smith defends. But while realists hastily surmise that this means anti-realists deny the existence of an extra-cranial world, in fact what these so-called anti-realists are usually denying is the representationalist picture of knowledge that posits an inside/outside. In that sense, pragmatists like Rorty are not “anti-realists” because they think the whole realist/anti-realist debate rests on a category mistake—a contingent, faulty, “modern” picture of knowledge that we should reject.

As you can imagine, it’s not a far distance from *moral* worries about relativism (or anti-realism) to specifically *theological* worries. If relativism obliterates moral facts, what does it do to God? In its strongest form, the worry about social constructionism would be that it means *we* “construct” God—that God, rather than being an eternal, transcendent Being who precedes us (and speaks to us, and loves us), is instead a product of our social construction, an invention we create. There “is” no “God” apart from the entity/concept that we “construct.” In Feuerbach’s version of this deflationary account of religious belief, God is actually *us* writ large, a projection of all that we are not.<sup>28</sup> If *that* is the implication of relativism, then it is clearly a view antithetical to orthodox Christian faith. So we need to grapple with this challenge.

Alvin Plantinga deals with such accounts as possible “defeaters” of Christian belief.<sup>29</sup> And he explicitly addresses Rorty’s deflation-

27. See Alvin Plantinga, “How to Be an Anti-Realist,” presidential address to the Western Division of the APA, April 29, 1982, in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 56 (1982): 47–70. Plantinga targets the “Continental Anti-Realism in such philosophers as Richard Rorty” and the “Linguistic Anti-Realism of Wittgenstein and his many followers” in his Stob Lectures, *The Twin Pillars of Christian Scholarship*, in *Seeking Understanding: The Stob Lectures, 1986–1998* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 128–32.

28. See Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*. For sympathetic discussion, see Van A. Harvey, *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

29. See Plantinga’s explanation of “defeaters” (and defeater defeaters) in *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 359–66.



ary account of truth as an example of a potential "postmodern" defeater, asking quite simply, "Is postmodernism inconsistent with Christian belief?" The beginning of Plantinga's answer is worth noting. In some ways, he says, "postmodern" claims are not defeaters of Christian belief because "some of them are entirely congenial to it. For example, postmoderns typically reject classical foundationalism, which has also been rejected by such doughty spokespersons for Christian belief as Abraham Kuyper, William Alston, and Nicholas Wolterstorff and, for that matter, in an anticipatory fashion by Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Edwards."<sup>30</sup> So you heard it from Plantinga first: Kuyper and Rorty might not be as far apart as one might think.

But let's not sit down for a round of "Kumbaya" just yet. "Other postmodern claims," Plantinga emphasizes, "do appear to be incompatible with Christian belief: for example, the claims that God is dead, that there are no 'objective' moral standards, and perhaps also the claim that there isn't any such thing as *truth*, at least as commonsensically thought of."<sup>31</sup>

I haven't run into many so-called "postmodern" theorists who actually go around saying "there isn't any such thing as *truth*." That would be a bit too earnest and direct, not befitting their irony. It's certainly not something that Rorty says. Instead of seeing them reject "any such thing as truth," it would be better to say that they offer us *deflationary accounts* of truth. They *explain* truth in terms other than our (realist) habits incline us to. So they don't deny truth, nor do they forfeit the ability to be able to say, "X is true"; they just don't think that truth is a mechanism by which concepts in our heads magically hook onto entities outside of our heads. If *that* is how you usually think about truth—if that is your default and "commonsensical" picture of truth—then it will seem like Rorty is denying that there is truth. But in fact he's just not buying the story we usually tell about truth.

30. *Ibid.*, 423. He goes on to note that postmodernism and Christianity share concerns about the poor, oppression, and systemic injustice, and both have a hearty sense of self-suspicion and hold to fallibilism (424).

