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the Transcendental “We” —Reflections on
Pragmatist Methodology”

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The Rortyan “We”, the Disappearing “We”, And the Transcendental “We” —Reflections on Pragmatist Methodology

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Introduction

For pragmatists—or for *us* pragmatists—there is no non-committed, “merely theoretical”, or value-neutral place to stand in philosophical discussion, no abstract level of purely intellectual argumentation beyond our reflection on how to live, or beyond an on-going self-examination seeking to understand what it means for us to engage in the practices we do engage in, both epistemic and ethical. This insight into the profound entanglement of the *theoretical* and the *practical* has received different articulations in the pragmatist tradition.¹ One of them is William James’s (1975 [1907], Lecture I) famous (or notorious) concept of a “philosophical temperament”, which reminds us that we always engage in philosophical thinking

¹ It is obvious that an essay honoring Bjørn Ramberg’s philosophical achievements should address pragmatism in a way or another. It is, of course, primarily in the context of Nordic and European pragmatism collaboration that I have come to know him over the years. I recall first meeting him in person at the University of Oslo when I gave a guest talk there in September 2001 (a week after 9/11) and he invited me to a wonderful dinner—with rather serious conversations—at Theatercaféen. Since then, we both participated in a collaborative Nordic project on the concept of rationality led by Leila Haaparanta in the early 2000s, as well as various pragmatism-related activities, including a memorable panel (with Cheryl Misak) on pragmatism and subjectivity at the APA Pacific Division Meeting in Vancouver, BC in 2009.

and argumentation as flesh-and-blood human beings, with our individual needs and interests, seeking our own voice in philosophizing. Another articulation, emphasizing the first-person plural rather than the first-person singular, is the methodology that Richard Rorty (e.g., 1989) seems to advocate (insofar as it is appropriate to call it a “methodology” at all): trying to look and see how things seem to be “to us”, or from “our” point of view, realizing that we have to “start from where we are” when aspiring to transform ourselves into something (hopefully) better. In these terms, philosophical reflection can be regarded as an inquiry into who, and what, *we* are—not simply “work on oneself”, on “one’s own conception”, on “how one sees things”, as Ludwig Wittgenstein (1998, 24) characterized the nature of philosophy in 1931, but (as we might say) “work on ourselves”, on how we see things (and on how we ought to see them).

The very possibility of this “ought” is what should trouble us here. Where does our self-reflection draw its normative force from? The purpose of this paper is to explore, in dialogue with not only Rorty but various other contemporary thinkers emphasizing the philosophical significance of “us”, what exactly it means, or could mean (for a pragmatist, or for us pragmatists), to inquire into who we are, and how the concept of “us” ought to be characterized in this context. We will thereby encounter different versions of the philosophical “we”.

The transcendental “we”: understanding our “mindedness”

Instead of Rorty’s well-known rhetorics of “us”,² I will begin from an attempt to *transcendentally* elucidate the significance of “starting from where we are”. It is against this background that the relevance of Rorty’s insistence on our thoroughgoing contingency will emerge. The conception of philosophy as “work on ourselves” may be characterized as an inquiry into the “transcendental ‘us’”—a “pragmatic transcendental anthropology”, as we might also call it (cf. Pihlström, 2016). Jonathan Lear (1998, chapters 11 and 12) is one of the relatively few interpreters of Wittgenstein explicitly employing the expression, “transcendental anthropology”.³ Let me first introduce this idea in broad strokes.

² See, e.g., Rorty 1999 and 2007. Rorty repeatedly refers to various contingent groups of “us”: “us modern Western liberals”, “us pragmatists”, “us Kuhnians”, and so forth. For a recent analysis of the “we” rhetorics Rorty engages in, especially in the context of feminism, see Dieleman, 2021, 179–81.

³ I will also try to make some other philosophers’, especially Raimond Gaita’s (2004 [1991]), occasionally somewhat cryptic reflections on the significance of the ethical “for us” more precise by utilizing Lear’s notion of our being “minded”.

Lear defines someone's being "minded" in a certain way in terms of their "shar[ing] the perceptions of salience, routes of interest, feelings of naturalness in following a rule which constitute being part of a form of life" (ibid., 290).⁴ This characterization is irreducibly *normative*, because being minded is crucially about rule-following (a profoundly Wittgensteinian concept, of course), while also invoking contingently *natural* features of our rule-following practices, including even "feelings of naturalness", as well as our contingently inhabiting a form of life situated within its natural surroundings. It is easy to extrapolate this to considerations of various ways of being "minded" as "we" are: we are dealing with boundary-drawing that is natural for us while also being inescapably normative, constraining any choices and moves possible for us within the boundaries thus drawn.

This conceptualization will help us cash out the idea of "our common humanity"—emphasized by Raimond Gaita (2000; 2004 [1991])—by giving it a transcendental shape in terms of the notion of the "transcendental 'we'".⁵ As Lear (1998, chapter 12) carefully analyzes, this Wittgensteinian "we" (the "we" understood as a subject of a form of life within which our rule-following practices take place) in a sense seems to "disappear", just like the Kantian "I"—as purely formal—disappears from the "I think" that must be able to accompany all my representations.⁶ What this means is that our being, at the transcendental level, "minded" in a cer-

⁴ As Boncompagni (2022, 36) notes, this echoes Stanley Cavell's (1962) description of the concept of a form of life in Wittgenstein.

