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## RORTY, RADICALISM, ROMANTICISM: THE POLITICS OF THE GAZE

JOAN C. WILLIAMS\*\*

Perhaps it is fitting that Richard Rorty, who has made a career defending perspectivalism,<sup>1</sup> should find himself signifying diametrically opposed things to different people. In roughly half of my conversations about Rorty, someone ultimately dismisses his "radical relativism." "Of course," I've been told innumerable times, after a long discussion of ethics or epistemology, "I don't go as far as *Rorty*."

Then I have to admit I do. Consequently, I value Rorty's elegant and influential explorations of nonfoundationalism.<sup>2</sup> The notion that there exists no absolute truth, no privileged text, no God's-eye point of

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1. Perspectivalism is another term for nonfoundationalism that stresses that, without absolutes, we cannot achieve a "view from nowhere." The phrase is from Thomas Nagel's *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). According to William James, "What we say about reality . . . depends on the perspective in which we throw it." William James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), quoted in Joseph William Singer, "Property and Coercion in Federal Indian Law: The Conflict Between Critical and Complacent Pragmatism," *Southern California Law Review* 63 (September 1990): 1840. Note that other nonfoundationalists have used metaphors of blindness and gazing. See for example, Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 217, 243; William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on some of Life's Ideals* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

2. See Richard Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature and Consequences of Pragmatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

view<sup>3</sup> has labored under a severe burden of perceived implausibility since its invention. Said Clifford Geertz in 1984: "To suggest that 'hard rock' foundations . . . may not be available is to find oneself accused of disbelieving the existence of the physical world, thinking pushpin as good as poetry, regarding Hitler as just a fellow with unstandard tastes."<sup>4</sup>

The felt implausibility of nonfoundationalism has been exacerbated by the aestheticist style of many of its advocates. A good example is Friedrich Nietzsche, who argued that once God was dead, morality came tumbling after, leaving only the raw exercise of power.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most influential contemporary practitioner of the aestheticist style is Jacques Derrida, with his vivid sense of the melodramatic, his abandonment of conventional philosophical prose, and his irresistible desire to shock the bourgeois by exploring in a shocking and stylish way the "free play" left over after the death of "metaphysics."<sup>6</sup>

The aestheticist celebration of found freedom is profoundly threatening if it signals the freedom to torture innocents. To make nonfoundationalism plausible in ethics, Rorty's resuscitation of pragmatism holds much greater promise. While aestheticists focus on what's gone once God is dead, pragmatists focus on what's left. Aestheticists aim to shock; pragmatists to reassure. Pragmatists' central message is that the critique of absolutes is not so threatening, after all. We *can* function without absolutes, they argue; in fact, we always have. Words were tools even when we thought they were mirrors.<sup>7</sup> The mere admission that they are no more than tools will not cause them suddenly to break.<sup>8</sup>

3. This phrase is drawn from Hilary Putnam's *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 49.

4. Clifford Geertz, "Distinguished Lecture: Anti Anti-Relativism," *American Anthropologist* 86 (June 1984): 263.

5. For a recent application of this interpretation of Nietzsche, see Thomas L. Haskell, "The Curious Persistence of Rights Talk in the 'Age of Interpretation,'" *Journal of American History* 74 (December 1987): 984-64.

6. This interpretation of Derrida's work is quite different from the one I discussed in "Critical Legal Studies: The Death of Transcendence and the Rise of the New Langdells," *New York University Law Review* 62 (June 1987): 429-497. There I was tracking the application to law by critical legal scholars of the Yale critics' interpretation of Derrida. Allan Megill offers a much more sympathetic and persuasive interpretation of Derrida. See Megill, *Prophets of Extremity*, 257-337.

7. For an exploration of the mirror metaphor, see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*; for discussion of the tool metaphor, see Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 11-13.

8. Cf. Clifford Geertz, "Anti Anti-Relativism," 264. The text's formulation presents the "tool" metaphor as superior to the traditional "mirror" metaphor. This is the sense in which nonfoundationalism presents a new theory of knowledge (of which the tool metaphor is an integral part). See James Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 64-94.