31. *Ibid.*, 424, his emphasis. Both Rorty and Charles Taylor would caution against making any hasty assumptions about what is "commonsensical" when it comes to truth. An entire "picture" of knowledge that is relatively "new" (i.e., modern) has seeped down into our folk consciousness so that a representationalist account of knowing is *now* "commonsensical." But that doesn't mean it is *natural*.

Plantinga seems to appreciate something like this. So he summarizes the postmodern defeater in this way: “There is one common postmodern sort of view of truth according to which what is true depends on what we human beings say or think”; and that, he adds, “*does seem incompatible with Christian belief*” because that claim would mean “whether it is true that there is such a person as God depends upon us and what we do or think.”<sup>32</sup> Plantinga latches on to Rorty’s provocative claim that “truth is what our peers will let us get away with saying.”<sup>33</sup> In effect this would mean that “God depends on us for his existence”—or at least depends on our peers<sup>34</sup>—and “from a Christian perspective, that is wholly absurd. This way of thinking about truth, therefore, is incompatible . . . with Christian belief.”<sup>35</sup>

Ultimately, I want us to feel the force of Plantinga’s concern, but hold off before drawing his conclusion just yet. I wholly agree with him that any understanding of truth that would make God’s existence dependent upon us would be incompatible with orthodox

32. *Ibid.*, 424.

33. *Ibid.*, 429, citing Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 176 (slightly amended). (We will deal with this claim in context in chap. 3 below.) Plantinga glosses this as follows: “Presumably Rorty’s claim is that the truth of a belief or proposition depends in some important way on social reality of one sort or another; truth is in some way a function of society and what it does or would do. What is true ‘for us,’ then, will depend somehow on our own society” (*Warranted Christian Belief*, 431). But those qualifications (*in some important way; in some way; somehow*) are crucial. It is not at all clear, depending on how these qualifiers are understood, that *this* sort of claim is necessarily incompatible with Christian faith. Indeed, one could suggest that Plantinga’s own account of warrant already absorbs something like these sorts of considerations. (Plantinga notes that his account of “warrant,” as articulated in *Warrant and Proper Function*, makes warrant “*relative to circumstances*” [*ibid.*, 428, emphasis added].)

34. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 429. In his APA address, Plantinga comments on Rorty’s claim: “The idea is not, I take it, that our peers are both so splendidly informed and so fastidious that as a matter of fact they’ll let us get away with saying something if and only if that thing is true” (“How to be an Anti-Realist,” 50). It is true (ironically) that Rorty does *not* mean that our peers have “correspondent” knowledge of “the way things are,” which then functions as a realism by proxy. However, as we will see in a more careful exposition of Rorty’s argument, our peers will *not* just let us get away with anything, and that’s because we inhabit a world that constrains us in some way. It’s just that as soon as realists like Plantinga or Smith hear “constraint” language, they think the *only* account must be “correspondence.” We’ll return to these matters in chap. 4.

35. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 425.

Christian belief. But I’d like us to slow down the game film here and reconsider the moves that got us to his hasty conclusion. We need to be a little more careful with a few of them. First, we will want to confirm that the pragmatist tradition of Wittgenstein, Rorty, and Brandom really does argue that “what is true depends on what we human beings say or think” (as I think it does). Then, second, we need to carefully consider *why* these pragmatists make such claims, and whether those claims aren’t in fact rooted in close attention to the conditions of our finitude and creaturehood. When we do so, I think we’ll find that pragmatism is a robust philosophy of contingency that is wholly compatible with the Christian doctrine of creation—and even something of a prophetic reminder of the importance of the Creator/creature distinction. Third, we’ll want to confirm whether they draw the sort of metaphysical conclusions from this that Plantinga attributes to them. For example, do they really mean to claim that the human, social conditions of knowing and truth claims are metaphysically creative? Or that unless humans *say* something “is true” that things don’t *exist*?