⁵ Pragmatist analogies of the notion of "our common humanity" might include, for example, Peirce's "critical commonsensism" and James's account of common sense (in James, 1975 [1907], Lecture V) as a kind of evolutionized Kantianism, as well as (by extension) Wittgenstein's occasional references to forms of life and "*die gemeinsame menschliche Handlungsweise*" as incorporating convictions that are not epistemologically indubitable but are just not doubted as they are rooted in our habits of action. (Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* would be the primary source in this regard.) With a minor stretch, even Dewey's pragmatic naturalism, insofar as it involves the idea of our inescapably viewing the world in terms of human values and meanings, could be considered a variant of this idea (thanks to Rob Sinclair for insightful comments on this matter).

⁶ See Kant's analysis of the original unity of transcendental apperception in the First Critique (1781/1787). Constantine Sandis (2020) reminds us that there is a multiplicity of different uses of "us" in Wittgenstein, and clearly not all of them can be said to be transcendental in the sense investigated by Lear. Sandis specifically distinguishes between "we philosophers", "we language users", and "we normal people"—and it seems that often "we" for Wittgenstein just means "most of us" (ibid., 184). Sandis distances himself from any transcendental or idealist readings of Wittgenstein (ibid., 186–88). While I am mainly using Lear's interpretation for my own purposes here, I am not taking any firm stand on who actually gets Wittgenstein right. See Boncompagni's (2022) critique of transcendental inter-

tain way entails *our being so minded that we do not, and cannot, see this “us” as merely one social group or practice among others*. In short, there is no relevant alternative to the group of “us”, given that we *are* minded in the way we are.⁷ For example, our being “minded” to regard something as not merely wrong but “unthinkable” (that is, not to be seriously considered at all, either in an epistemic or an ethical sense) means, then, that that something *is* unthinkable.⁸ If we are so minded that a certain view or practice—a truly weird way of measuring, political murder, or Holocaust denialism, for instance⁹—is unthinkable for us as a serious candidate for discussion, this means, *for us*, that it *is* unthinkable, period. In particular, the meaning of the ethical for us is grounded in our “mindedness”, and our drawing the boundary between the thinkable and the unthinkable plays a crucial role in the constitution of this meaning (see Pihlström, 2025, especially chapters 1–2).

However, it may seem to be problematic to ground the ethical unthinkability of (e.g.) political murder or Holocaust denialism in *mere facts* about how we happen to think. Let us therefore pursue Lear’s considerations in some more detail. He begins his discussion of the “we” by identifying what he calls the “anthropological stance” in Wittgenstein—a sideways-on description (as we might put it) of a form of life. However, he notes that this does not encourage relativism: “We cannot step outside our form of life and discuss it like some *objet trouvé*. Any attempt to *say* what our form of life is like will itself be part of the form of life [...]. For Wittgenstein is not here talking about one culture among others.” (Ibid., 249.) Being minded “as we are” is simply “not one possibility we can explore among

pretations of the concept of form(s) of life in Wittgenstein; her own view is “methodological” rather than transcendental (or naturalistic).

⁷ Analogously, the Kuhnian “normal scientist” working within a paradigm cannot, when doing so, conceive of her- or himself having adopted some alternative paradigm (one among many); to be committed to a paradigm and to practice normal science within it is to fail to see relevant alternatives—and thus to find the contingent revolutionary history of the paradigm itself “invisible”. See Kuhn, 1970 [1962], and recall Rorty’s occasional references to “us Kuhnians”.

⁸ The concept of the (ethically) unthinkable is central in Gaita, 2004 [1991], chapter 17. Compare, e.g., Wittgenstein’s examples concerning our concept of measuring, extensively discussed by Lear (1998).

⁹ These are of course very different examples, and many others could be given. This paper cannot settle the difference between the ethically unthinkable and the (merely, though deeply) wrong, but the intuitive idea is that the unthinkable could not even be considered and thus found to be wrong—by us.

others" (ibid., 250); imagining counterfactuals to our mindedness "cannot for us express real possibilities" (ibid.).¹⁰

Now, what *kind* of impossibility is this? That is, what *kind* of "illusion of possibility" (ibid.) is created by thinking that we could step out of our mindedness?¹¹ Clearly we are not simply speaking of a natural (im)possibility or even a metaphysical one, let alone a logical one.

I am tempted to agree with Lear that this situation needs to be analyzed in terms of transcendental investigation (ibid., 252ff.). At the same time, this is an inquiry into what it is to be, naturally and contingently, "us": "Even when we try to come to grips with a form of 'other-mindedness,' it is we who have posed it and we who are trying to come to grips with it." (Ibid., 258.) So, who are *we* (cf. ibid., 263, 275)? Asking such questions, a transcendental inquiry into our rule-following practices and (thus) our mindedness is a quasi-Kantian critique of the illusoriness of any purely anthropological stance, exposing "its pretense of pure observer" (ibid., 273). The "who are we" question, then, troubles *us*, and *we* need to avoid illusory answers distracting our self-understanding:

There are certain truths about us which, though they must be expressed anthropologically, are not confined to any particular form of life. Nor are they merely universal in the sense of occurring in all forms of life. Rather they try to express the conditions of being minded in any way at all. For example, the reflective philosophical claim that what correct measurement is is itself dependent on our interests, desires, practices is not supposed to be a local claim about what constitutes correct measurement around here. Nor is it a universal sociological claim about human groups. It is a philosophical claim about the constitutive conditions of a form of life. (Ibid., 276.)