Rorty's work has helped explain how we can abandon foundationalism without becoming disoriented, immoral, mute; without disbelieving in the physical world or dismantling our traditions. Pragmatism taps Americans' love of straight talk and useful thought, and avoids the anti-intellectualism awakened by Derrida's extravagant density and verbal dazzle. Derrida's style may garner cultural power in France; in America, it places nonfoundationalism at a severe persuasive disadvantage.<sup>9</sup>

Despite Rorty's commitment to pragmatism, he often melds a pragmatist with an aestheticist tone. This worked well when Rorty limited his focus to epistemology and other technical philosophical issues. Now that Rorty's attention has turned to political philosophy and ethics, however, his use of an aestheticist tone threatens to jeopardize his project of making nonfoundationalism seem a plausible and desirable way to think: Nonfoundationalism seems unappealing if the death of God signals the freedom to torture innocents. I therefore begin this essay by explaining in a consistently pragmatist tone how nonfoundationalism can be reconciled with the widespread sense that ethical certainties exist.

Then I shift to a different perspective, and we meet a very different Richard Rorty. For while half my conversational partners dismiss Rorty as too threateningly radical, the other half roll their eyes at how reactionary he is. These encounters echo the rough sledding that resulted from publication of his recent work, culminating in 1989 with *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. This work has been called "myopic, smug, and insensitive,"<sup>10</sup> "complacent,"<sup>11</sup> and "somewhat placid and world weary;"<sup>12</sup> Rorty has been accused of "reinforc[ing] existing power relations that illegitimately oppress and exclude large segments of the population."<sup>13</sup>

Though I share the uneasiness that underlies these criticisms, they have an odd quality that stems from the fact that Rorty himself is neither complacent nor conservative. He is an egalitarian, a feminist, a social democrat. Why the impression created by his recent work?

9. Rorty has almost single-handedly resuscitated interest in the American pragmatists John Dewey, William James, and Charles Peirce. See Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1989), 199. For an example of open derision of Derrida's style by an eminent American intellectual historian, see Thomas Haskell, "The Curious Persistence," 992 n. 15.

10. Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 230.

11. Joseph William Singer, "Property and Coercion in Federal Indian Law," 1826.

12. Thomas Grey, "Hear the Other Side," *Southern California Law Review* 63 (September 1990): 1569-1595.

13. Joseph William Singer, "Should Lawyers Care About Philosophy?," *Duke Law Journal* 1989 (December 1990): 1759.

The trouble, I argue in the second part of this essay, is Rorty's apparent unawareness of the ways that our institutions and patterns of thought currently render his egalitarian principles unattainable. Rorty could benefit from one of the key insights of feminism: that much of what we like about ourselves, notably our culture's definition of self-creation, is deeply intertwined with patterns of oppression.<sup>14</sup> Rorty's recent work is built around a Romantic idea of self-creation that serves to deflect his gaze from ingrained patterns of gender, class, and race inequities. For Rorty to integrate his egalitarian intentions with his other concerns, he must first come to terms with the political implications of his focus on making the world safe for strong poets.

I. INNOCENTS AND AZTECS:  
RORTY'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL RADICALISM

*What, then, can the pragmatist say when the torturers come?*

—Jeffrey Stout<sup>15</sup>

The imagery of tortured innocents has played a central role in the intellectual history of nonfoundationalist thought. In this section, I first sketch the historical links between distrust of nonfoundationalism and people's sense that moral certainties exist. I then argue that these certainties reflect not objective truth, but the grammar of what it means to be us. The torture of innocents is wrong because it violates our culture's celebration of the individual and our sense of the essential dignity and equality of human beings. I conclude by exploring some of the benefits to be gained from redefining our moral certainties as cultural rather than as reflective of eternal truth.

Edward Purcell's excellent book, *The Crisis of Democratic Theory*, documents how the specter of ethical relativism deflected Americans from their initial encounter with the critique of absolutes in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> Purcell incisively documents how the growing certainty of Nazi evil led to a rejection of nonfoundationalism in the social sciences and the law. When Ruth Benedict argued in 1934 that such elemental acts as murder and suicide were judged differently in different cultures and "relate to no absolute standard,"<sup>17</sup> the point seemed

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14. See Joan Williams, "Virtue and Oppression," in *NOMOS 33: Yearbook of the American Society of Political and Legal Philosophy*, ed. John W. Chapman and William A. Galston (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming).

15. Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, 256.

16. Edward A. Purcell, Jr., *The Crisis of Democratic Theory* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1973).

17. *Ibid.*, 70, 158.

provocative and innocent enough; ten years later such ethical "relativism" seemed at once a serious threat to national purpose and intuitively, "obviously" wrong.

The most common contemporary response to the fear of "nihilism" is to embrace nonfoundationalism while preserving access to a few objective, moral certainties.<sup>18</sup> A recent notable example is Jeffrey Stout, who adopts a nonfoundationalist approach to ethics. Stout's work is pragmatist in spirit, yet he reverts to objectivity to explain why slavery and the torture of innocents are wrong.<sup>19</sup>

In pragmatist ethics, objective moral certainties are both undesirable and unnecessary. Objectivity is undesirable for a very simple reason. As recent work shows,<sup>20</sup> forging some coherency for neopragmatism will be difficult. If pragmatism is to prove more than "generosity of spirit in search of something to say,"<sup>21</sup> we as pragmatists ought to agree on a vigorous nonfoundationalism. Not only is objectivity undesirable; it also is unnecessary to explain our sense of certainty about torture and other horrors. What follows is an attempt to reassure that, to the extent nonfoundationalism offers us ethical space, it is ethical space we have always handled and can handle in the future.

Why is the torture of innocents wrong? A Wittgensteinian strategy provides the most direct response. The torture of innocents is wrong because of the grammar of the sentence.<sup>22</sup> If someone is "innocent," then by definition she should not be punished: by calling her innocent the speaker presupposes that conclusion. And "torture"? Let us begin by noting that, within our contemporary language of morality, torture provides the touchstone of moral bankruptcy.<sup>23</sup> Whatever the Evil Ones did to their Innocents, if Amnesty International can successfully label it as torture, it has won the battle for moral condemnation. A successful charge that someone has tortured innocents ends the discussion: Torture's

18. Another common approach is to adopt nonfoundationalism, but to reaccess nigh-objective certainties by linking them to consensus within a given culture. For a critique of this approach, see Joan Williams, "Culture and Certainty: Legal History and the Reconstructive Project," *Virginia Law Review* 76 (May 1990): 713-744.

19. Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, 225, 245. See also P. Foot, "Moral Relativism," in *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral*, ed. J. Meiland and M. Krausz (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1982), 163.

20. See, e.g., essays included in Brint and Weaver, eds. *Pragmatism*.

21. This phrase originally was applied to republicanism. See Larry G. Simon, "The New Republicanism: Generosity of Spirit in Search of Something to Say," *William and Mary Law Review* 29 (Fall 1987): 83. I am grateful to my colleague Mark Hager for this citation.

22. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), 371-373.

23. Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. and ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 94, 357-358, 410.

status as a trump card signals its central ideological role as a reference point of immorality.

Why does torture play this role in our form of life? For a subtle, detailed and elegant answer see Charles Taylor's brilliant analysis of the sources of modern identity.<sup>24</sup> I will strive for a less subtle but perhaps more widely accessible explanation, using the Aztecs as a heuristic.

What I know about Aztecs consists of vague impressions from Mexican museums. They were a highly developed society with advanced astronomical knowledge. They were great administrators and fierce warriors who built a vast empire. They believed the universe would run down without a steady stream of human sacrifice, and they killed lots and lots of people by ripping out their hearts.

To us, the Aztecs are not an attractive people. Their notions of human sacrifice seem senseless, cruel, and profligate in the extreme. How can we say other than that they were wrong? Do we "relativists" really claim that human sacrifice was as "right" for the Aztecs as respectful praying is for us? Rather than answer this question, I hope to unpack the assumptions behind it.

Let us begin by asking why we find the Aztec religion so repulsive. First of all, we don't believe in it, so we see the human sacrifice as unnecessary. We do not, for example, feel the same level of purified outrage at the fact that Americans boil some people's brains inside their skulls until their eyes bulge and often pop out. Electrocuting is unfortunate, but, in the common view, necessary.<sup>25</sup> But if we *really believed* that the world would end without human blood, the gore of human sacrifice would look to us more like the gore of our own highly ritualized executions. Undesirable, perhaps, but a given of adult life.