Then, and only then, can we finally re-ask Plantinga’s question: Is such a (pragmatist) view of truth inconsistent with Christian belief? But we’ll also flip the script and ask, Is the “realist” picture proffered by Smith and Plantinga the best—or even the *only*—epistemological option for Christians? Or could there in fact be good *theological* reasons to raise questions about realism and the epistemology it assumes? Could there be reasons and resources, internal to Christian confession, that should prompt us to think differently about truth and knowledge?

### **Picturing Contingency and Solidarity: *Wendy and Lucy***

Those Christians who foment alarm about the threat of relativism often invoke “absolute truth” as both a casualty and antidote. What’s threatened by relativism is “absolute” truth, and yet the only thing that can deliver us from relativism is “absolute” truth. The frequent and sloppy use of the qualifier “absolute” leads to a common confusion of “relativism” with sheer arbitrariness. So when someone encounters the claim that truth “is relative,” this is what they *hear*: truth is *arbitrary*—anything goes. In response, Christians then invoke “absolute” truth as an insulator and buffer

against such arbitrariness—without ever really explaining what the adjective “absolute” does when appended to “truth.” What exactly does the qualifier “absolute” add to the word “truth”? And if something’s being absolute means that it is absolved of relation (the technical sense of the word), then what could that mean for contingent, social *creatures* like us?

This Christian reaction to relativism, with its therapeutic deployment of “absolute” truth, is a symptom of a deeper theological problem: an inability to honor the contingency and dependence of our creaturehood.<sup>36</sup> There might even be something rather gnostic (and heretical) in this failure to own up to contingency; indeed, one could argue that the claim to such “absoluteness” is at the heart of the first sin in the garden.<sup>37</sup> Conversely, appreciating our created finitude as the condition under which we know (and were *made* to know) should compel us to appreciate the contingency of our knowledge without sliding into arbitrariness. Saying “It depends” is *not* the equivalent of saying “It’s not true” or “I don’t know.” Owning up to our finitude is *not* tantamount to giving up on truth, revelation, or scriptural authority. It is simply to recognize the conditions of our knowledge that are coincident with our status as finite, created, social beings. And those conditions are pronounced “very good” by the Creator (Gen. 1:31). One reason Christians should take seriously the pragmatist tradition from Wittgenstein through Rorty up to Brandom is that it can be received as a rigorous philosophical account of finitude and contingency, attentive to the material, social conditions of human, creaturely knowing.

Is Christianity synonymous with “objectivity”? Can finite humans hold “absolute” truths? What if the gospel is “relatively” true? Isn’t the truth of Christian faith *relative to* Jesus Christ? And isn’t our understanding of that story *dependent upon* the faith narrated in Scripture and handed down by tradition? Recall, for example, Christian Smith’s outline of “strong” social constructionism, as I summarized it earlier.

36. In this respect, *Who's Afraid of Relativism?* can be read as an extension of arguments I made about finitude and creaturehood in my earlier book *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

37. Nicholas J. Ansell, “The Call of Wisdom/The Voice of the Serpent: A Canonical Approach to the Tree of Knowledge,” *Christian Scholar's Review* 31, no. 1 (2001): 31–57.

- It assumes that humans *constitute* our “reality,”
- that this act of “making” our world is inevitably *social* and thus depends on a community or society or “people,”
- that our knowledge of reality is therefore *relative to* the categories and concepts that our community gives us,
- and that this means we can never “know” whether our beliefs *correspond* to reality because there would be no way to step outside a community to check whether our categories “match” an *external* reality.

What if we took that as a description of how we are illumined by the Holy Spirit, as part of the body of Christ, given the right categories and concepts from God’s self-revelation in Christ and the Scriptures, in such a way that we are enabled to finally see the truth about creation that is otherwise suppressed by unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18–23)? Isn’t it the case that Jesus’s promise that the Spirit will lead us into all truth (John 16:13) is commenced at Pentecost, which is simultaneously the sending of the Spirit and the constitution of the church as the body of Christ, the “society” of the Spirit? True knowledge *depends* on God’s revelation, and receiving that revelation *depends* on the regenerating and illuminating power of the Spirit as the conditions for knowing, which requires being enfolded into that “people” who gather in worship, to hear the Word, illumined by the Spirit. Grasping the truth about God, the world, and ourselves is dependent upon being part of the “us” illumined by the Spirit, heirs to the gift of the Scriptures, and part of the community of interpretive practice that is the church (1 Cor. 2:6–16).<sup>38</sup> So, in a sense, the answer to the question “Is Christianity true?” is the scandalous reply: “It depends.” It depends on the One in whom all things hold together (John 1:1–4; Col. 1:15–20).