¹⁰ James's (1975 [1907], Lecture v) analysis of common sense as our inherited background is pluralistic, however, because science (or "philosophic criticism") can challenge common-sense convictions, and none among these spheres of life is absolutely true in comparison to the others. In classical pragmatism, a clearer analogy to the transcendental "we" might be available in Peirce's conception of the idealized community of researchers employing the scientific method—a "we" that would thus ultimately reach the "final opinion". See, e.g., "The Fixation of Belief" (1877) and "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (1878) in Peirce 1992–98, vol. 1.

¹¹ Lear (1998, 270) specifically says that the "sideways-on perspective" is an illusion: not a perspective at all but an "imaginative fiction". This may be compared to Phillips's (1992, 232) claim about there being only "horror or madness", "not an alternative attitude", lying outside the consensus of responses and expectations constituting our relations to other human beings.

Thus, Lear tells us, we eventually “reach truths which express basic conditions of being minded, and the ‘We’ is just the subject for whom these truths are true” (ibid., 278). By analogy, when speaking about what is thinkable or unthinkable “for us”, we are referring not simply to the contingent group of us we (anthropologically or sociologically) happen to be, or to the (contingently) universal totality of all human beings, but at a philosophical level to what it means to be (any) “us” at all as seen from within the “us” we are, even though any such “us” is, of course, also a fully natural and contingent social group situated in a concrete world. The core of the illusion of the sideways-on perspective is the failure to view this as a transcendental issue in the first place.

However, while drawing the transcendental moral Lear introduces us with, we must—from the point of view of our (already) being “us”—recognize the *contingency* of all this, of our being anyone or anything at all. True, the phrase, “We are so minded:” “by itself is empty; it gains content by what we (are so minded as to) place after the colon” (ibid., 291).¹² Yet, as Lear himself points out, the “we” does *not* “disappear” in the sense of collapsing to “a bare formal condition of thought”, because the “laws of thought” at work in our mindedness “have no content in abstraction from the myriad activities in which we engage” (ibid., 280). This is a kind of *pragmatism*, we may say, though Lear does not explicitly link his views with the pragmatist tradition. That the prefix, “We are so minded:”, “does not disappear”, after all, but only seems to do so, “makes us reflectively aware that our form of life is not some fixed, frozen entity existing totally independently of us” but “(our) active mind”—even though this is, again, something we can be aware of only “from the inside” (ibid., 300). What this means is that the boundaries we draw between the thinkable and the unthinkable—for and by us, whoever we are—constitute what it means to be, actively, any “we” at all, and this constitutivity takes place not at an abstract transcendent level but (transcendentally) *within* any activities, ethical as well as epistemic or conceptual, that we engage in (and hence, we may say, “pragmatically”, qualifying any such activities *as* we engage in them). Our drawing and redrawing the thinkability vs. unthinkability divide are itself an activity of ours, *our* drawing that line.¹³

¹² The obvious analogy, as Lear repeatedly reminds us, is Kant’s “I think”, the purely formal unity of transcendental apperception: “The ‘We are so minded:’ must thus stand in an analogous ‘master-slave’ relation to our form of life as the Kantian synthetic unity of apperception stands to the object of judgment.” (Lear, 1998, 300.)

¹³ The position I am (with some qualifications) deriving from Lear, without claiming it to be exactly his, can also be compared to Phillips’s (1992, 107) account of what he finds a

There is, then, no metaphysically realist God's-Eye View—no higher court of appeal—for viewing our being minded in a certain way as merely one option among others. As has often been remarked, metaphysical realism postulating a “ready-made world” and radical relativism denying any shared reality are two sides of the same coin (cf., e.g., Putnam, 1981). Therefore, we cannot really make sense of the possibility of *our* being minded in a radically different way, either. We cannot do so because the relevant “sense-making” would have to be performed by *us*. This is one way of articulating what it means to say that the “mindedness” we are dealing with is transcendental. In particular, our views on what is ethically thinkable or unthinkable cannot be just transformed or revised in the way we revise ordinary empirical beliefs or our “first-order” moral views within the limits fixed by what we regard as thinkable—any more than a Kuhnian paradigm change could simply take place as a result of our acquiring more empirical evidence (though novel evidence is relevant to such shifts in leading to anomalies and crises). More positively, this can also be expressed by saying that when viewing the world in terms of “our” distinction between the thinkable and the unthinkable, that is, when being minded in a certain way that rules some things out as possible candidates of serious moral (or epistemic) consideration,¹⁴ we are inviting all others, each and everyone, to do the same (no matter who they are), that is, to look at the world with our eyes—and as far as possible, we should issue this invitation by “using persuasion instead of force”, quoting Rorty's oft-used apt phrase.

The contingency of “us”

After having preliminarily introduced the transcendental perspective on “us” and our “mindedness”, let us pursue a quite different way of philosophically appealing to “us” by turning to Rorty.

Rorty's (e.g., 1989; 1991; 1999; 2007) heavily rhetorical “we” is explicitly *non-transcendental*—always denoting a specific cultural group, a historically contingent “us”—and thus very far from Lear's, even though

condition of moral seriousness: “If someone has moral beliefs, it must matter to him that some things are believed or done and not others. A man who says all views are equal has no views.”

¹⁴ It is, admittedly, pleonastic to speak about “serious moral consideration”, as anything that is morally considered at all is by definition serious. Morality is a serious business to begin with. This pleonasm may, however, be needed as a continuous reminder of this fact about “us” and “our” concept of morality.