At a deeper level, we cry, we'd never stand for human sacrifice: we'd risk the lives of every one of us rather than allow the slaughter of innocents. During the Civil War, for example, Southern troops made a particular point of slaughtering black Union troops while taking their white comrades prisoner. Confederates, moreover, didn't waste their bullets: They clubbed and bayoneted even soldiers who had surrendered. Eventually, the North threatened to stop all prisoner exchanges unless the South agreed to treat black and white prisoners of war equally. The South refused. All prisoner exchanges stopped, and many Union soldiers

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24. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

25. Public opinion polls show that 70 to 80% of the American public supports the death penalty. *Boston Globe*, July 28, 1990, 18.



died of starvation and disease as prisoner-of-war facilities became so overcrowded they turned into death camps.<sup>26</sup>

White men died rather than sacrifice the principle that all human life is sacred, that all human beings must be accorded equal dignity. This is the core principle that makes Aztec sacrifice incomprehensible, and it is (to me) the single most precious principle of our tradition. It is encapsulated in the Equal Protection Clause of the Constitution and in the Declaration of Independence: "All men are created equal."<sup>27</sup> But these are only its recent, secularized formulations: the principle goes back much, much further. It is a core principle of Christianity,<sup>28</sup> and of the Judaic tradition before it: Some think the story of Abraham and Isaac marks the end of human sacrifice in the Hebraic tradition.<sup>29</sup> The modern notion that people are equal—a notion closely linked with earlier notions of equal dignity of souls before the Lord—is a cornerstone of the Western tradition.

This is the perspective from which we can understand our revulsion with Aztec sacrifice. That practice was deeply antithetical to our sense that each human being has an equal right to live, to create a full life, and to strive for happiness. Presumably, the Aztecs held some variant of a quite different vision, one in which human beings are seen as more like cells in a body, so that one feels no compunction about excising a breast to let the body (politic) live. To the extent that sacrificial victims were prisoners of war, the Aztecs also presumably drew sharp limits around their sense of kinship with other human beings and chose to identify as "like us" only those of their own group.

Is Aztec sacrifice wrong? To us, of course it is. Does this mean it violated some eternal moral truth? No. It means that we could not be ourselves and be other than repulsed by the image of human hearts held up to the sun. We can see how the Aztecs acted as they did—they lived without a central principle that defines our identity. Saying the Aztecs were wrong simply means we do not want to change in the ways required to make their practices understandable. We have no wish to abandon the notion of the equal dignity of souls.

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26. I should note that, in wartime, the decision to spend the lives of some in order to save the lives of others is an everyday occurrence. This fact's inconsistency with the basic structure of our ethics is glossed over with rhetoric of duty and bravery. The North's refusal to tolerate the South's attacks on African-American soldiers in the context noted reflected the fact that the equality of blacks and whites had become a key contested issue in the war. *The Civil War, Episode 7* (PBS Video 1989).

27. Whether the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence considered women to be created "equal" is, of course, less clear.

28. See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 287.

29. See George A. Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible* (Oxford: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952), vol. 1, 164.

Let's move from Aztecs to closer cultural villains: to Nazis, Iraqis, and abortion. The Nazis so threaten our imagination because they were part of our tradition—that's why they hid the death camps instead of making them arenas for ritual celebration. The Nazis were Europeans acting like Aztecs, killing innocents without compunction in pursuit of an illusion of the common good. Iraqis did likewise when they used twelve-year-old boys as mine-sweepers during the Iran-Iraq war, a disgusting development from the standpoint of the Western principles that human life is sacred and that each human being has the right to a "full" life. The action made sense, though, from the framework of an older theological tradition that viewed human life as but an opportunity to maneuver oneself into heaven. From that perspective, the boys' sacrifice was also an opportunity; letting them grasp it left everyone better off.<sup>30</sup>

This is the sense in which ethical thought is ethnocentric, not universal. A key move is to ask, when faced with an ethically troubling act, what would life have to look like to make this a justifiable choice? Then the second, crucial question: Do I want to change in the ways I would have to in order to adopt this novel point of view?