North American Christianity is especially allergic to the relativism and contingency highlighted by pragmatism precisely because we have become a people who are bent on security, comfort, and autonomy. We are uncomfortable with the scandalous dependence of radical discipleship. We are functional deists and practical atheists

38. As succinctly summarized by Stanley Hauerwas and Sam Wells, “Through worship God trains his people to take the right things for granted.” “The Gift of the Church and the Gifts God Gives It,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 25.

who have drunk the Kool-Aid of American ideals of independence. That's not a *cause* for our epistemological assumptions, but it can partially explain how they've become "common sense." In that respect, I think an engagement with pragmatism can be an exercise in self-examination, prompting us to remember and retrieve core convictions of Christian orthodoxy that our regnant epistemologies have led us to forget. We might think about bringing Rorty to church because he has something to teach us.

If the Christian doctrine of creation and creaturehood includes a robust account of contingency and dependence, and if pragmatism is a philosophical account of that contingency and dependence, then I might suggest that Kelly Reichardt's film *Wendy and Lucy* is a powerful cinematic illustration of the same themes.

The entire narrative is carried on the back of Wendy, played marvelously by Michelle Williams. We first meet Wendy and her faithful dog, Lucy, indirectly: the camera is watching her through the trees. Seeing her obliquely through the forest filmically connotes a sense of her vulnerability. Is someone stalking her? Are *we*? Is this some God's-eye-view we have of her? Or are we along for the ride?

So we find her wandering alone with Lucy, off the beaten path—the soundtrack a melancholy humming somewhere between contentment and sadness. We can already sense both strength and fragility here. She has had the courage to set out on her own, to leave behind a life in Indiana and strike out by herself for new opportunities in Alaska. When we meet her en route, in the Pacific Northwest, her "independence" is not very secure. To the contrary, her situation is tenuous. Apart from Lucy, she is alone, driving a beat-up old Honda Civic that seems on the brink of giving up the ghost. The fragility of her situation is highlighted by constant glimpses of her makeshift ledger: a small spiral notebook that lays out her plans, calculating the cost of gas against her finite (very meager) resources. Any expense out of left field would ruin everything. This is what the opposite of "financial security" looks like.

Just a couple of minutes into the movie this vulnerability and fragility is crystallized: in a split second, Lucy is gone. Searching for her, Wendy is now the one who is peering through the trees upon a group of vagabonds gathered around a fire, threatening and unpredictable. But they have Lucy. With a gulp, she approaches, and before long we realize her fears are unfounded. The vagabonds are

well acquainted with grief, and dependence. Recognizing Wendy’s need, they offer help, because it turns out they share something in common: they’re all just passing through. This is a constant refrain from Wendy, a repeated phrase in the sparse dialogue of the film: “I’m just kind of passin’ through.” And as this phrase keeps being repeated, the constant sounds and images of trains begin to make sense: the squeal and rumble and whistle of the trains are the visualization of “passin’ through.” After all, who isn’t?