Wittgenstein is one of the main sources for both. While it may be argued that Rorty's radical pragmatism lacks the normative resources of a transcendental inquiry into the necessary preconditions of our being "minded" (and especially into any rational criteria of critically transforming that mindedness), we may take home from Rorty the lesson of our thoroughgoing fallibilism and historical contingency. Even if we cannot, as we now stand, meaningfully regard our way of viewing the world as just one among many possible ones, that is, even if "other" ways of drawing the boundary between the thinkable and the unthinkable are, indeed, unthinkable for us and there is no relevant alternative we could non-illusorily make sense of (while remaining "us"), we must be able to entertain the idea that *our* life *could* be, or could have been, dramatically different from what it is, if only for the trivial reason that we could have been born into a different time and place.¹⁵ We have to acknowledge this possibility in a self-critical—transcendental—sense *from within* our being minded in the way we are, especially as we view our mindedness as "active" in Lear's sense. This is analogous to a Kantian transcendental thinker recognizing that human cognition could, in principle, be different from what it is: it is not metaphysically necessary that we organize our experience, and any possible experience, in terms of the forms of intuition and the categories of the understanding. "Our common humanity" could be different. Yet, sharing the humanity we contingently do share (indeed, in my view Rorty offers one of the best articulations of human historical contingency in the history of philosophy), we can only engage in a never-ending ethical reflection on what it means to be human together with others, and it is right here that we need ethical persuasion directed to others to adopt what we find the only possible ways of seeing some things as unthinkable.

The reflexivity of such reflection is not very far from transcendental approaches, however. For example, we are (and ought to be) so minded that we realize that cruelty "is the worst thing we do"—as Rorty repeatedly phrased his definition of what it is to be "liberal", drawing from Judith Shklar. It is, and must be, unthinkable for us to be intentionally cruel. It would be ethically impossible to claim that cruelty (for its own sake) would in some cases be justified. The question of justification cannot (or, better, simply does not) even arise here. Engaging with Rorty's views may

¹⁵ However, is this really trivial? Could *we* really have been born into another time and place? We would never have been "us" if we had. Yet, there is presumably something non-trivial and important that the possibly incoherent thought of "our" possibly having been born into different surroundings tries to express.

lead us to ask what exactly the word “we” refers to (that is, again, who are the “we” denoted by this word) when we (!) are invited to describe ourselves as “liberal ironists” according to whom “cruelty is the worst thing we do” but who nevertheless, ironically, recognize the contingency of our liberalism, the fact that “there is no answer to the question ‘Why not be cruel?’—no noncircular theoretical backup for the belief that cruelty is horrible” (Rorty, 1989, xv). There is no way of engaging with this question about “us” being identified by self-descriptions such as “we liberal ironists” without our already (contingently yet constitutively) finding ourselves amongst the “us” recognizing this precarious yet (switching to Lear’s terms again) arguably transcendently constitutive limit marking an impossibility of appealing to anything more fundamental than the horror of cruelty itself in support of our commitment to avoiding cruelty.¹⁶

Now, if our meta-level views on what is thinkable or unthinkable and what our mindedness thus constitutively consists in are themselves open to ethical critique in terms of the ethical discourse they at the same time define and constitute, are the ethical unthinkableabilities that we take to define us and our form of life “really” unthinkable, after all? Aren’t they, rather, within the (“thinkable”) ethical realm? There is no easy way out from this predicament. Anticipating a non-conclusive pragmatist response, it may be suggested that there is only our on-going ethical discussion itself to rely on, a discussion also continuously exploring the boundaries between the thinkable and the unthinkable themselves, and constantly actively renegotiating where exactly such boundaries lie, when we seek a deeper philosophical understanding of, for example, the relation between the unthinkable and the “merely wrong”, or the sense in which the thinkability vs. unthinkableability boundary defines “us”. Engaging in this discussion is to practice transcendental moral philosophy, one of whose defining characteristics is its resolutely *reflexive*—uncompromisingly self-critical—focus.¹⁷

¹⁶ As Rorty himself acknowledges (e.g., Rorty, 1989, xv; see also *ibid.*, 74, 146), the notion of the liberal as someone according to whom cruelty is the worst thing we do is drawn from Judith Shklar (see her 1984, chapter 1). On “us liberals” and our contingency, see also, e.g., Rorty, 1991, 13-15.

¹⁷ One reflexive question that might be asked at this point is the following. Does the Rortyan rhetoric of “us” set up a meta-level boundary acknowledging that the historical contingency of “us” (our mindedness, or our drawing the thinkability vs. unthinkableability boundary in the way we do) is itself *not* contingent but defines us *ahistorically*? Is this the kind of reflexivity inherent in critical (transcendental) philosophy or just a vicious circle? The pragmatist reflexivity defining what I take to be the most promising approach here is committed to indefinitely exploring the necessary contingency and the contingent necessity of “us”, and the entanglement of these contingencies and necessities. We quasi-necessarily

My purpose here is not to enter into any full-fledged critique of Rorty. However, many other critics have persuasively argued over the decades (ever since his early *magnum opus*, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 1979), that Rorty lacks the normative resources for critically and rationally assessing—and thus non-arbitrarily changing or transforming—the contingent “us” that we are. On the other hand, doesn’t everyone? As our drawing at least some distinction between the thinkable and the unthinkable is arguably constitutive of the possibility of normative discussion, Rorty does deserve a fair hearing, even though we cannot follow him into his radical ironism which ultimately reduces all normative and rational persuasion to mere causal clashes between “vocabularies”. The references to Lear above may be seen as one way of normatively enriching the flatly reductive Rortyan “us”.¹⁸ Furthermore, Gaita’s (2004 [1991]) method of exploring both real-life and literary cases where “our” thinking (and its very possibility) is compared with ways in which we could not possibly think—ways characteristic of “cranks”, “lunatics”, or those who are “wicked” (cf. Glover, 2011)—may not in the end be radically different from Rorty’s own approach that takes imaginative literature extremely seriously in philosophically analyzing “us”.