This procedure explains not only Aztecs and innocents, but abortion. Although I am absolutely convinced that access to abortion must be guaranteed,<sup>31</sup> I can see how the conclusion that seems so obvious to me can seem utterly unconvincing, even repulsive to (a) an idealistic, celibate priest, who has no incentive to think through what denial of abortion will mean in the lives of actual women, and every motivation to engage imaginatively with the drama of fetal life; or (b) a middle-aged Mormon mother of five who believes that a woman's vocation is to marry, that the purpose of marriage is procreation, that sex outside of marriage is wicked, and that the wicked shall be punished.

Neither the priest's nor the Mormon lifestyle seem to me an indefensible choice. And I can readily see how, from their perspectives, abortion seems indefensible. Yet I still believe they are wrong about abortion and I am right. This conclusion reflects not my more accurate mirror of ultimate realities but a coherent social-political-intellectual outlook that includes my beliefs about the role of women, about the impact of income disparities in this country, and about the duty of human beings to acknowledge responsibility in human situations in which all available choices involve inescapable tragedy.

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30. During the concluding plenary of the Conference on Pragmatism in Law and Politics at the University of Virginia, November 7-9, 1990, the Iraqis' reported use of boys as mine sweepers during the Iran-Iraq War was cited as evidence that objective certainties exist.

31. For further discussion, see Joan Williams, "Abortion, Incommensurability, and Jurisprudence," *Tulane Law Review* 63 (June 1989): 1669-1670.

Ethical choices offer not opportunities for appeal to absolutes, but the chance to find out who we are and who we want to be.<sup>32</sup> The torture of innocents functions as an absolute because no fully socialized American could help but condemn Nazis, Iraqis (in the context noted), and Aztecs. About abortion we are not so sure: Abortion brings us back from platitudes to the much broader range of contexts where we simply don't agree.

Once we redefine absolutes in this way, we can explain our sense of certainty about the torture of innocents without a God's-eye point of view. A steadfast refusal to appeal *in any context* to objective moral certainties has, in my view, more than epistemological significance. It offers us a chance to step back and examine the structure of our form of life, to assess the hidden costs of our ideals. How the ideal of universal brotherhood is inevitably hemmed in by the arbitrary lines that people draw to define, and ultimately to limit, the scope of their moral responsibility.<sup>33</sup>

To capture this arbitrariness, I turn to a brilliant series of articles by intellectual historian Thomas Haskell.<sup>34</sup> Haskell examines how Europeans after 1750 reached the "obvious" truth that slavery is evil. My discussion thus far suggests that our certain sense of slavery's evil signals that opposition to slavery is central to our ethical identity; for us, slavery violates the grammar of what it means to be human. Yet opposition to slavery in the West is relatively recent. Before 1750, "slavery was routinely defended and hardly ever condemned outright, even by the most scrupulous moralists."<sup>35</sup> Haskell traces development of a "humanitarian sensibility" that led to the "obvious" truth that slavery is immoral. He begins with a thought experiment:

Let us call this the "case of the starving stranger." As I sit at my desk writing this essay, and as you, the reader, now sit

32. Who are "we"? Richard Rorty's notion of North Atlantic culture is useful here. See Richard Rorty, "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity," in *Habermas and Modernity* (R. Bernstein ed. 1985), 33.

33. This point is dramatized by the fact that we have no ungendered way to capture the serene, inspirational overtones of the phrase "universal brotherhood."

34. Thomas L. Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part 1," *American Historical Review* 90 (April 1985): 339-362; Thomas L. Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part 2," *American Historical Review* 90 (June 1985): 547-567. Haskell's articles have proved controversial on a number of grounds. See, for example, John Ashworth, "The Relationship Between Capitalism and Humanitarianism," *American Historical Review* 92 (October 1987): 813-829. See also David Brion Davis, "Reflection on Abolitionism and Ideological Hegemony," *American Historical Review* 92 (October 1987): 797-813; Thomas L. Haskell, "Convention and Hegemonic Interest in the Debate over Antislavery: A Reply to Davis and Ashworth," *American Historical Review* 92 (October 1987): 829-879.