In the graciousness of the vagabonds, who are also just “passin’ through,” we are confronted with the fact that our sense of threat is something *we* projected onto them because of their failure to conform to the ideals of responsible autonomy and security. Because they don’t conform to our image of “stability” and normality, we imagine them threatening. If Wendy peered through the trees and saw Lucy with a nice suburban family laughing beside their backyard pool, we would have never given it a second thought. But the fact is, these vagabonds are not the pretty people we’re used to. Indeed, Reichardt’s film turns the gaze of the camera on a side of North American life we don’t usually see in pictures: those vulnerable places on the other side of the tracks, without the glitz and pristine gleam of the new and suburban and respectable. This is a world without financial security and the autonomy of the middle class; instead, we see those who live on the edge, surviving, dependent on the help of others but also on good fortune, because they are all only one curveball away from ruin.<sup>39</sup>

And yet those who are dependent and vulnerable also don’t seem to harbor the illusion of being otherwise—the illusions of security and independence that are part and parcel of our bourgeois “normality.” As dependent, they recognize the dependence of others and are willing to give out of their own dependence. The motley crew at the bottle return depot is welcoming and ready to help Wendy. Even the CVS security guard is far from secure; he too is barely scraping by on a part-time, minimum-wage job. And yet he will press seven dollars into Wendy’s hand as a gift, and you know it’s the equivalent of the widow’s mite.

39. The “soundtrack” of the film accords with the thinness of resources of the characters: no pop songs or indie ballads, just the screech and whistle of trains and the occasional humming.



Ruin becomes Wendy's story. She was held above it by only the slenderest of threads, and soon enough circumstances snap that thread: she sleeps in her car, but upon waking, her car won't start, which means a costly repair. That means she doesn't have enough money to eat—or feed Lucy, who is as dependent on Wendy as Wendy is on the cosmos. So in a moment of weakness, she steals some food. Caught for shoplifting,<sup>40</sup> she is hauled away to jail, which means that Lucy is abandoned for hours. And upon return, Lucy is gone. Without a car to find her, Wendy trudges miles and miles on foot. When her car is towed into the lot for repair, it means she has lost her shelter for sleeping, and so now she is even more exposed—sleeping outside, which leads to a harrowing scene of danger and threat, a terrifying scene of vulnerability. Still frantically searching for Lucy, she begins leaving articles of her clothing where Lucy might find them. So now Wendy is shedding the last remaining possessions she has; she is down to the shirt on her back and just a few dollars in her pocket.

But finally, some good news: Lucy is found. She had been welcomed by an adoptive family, a kind of canine foster care. Offloading the unrepairable car, settling her bill with the mechanic, and spending her last bit of money on a cab to Lucy, Wendy finds her faithful friend in a simple but idyllic home: a kindly gentleman to care and provide for her, a yard with room for Lucy to romp. And Wendy makes the hardest decision: to let Lucy go. Recognizing her own dependence, Wendy realizes the reality of Lucy's dependence on her and makes the heartbreaking decision to entrust her to this new caretaker—someone on whom the dog can depend.

As we see her hop into a boxcar with just a knapsack left to her name, we realize Lucy's relation to Wendy is like Wendy's relation to the cosmos: might someone adopt *her*, welcome *her*, provide for *her*?

40. The sixteen-year-old kid who catches Wendy and lobbies for her arrest is later picked up by his mom in the safety and security of the family's Volvo wagon. The automobiles are allegories in this movie. This same teenager voices the viewpoint of staid middle-class security when, pronouncing judgment on Lucy, he states: "If a person can't afford dog food, she shouldn't have a dog." Who can argue with that kind of economic logic?



## A Christian Philosophy of Contingency

The church is most faithful, Stanley Hauerwas argues, when we “are content to live ‘out of control.’ For to be out of control means Christians can risk trusting in gifts, so they have no reason to deny the contingent character of our existence.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, to know God is God (and we are *not*) is to own up to the tenuous fragility of our existence. This is to recognize that *everything* depends—not just our life and breath, but also truth and knowledge, even our epistemology and metaphysics. But all too often we construct accounts of knowledge and truth that effectively deny our dependence, that efface our vulnerability and try to “secure” us from the relativity of being a (rational, knowing) creature.