This can be turned into an implicit lesson of *pragmatist methodology*: what is needed is a pragmatic methodological pluralism and a pluralism of the different, contextually relevant, senses of “us” at work in any (even transcendental) critical and transformative reflection on what our contingent life could and possibly should be like.¹⁹ The question remains, however, who (which group of “us”) is able to switch the perspective from one of such senses to another. A transcendental (meta-level) “we” needs to be postulated in order to make sense of this possibility, and here we cannot follow Rorty’s lead. It is only transcendentially, “from within” (and seek-

eclipse, or make invisible, our historical contingency by finding our mindedness equivalent to mindedness *überhaupt*, by not being able to genuinely imagine a radically different form of life, and by recognizing this inability. We are inevitably “normal” or ordinary subjects of our form of life analogously to Kuhn’s “normal scientists” within a paradigm: without such “normality”, neither science nor life is possible. But then, occasionally, there are crises and even revolutions in both. After a revolution, we (again ordinarily) make it invisible. Historical, or historicist, self-awareness—Rortyan ironism—is an abnormality, an indication of a crisis state.

¹⁸ Conversely, Rorty’s “we” is, we may say, a deflated, fully naturalized version of Lear’s transcendental “we”. Instead of constitutive (transcendental) conditions for the possibility of our being who we are, the Rortyan “we” is characterized by its (our) contingent use of certain (“final”) vocabularies to which it (we) can always take an ironic attitude.

¹⁹ On the significance of pluralism in Rorty’s pragmatism, see Koopman 2021.

ing to elucidate what it means to look at things “from within”), that we may recognize the contingency of “us” in the sense of recognizing that we are something for whom (for which) the unthinkable *could* become thinkable, and vice versa, as paradoxical as this may sound. This, I think, is an important quasi-Rortyan lesson in pragmatist methodology.

Holistic pragmatism

One important type of pragmatism that may be applied in the kind of reflection proposed here, elaborating on Kuhn’s, Rorty’s, Lear’s, and Gaita’s views (among others), is the *holistic* pragmatism defended by Morton White (e.g., 2002).²⁰ Holistic pragmatism refuses to recognize any epistemologically essential dichotomy between the normative and the descriptive; everything—our entire system of beliefs—is tested holistically along its “edges” whenever we are testing any item within that system. If we need to revise our most fundamental beliefs—even logical ones—in order to accommodate a “recalcitrant” perceptual belief,²¹ then such a revision, as radical as it may be, should be among the options to be considered. We have to ask, however, whether holistic pragmatism makes it impossible to maintain a distinction between the unthinkable and the “merely” wrong, or between boundaries constitutive of us and disagreements within such boundaries. I do not think it necessarily does, but such distinctions must be understood as local in the sense of being inevitably discourse- or language-game-relative. As already explained, it is only from within an already acknowledged (“thinkable”) area bounded by the unthinkable that we can engage in any boundary-drawing at all. Yet, we need something like holistic pragmatism to keep the distinction alive as an object of the on-going self-reflection of our “active mind”, even when there is no sharp dichotomy between the transcendental and the empirical to rely on.²²

²⁰ One motivation for developing holistic pragmatism in this context is its ability to avoid both Rorty’s problem—the lack of normativity—and what we may perceive as Gaita’s problem, which might be considered another kind of lack of normativity based on too rigid a conception of the division between the thinkable and the unthinkable (criticized, e.g., in Glover, 2011). Because our boundary-drawing itself is tested all the time, pragmatically and processually, albeit always within some boundaries, both of these excesses may be avoided.

²¹ In “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”, Quine (1980 [1953], chapter 2) famously refers to “recalcitrant experience” when articulating his holism according to which the whole of science is empirically tested on its edges. White’s holistic pragmatism is a normatively (including ethically) enriched extension of Quine’s holism, which was more narrowly confined to logic, epistemology, and the philosophy of science.

²² Admittedly, however, holistic pragmatism is a double-edged sword in the context of the present inquiry. It might seem that it makes everything “thinkable”—anything can be

Holistic pragmatism—precisely because it treats our situation as “holistic” world-engagement with both ethical and epistemic aspects, instead of focusing on isolated or individual moral statements—equips us with some of the conceptual resources necessary for reflecting on the possible changes that might occur in the boundaries we draw between the thinkable and the unthinkable in highly exceptional situations. Even if we do structure the world we live in in terms of those boundaries and attach a quasi-transcendental necessity to this structuring, it would be illusory to believe that the boundaries will always remain the same. To account for this dynamic, we need philosophical tools provided not only by transcendental philosophy *à la* Lear (and Lear’s Wittgenstein) but also by pragmatism—not, however, merely Rorty’s but also White’s (2002), with its irreducible commitment to genuine normativity (cf. Pihlström, 2021, especially chapter 5).