35. Haskell, "Capitalism and Humanitarian Sensibility 1," 339.

reading it, both of us are aware that some people in Phnom Penh, Bombay, Rangoon, the Sahel, and elsewhere will die next week of starvation. They are strangers; all we know about them is that they will die. We also know that it would be possible for any one of us to sell a car or a house, buy an airline ticket, fly to Bombay or wherever, seek out at least one of those starving strangers, and save his life, or at the very least extend it. We could be there tomorrow, and we really could save him. Now to admit that we have it in our power to prevent this person's death by starvation is to admit that our inaction—our preference for sitting here, reading and writing about moral responsibility, going on with our daily routine—is a necessary condition for the stranger's death.<sup>36</sup>

Haskell acknowledges that our inaction is only one of a number of interacting causes. "But the troubling fact remains that *but for* our inaction this evil event would not occur."<sup>37</sup> He continues:

Why do we not go to his aid? It is not for lack of ethical maxims teaching us that it is good to help strangers. Presumably we all subscribe to the Golden Rule, and certainly if we were starving we would hope that some stranger would care enough to drop his daily routine and come to our aid. Yet we sit here. We do not do for him what we would have him do for us. Are we hypocrites? Are we engaged in self-deception? Do we in any sense *intend* his death?<sup>38</sup>

To say we intend his death "stretch[es] the meaning of intention way beyond customary usage."<sup>39</sup> Haskell's central point is not to argue about issues of causation or intent, but to point out that we have to draw the limits of moral responsibility *somewhere*, and that "somewhere" will always exclude much pain and suffering we could alleviate. Necessarily so: Even if we drop our pens and go to Bombay, we will have to choose to begin by saving person A or person B.

Haskell's thought experiment aptly dramatizes the now-traditional nonfoundationalist assertion that the limits we draw in ethics are a matter of convention.<sup>40</sup> Haskell's thesis is that opposition to slavery emerged

36. *Ibid.*, 354-355.

37. *Ibid.*, 355 (emphasis in original).

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*, 349.

40. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), 224; Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. and ed. Walter Kauffman (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 77, 80.

as part of a rather sudden widening of Europeans' sense of responsibility to strangers. He points out that medieval minstrels sang joyfully, without apparent feelings of distress, of hearing the vanquished cry for help.<sup>41</sup> Those slaughtered fell outside the Europeans' ambit of responsibility; so did slaves until about 1750. Only after slaves were reconceptualized as human beings "like ourselves" did slavery seem clearly immoral rather than a necessary evil.

Haskell's dramatization of the conventional nature of our ambit of responsibility has extraordinary power if we turn it back to Aztecs, Nazis, and abortion. The Aztecs and the Nazis did not feel morally implicated in the death of their victims because they felt those victims were outside their ambit of responsibility—much as nonvegetarians today define animals as outside the range of creatures to whom they owe the right to life.<sup>42</sup> Haskell's analysis suggests that the abortion debate can be understood as a controversy about whether (or, more correctly, when) to include the developing fetus within our ambit of responsibility.<sup>43</sup> Pro-life advocates often preserve the traditional assumption that our ambit of responsibility is incontestable rather than a matter of convention; or else they think that a refusal to identify with a fetus the size of a lima bean<sup>44</sup> does more moral damage than refusal to feed a starving adult: I disagree. Once we view the scope of our moral responsibility as a matter of convention, it may become clearer why women—faced with grossly disproportionate physical, psychological, and economic burdens of raising children and extraordinarily high cultural standards of what it means to raise a child "well"—choose to place some fetuses outside their ambit of responsibility.

However much we disagree about abortion, one thing is clear. A defining characteristic of ourselves is our commitment to the ideal of identifying with all humanity at least to the extent of refusing to kill or torture people by means of positive actions. That's what makes the actions of the Nazis and the Aztecs seem so indisputably unconscionable.

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41. Haskell, "Capitalism and Humanitarian Sensibility 2," 549 n. 5.

42. See Haskell, "Capitalism and Humanitarian Sensibility 1," 354.

43. The traditional law of "quickening" can be interpreted as reflecting a decision to include the fetus within the community's ambit of responsibility when the mother could feel the baby move. See J. Mohr, *Abortion in America: The Origins and Evolution of National Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 3-6.