This is why I think pragmatism could actually be a gift to the church and its philosophers. Pragmatism is a philosophy of contingency; but it is also (*because* of that) a philosophy of community—a philosophical account of knowledge and truth that recognizes the essential link between dependence and community, contingency and solidarity. And *that* intuition, I would argue, is an essentially *creational* insight: it amounts to nothing less than a philosophical appreciation for the lineaments of creaturehood.

Embracing contingency does not entail embracing “liberalism”: in fact, to the contrary, it is when we deny our contingency that we are thereby licensed to deny our dependence and hence assume the position where *we* are arbitrators of truth. We then spurn our dependence on tradition and assume a stance of “objective” knowledge whereby we can dismiss aspects of Scripture and Christian orthodoxy as benighted and unenlightened. In short, it is the denial of dependence that undergirds a progressive agenda. The picture of knowledge bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment is a forthright denial of our dependence, and it yields a God-like picture of human reason. It is “objectivity” that is “liberal.”

Granted, there are two different ways of emphasizing contingency. As Hauerwas elsewhere notes, liberals often *do* emphasize that “everything is contingent.” But he also notes an odd tension

41. Stanley Hauerwas, “Reforming Christian Social Ethics: Ten Theses,” in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 113.

at that point: such a claim is less liberal and more nihilist. In contrast, the Christian claim about contingency is not that *everything* is contingent but rather that everything *created* is contingent.<sup>42</sup> Everything created depends upon the Triune Creator who, alone, is necessary. And that makes all the difference, Hauerwas points out, because it means that the Christian understanding of contingency is itself dependent. “The liberal nihilists are, of course, right that our lives are contingent,” he says, “but their account of contingency is unintelligible. Contingent to what? If everything is contingent, then to say we are contingent is simply not interesting. In contrast, Christians know their contingency is a correlative to their status as creatures. To be contingent is to recognize that our lives are intelligible only to the extent that we discover we are characters in a narrative we did not create.”<sup>43</sup> And that very discovery, I would add, depends upon our being “in Christ.”

This book is an essay exploring the implications of this basic intuition about creaturely contingency and dependence for our accounts of knowledge and truth. At the same time, it is an extended philosophical conversation with pragmatism because I see pragmatism as a scrupulous philosophical account of the contingency, dependence, and sociality that characterizes human creaturehood. As such, the pragmatism of Wittgenstein, Rorty, and Brandom provides important resources to develop not a hip, relevant, contemporary “postmodern” account of truth “for our times” but rather an account of knowledge and truth that remembers and re-appreciates the implications of a biblical doctrine of creation. In other words, I’m not extolling pragmatism as a way for the church to “update” our account of knowledge and “get with the times” so that we can be “relevant” in a postmodern age. To the contrary, I’m arguing that a Christian philosophical engagement with pragmatism can be an occasion to remember core themes of Christian orthodoxy that we have effectively forgotten in modernity.

The structure of the book is relatively simple. On the one hand it is simply chronological, devoting a chapter to each key figure beginning with Wittgenstein, then Rorty, and finally Brandom. But

42. A claim carefully explicated by Thomas Aquinas in his little metaphysical work *De ente et essentia*.

43. Stanley Hauerwas, “Preaching as Though We Had Enemies,” *First Things*, May 1995, 9.

this order is also a kind of conceptual snowball. It is Wittgenstein who crystallizes the core pragmatist insight that “meaning is use.” Richard Rorty builds upon this, and emphasizes the *social* aspects of knowledge and truth that follow from Wittgenstein’s insight. Then Robert Brandom teases out how we should think of reason and logic in light of Wittgenstein and Rorty.

Throughout these expositions I will also consider how and where the insights of pragmatism intersect with a Christian understanding of creaturehood and contingency, including an extensive comparison of Augustine and Wittgenstein at the conclusion of chapter 2. Finally, in chapter 5, we will explore the implications of a “Christian pragmatism” for Christian theology and ministry. This is embodied in George Lindbeck’s notion of “postliberalism,” including his timely proposals regarding the shape of evangelism, mission, and apologetics.