In terms of holistic pragmatism, we may also say that whatever framework of thought and action defined by our (current) understanding of what is to be considered thinkable and unthinkable we are committed to, that framework must do some practical “work” for us in our lives. In standard pragmatist terms, it must be “satisfactory” in some sense, or serve our values, needs, and interests (which are themselves holistically tested, too). The basic difficulty we have to face, and which we must examine by entangling pragmatist and transcendental approaches, is our ability to pragmatically assess the success or satisfactoriness of such frameworks only within one or another framework itself (or *the* framework *we* find constitutive of our mindedness). There are no values, needs, or interests that would be prior to our framework in the sense of being independently available in our assessments of that framework; instead, our ethical valuations depend on what we find thinkable and unthinkable. It is precisely in this sense and for these reasons—in the interest of avoiding both an excessive conservatism of a permanently stable “we” and an excessive relativism too easily imagining the availability of genuine alternatives to “us”—that we need holistic pragmatism (transcendentally rearticulated) as an implicit guiding thread of a truly pragmatist-cum-transcendental inquiry into what it is to be minded in our way while being simultaneously committed to actively considering how our mindedness might become better.

empirically tested, and (to rephrase Quine again) “any statement can be held true come what may”—while on the other hand, it enables a holistic analysis of everything, including the boundary between the thinkable and the unthinkable itself (or its various uses in our practices).

We have to maintain a *reflective equilibrium* between the particular (e.g., ethical) views and arguments presented within an area of thinking constituted by our ruling out the unthinkable and the overall critical pragmatic consideration of how that particular way of ruling something out serves our lives.²³ The specific ethical views and arguments presented within the area of the thinkable may thus in some cases play a pragmatic role in challenging the entire framework and its defining limits, and thereby challenging “us” to become something different from what we currently are.

Consequently, the recognition of the historical contingency and revisability of the boundaries of our mindedness (viz., of what is constitutive of “us”) can itself play a transcendental role as a necessary condition for the possibility of our being able to take an *active* stance to developing our mindedness, never being fully satisfied with (or even fully at home in) who we are. The possibility of transformation transcendently requires contingency—even the contingency of the transcendental itself—and developing pragmatist methodology is arguably centered around the self-critical transformation of who we as rational inquirers are.²⁴

“How we think”

Moral philosophy, when critically investigating the boundary between the ethically thinkable and the unthinkable in a transcendental sense, must continuously seek to enhance our understanding of what it means to view the world “with our eyes”, or “with the eyes of humanity” (Gaita, 2005, 165). Only within the perspective(s) opened by such viewing is it possible for us to discuss, compare, evaluate, and criticize moral positions. Those who are not viewing the world with our eyes are beyond such discussion, and beyond “us”; we can only, following Rorty’s (1989) advise, try to use

²³ In White’s (2002) holistic pragmatism, reflective equilibrium is a key method—and it has, as is well known, been employed by many important thinkers (e.g., Rawls, 1971) not standardly classified as pragmatists. On the significance of holism in Gaita’s account of unthinkability, see also Glover 2011.

²⁴ Even though I have avoided extensive references to Dewey’s pragmatism in this paper, it would be an interesting exercise to consider how exactly even Deweyan naturalism (e.g., Dewey, 1986 [1929]) could be turned quasi-transcendental by interpreting it in terms of the kind of holistic pragmatism outlined here. A continuous critical inquiry into how we ought to continue our inquiries, yielding a critical self-transformation of “us” through changing problematic situations, could be seen as a kind of Deweyan equivalent of the approach I am developing. Again, I am grateful to Rob Sinclair for challenging me to consider these issues in relation to Dewey.

persuasion rather than force in inviting them to this open and hopefully maximally inclusive group of “us”.²⁵

It is, as we have seen, essential to distinguish between different senses of “us”: the radically contingent Rortyan “we”, the disappearing “we” (cf. Lear, 1998), and the transcendental “we”. A pragmatist-cum-transcendental account of “us” may in the end arrive at the *indistinguishability* of these senses of “us”, but the complicated philosophical route leading up to that result is worth traveling.²⁶ Moreover, considering what and how “we” can, must, or cannot think about historical moral catastrophes such as the Holocaust²⁷ and what these modalities (pragmatically) mean for us in our lives may be a vital step on that route. Rorty (1989), in his controversial account of “final vocabularies” and ironism, emphasizes the historical contingency of everything, including (though these are not his exact words) what *we* find thinkable or unthinkable—and who we, thus, are. His famous ironism can be characterized as the disillusioned recognition of this radical contingency conjoined with an openness to the possibility of enlarging the sphere of us to ever new and more inclusive directions. However, the transcendentially inclined pragmatist may ask how we can recognize this contingency and still remain sincerely *committed* to the “final vocabularies” we employ to define our lives and identities, as well as committed to actively transforming those vocabularies—and ourselves as their subjects—whenever necessary (indeed, to having an “active mind”, in Lear’s sense). What we arrive at here is a historicized and naturalized account of the “transcendental ‘we’” radically aware of its (our) own historical contingency.²⁸

²⁵ Dictators and totalitarian regimes, in contrast, exclude all even minimally diverse individuals and groups from their “us”. The Nazis, in particular, can be said to have expunged the Jews from the “we” of history (Patterson, 2018, 67–8).

²⁶ This indistinguishability is, arguably, analogous to the sense in which the transcendental self (or ego) can be claimed to be, at the same time, just the natural self (albeit seen or considered *qua* transcendental). See, e.g., Carr, 1999; Pihlström, 2003.

²⁷ When asking this question, we must never overlook the historical and political variability of “us”. Susan Neiman (2020, 28, 44, 87) refers to “Todorov’s rule” (formulated by Tzvetan Todorov): while Germans should focus on the singularity of the Holocaust, Jews should focus on its universality. This has enormous significance on, e.g., to how exactly the crimes of Nazism and communism can be compared, and in what contexts. Nothing in my admittedly abstract use of “we” signifies any attempt to downplay the *political* complexity of the “us” in what is (un)thinkable for us.

²⁸ When lucidly acknowledging our contingency, “we” (whoever we are) may also recognize that the ways in which our moral ideals make sense to us, or are compelling for us, depend on the changing natural and social world we historically live in. Hence the power of thought-experimenting ethical reflections such as Tim Mulgan’s (2011) ethics for a “broken

When negotiating—individually or socio-culturally, displaying an awareness of the contingency of us—“how we think”,²⁹ how we are able to think, how we ought to think, and what we are able to find thinkable in the first place, we are, almost by definition, examining the *human condition*, how we live and what we are. Failing to recognize this would be a form of thoughtlessness. Paradoxically, if a philosophical investigation of the “unthinkable” can teach us anything, it should teach us that we must do everything we can to avoid falling into thoughtlessness, an inability to think.³⁰ A full recognition of this in my view requires an active interplay of pragmatist and transcendental approaches in the effort to understand “our common humanity”.

Recall Jean-Paul Sartre’s famous 1946 essay on antisemitism. Sartre argued that antisemitism does not enjoy the right to the freedom of expression, because it undermines the conditions of such rights and freedoms. Sartre’s view can at a general level be extended to a criticism of the allegedly free expression of opinions hostile to ethnic or sexual minorities, for instance. Referring to a person who handed two Jews to Gestapo, he notes that someone who finds it natural to betray others in that manner cannot view humanity in our way; such a person does not view even their beneficiaries “in the same light as we do” (see Sartre, 1976 [1946]). The same might be said today, *mutatis mutandis*, not only about racists and fascists but also about, say, conservative religious thinkers who maintain that a just God could (possibly) condemn alleged sinners, such as homosexuals, to an eternal torture. Such a theory should be unthinkable for decent believers and non-believers alike.

This example brings us back to the investigation of the transcendental “us” and its historical contingency. We may agree with Rorty’s (controversially titled) “ethnocentrism” in realizing that “we have to start from where we are”. There is no way in which *we* could in a state of alleged neutrality *argue* that, for example, homosexuals should have all the same human rights as heterosexuals or that those who get abortion are not murderers. For *us* it is unthinkable that this should not be so. If we had to argue for the equal rights of sexual minorities against someone opposed to those rights, no argumentative exchange would get off the ground

world”, which can be seen as an inquiry into the possibly changing natural conditions for certain (for us natural and even inescapable) ways of drawing the boundaries between the ethically thinkable and the unthinkable.

²⁹ Dewey wrote a book with this very title: see Dewey 1997 [1910].

³⁰ This is a famous theme in Hannah Arendt’s analyses of evil, totalitarianism, and politics (see especially her 1994 [1963]).

as the argument itself would be possible only in a framework that had already granted such rights equally to everyone. Sound argument depends on such contexts of sanity. This is comparable to the Rortyan insistence (with Shklar) that the sheer non-argued and unjustifiable necessity of avoiding cruelty must be placed first in our ethical orientation to others. Thus, it is not obvious that we can ever defend the need or duty to take our shared common humanity seriously when facing others. Any such argument depends on our already acknowledging (in Gaita's terms) our common humanity; accordingly, those who fail in such acknowledgment (such as anti-Semites or homophobic conservatives) are in this sense beyond argument.³¹

Raising yet another example, we are (arguably) so "minded" that we cannot—to invoke a scenario Gaita (2004 [1991], chapter 17) formulates in his critical engagement with Peter Singer's straightforward ethical consequentialism—find the question of whether to kill a healthy three-week-old baby a serious question. We are so minded that we can only treat someone considering it seriously as not fully belonging to us, even if they tried to discuss the matter in terms of sophisticated utilitarian arguments along Singerian lines. We can again only, in Rortyan terms, use persuasion rather than force to bring them (back) to us, but there is only so much we can do here. Most importantly, we do not and cannot merely think that this holds for us as people in a specific culture. This unthinkability defining "us", or "our culture" is, from our perspective, the only decent way of thinking about the matter. Again, the transcendental "we" does not recognize any genuine alternative to its (our) mindedness. There just is, when the matter is seen from within our form of life, with our eyes, no other way of being minded. Being minded as we are is being minded (cf. again Lear, 1998). If we find something truly unthinkable, then *we* can only say that it *is* unthinkable and that it cannot be decently found thinkable by *anyone*. Morality is everywhere—it is unthinkable that it shouldn't be—and therefore there is no outside, no way of thinking otherwise. "Thinking otherwise" is possible only within ethics. Take this, if you wish, as a holistic pragmatist rephrasing of Wittgenstein's well-known cryptic remark, in the *Tractatus*, that "[e]thics is transcendental".³²

³¹ I have earlier tentatively experimented with a quasi-transcendental argument of this type against racism and sexism (see Pihlström, 2021, chapter 5).

³² It is extremely important to keep in mind that Wittgenstein does not claim ethics to be "transcendent" but, precisely, "transcendental". For discussion, see Appelqvist, 2020, "Introduction"; cf. Pihlström, 2023.

Conclusion: transcendental anthropology

As has become clear, Rorty's version of the "we" is explicitly non-transcendental and thus very different from Lear's. As important as it is to recognize, with Rorty, that our conception of who "we" are and "how we think" is grounded in our changing ways of speaking and acting in the contingent historical circumstances we live in, my worry is that Rorty's radical pragmatism lacks the normative level enabling a transcendental inquiry into the nature of our being "minded" (in a certain way, or in any way at all).³³ A Rortyan pragmatist might easily admit that for us in our contingent historical situation some particular view is unthinkable, but s/he would urge that just as our surroundings could be different, so could the role played by that view in our thought and action.

What we still may and should learn from Rorty is the lesson of the thoroughgoing fallibilism and contingency of our conception—even any transcendental conception—of "us": even when we cannot meaningfully regard our own way of viewing the world as just one among many possible ones, that is, even if "other" ways of drawing the boundary between the thinkable and the unthinkable are, indeed, unthinkable for us, we must still be able to entertain the idea that *our life could*—and possibly should—be (dramatically) different from what it is: something we find unthinkable could be thinkable or even right, and we currently find thinkable some things we shouldn't.³⁴ We have to recognize this possibility in a self-critical—*pace* Rorty, transcendental—sense from within our being minded in the way we are. This is, as noted above, analogous to a Kantian transcendental thinker recognizing that human cognition could be different from what it is: it is not metaphysically necessary from any imagined God's-Eye View that we organize all possible experience in terms of the forms of intuition and the categories as laid out in Kant's First Critique. In brief, our humanity *could* be different.

In the vocabulary used above, when something is transcendently constitutive of "us", the "we" in a sense disappears (as in Lear's analysis): "we are so minded that X" means, for us, just "X". This equivalence depends on our contingently being minded in the way we are. How-

³³ For this critique of Rorty, see, e.g., Pihlström, 2013, chapter 3. For diverging critical perspectives on Rorty's enormous relevance to contemporary philosophy, see the essays in Rondel, 2021.

³⁴ Admittedly, it is paradoxical to suggest that some view is unthinkable for us but could be thinkable. If it were thinkable, it would presumably have to be considered thinkable by a somewhat different (imagined) group of "us".

ever, the question remains: *couldn't we* be (or turn to being) differently "minded" (though we aren't and don't, and cannot see how we could), even if we followed Gaita and Lear in thinking that someone who is differently minded fails to be "one of us"? Shouldn't we acknowledge the possibility that in some sense we contingently *could*? Couldn't, moreover, *someone else* successfully "use persuasion instead of force" to bring *us* out of our mindedness and into something different? Isn't this still in some sense a possibility *for us*, for our active mind, even though in another sense there is no other-minded "group" out there for *us* to join, given who we are? In other words, isn't it at least conceivable to us that we could become truly different, after all? Even if something is, for transcendental reasons, unthinkable (for us), it might in some sense become an option for a re-considered and transformed "us"—presumably analogously to the way in which we might, in the Kantian context, imagine that we had the capacity of intellectual intuition which we actually (quasi-necessarily) lack, given the kind of finite rational beings we are.

There is no genuine contrast *within* the "transcendental 'we'" and its (our) mindedness, however. Even transcendental mindedness invokes, as a condition of its intelligibility, an outside "other", because the transcendental concept of being minded (the "transcendental 'we'") potentially criticized by non-transcendental pragmatists like Rorty cannot function without presupposing such an other—just like a vast abyss of the unthinkable needs to be presupposed for us to be able to acknowledge the contingency of the transcendental boundaries of the (for us) thinkable. *This* holds for "us", whoever we are. All, also all "others", need such a contrast between "us" and (possible) "others". Therefore, it seems to me that transcendental inquiries into our mindedness may in the end fail in the sense of making other-mindedness a kind of impossibility it cannot really be—for us. While ruling something out, we can hardly avoid entertaining the *possibility* of not ruling it out. This is something that Rortyan pragmatism may lead us to appreciate, while avoiding any transcendental investigations of who and what "we" are.

My conclusion, finally, is that there is a sense in which we (pragmatically) need all the three versions of "us" listed in the title of this paper. The idea of our "disappearing 'we'" reminds us that when we get to the level of drawing the line between the thinkable and the unthinkable, there are no genuine alternatives to our way of viewing the world. The Rortyan "we", however, recognizes the historical contingency and revisability of this lack of alternatives. The transcendental inquiry into "us"

then analyzes the necessary conditions for the possibility of both epistemic and ethical world-engagement based on these contingently necessary boundaries of our human situation. At a meta-level, such a transcendental investigation also explores the need to actively—as an exercise of what Lear calls our “active mind”—switch perspectives (when necessary) from one of these forms of “us” to another and to holistically apply the considerations of reflective equilibrium into their relationships. It is only the transcendental subject (the “transcendental ‘we’”) that is capable of such perspective-switching. Therefore, the transcendental reflection on “us”, when pragmatically carried out, ultimately incorporates all three senses of “us” in the spirit of critical holistic pragmatism. Only by so doing can we hope, with Rorty, to continuously transform our selves to match our hopes, to (always) try to become better versions of ourselves.³⁵

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³⁵ Thanks are due to the editors of this volume for the kind invitation to contribute this essay and for useful critical comments. A draft was presented as a guest lecture at the University of Milan (February, 2024); I am grateful to Rossella Fabbrichesi, Andrea Parravicini, and their colleagues for an excellent discussion. The argument of this paper is more comprehensively developed in Pihlström, 2025 (see especially chapters 1–2).

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