44. This describes a seven-week-old fetus. Sheila Kitzinger, *The Complete Book of Pregnancy and Childbirth* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 65. A three-month-old fetus is 2½ to 3 inches long and weighs ½ ounce. Arlene Eisenberg, Heidi Eisenberg Murkoff, Sandee Eisenberg Hathaway, *What to Expect When You're Expecting* (New York: Workman Publishing, 1984), 120. In 1981, over 90% of abortions were performed in the first three months of pregnancy. Patrick J. Sheeran, *Women, Society, the State, and Abortion* (New York: Praeger, 1987), 20.

Haskell's analysis highlights the conventional, limited, and historically contingent nature of our moral definitions. We are repulsed by the torture of innocents, but we still choose to kill Iraqis, animals, starving strangers, criminals, infants,<sup>45</sup> and victims of defective products and environmental contamination. We define these deaths as necessary evils, using much the same distancing procedures as the Aztecs might have used to absolve themselves of moral responsibility.

Pragmatists should object to the notion of moral absolutes, not because we want people to be free to torture or enslave, but because using the language of absolutes lets us evade the troubling fact that our moral choices fall on a continuum on which we set limits far short of our power to intervene. This notion of self-responsible freedom is a key theme in pragmatic thought.<sup>46</sup>

Although pragmatists and aestheticists agree that nonfoundationalism offers greater scope for human will, the projects they sketch out are very different. Aestheticists greet this final Galilean revolution with celebrations of found freedom. A pragmatist tone is less exuberantly playful. The pragmatist notes that we've always had the freedom to create ourselves, and, while we've used it remarkably well to a certain extent, genocide and starvation are also made by human hands.

Dewey combined this weighty sense of responsibility with a sunny American optimism about the power of the reforming spirit. These are qualities that make pragmatism precious in a troubled world. A neopragmatism more chastened and historical than Dewey's can help cure a key drawback of Western moral life, that serene sense of moral exceptionalism that pervades our tradition.<sup>47</sup> Haskell's parable points out the troubling structure of our morality: overly ambitious, designed to have us fail to attain our high ideals. To quote Charles Taylor:

We have somehow saddled ourselves with very high demands of universal justice and benevolence. Public opinion, concen-

45. The overall United States infant mortality rate is 10.4 (per 1,000 births). This is exactly twice as high as Japan's rate. *Newsday*, March 6, 1991, 99.

46. Charles Taylor traces the theme of self-responsible freedom back to Immanuel Kant and the Enlightenment. See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 366-367, 167-176. Related pragmatist themes stress a world still in the making, see John Dewey, *Essays in Experimental Logic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1916), 305 and John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: H. Holt, 1920), 186, and the transformative potential of democracy, see Richard Bernstein, "Dewey, Democracy: The Task Ahead of Us," in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, ed. John Rajchman and Cornel West (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 48-63, and Hilary Putnam, "Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy," *Southern California Law Review* 63 (September 1990): 1671.

47. The term "moral exceptionalism" is Charles Taylor's. See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 397. See also Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 22-50.

trating on some popular or fashionable "causes" and neglecting other equally crying needs and injustices, may apply these standards very selectively. . . . Or we can, while approving them, neutralize them as a distant ideal. . . . Some degree of this latter is probably necessary to keep our balance.<sup>48</sup>

Is a morality high-minded but inevitably honored in the breach inherently better than an approach less ambitious but implemented more consistently? The answer is unclear, but this is not the crucial issue. The key issue is that questions of this sort virtually never are discussed, despite their central importance in our particular, contingent moral universe.

To summarize: We as pragmatists do not need *any* absolutes to account for our sense of moral certainties. We should refuse to link our certainties to absolutes because in doing so we lose the opportunity for insight into the grammar of what it means to be us. Understanding the arbitrariness of our "absolutes" can help us grasp some of the hidden costs implicit in our current, contingent self-definition.

## II. THE POLITICS OF THE GAZE: RORTY'S CONSERVATISM

In recent years, for every conversation I have had with someone decrying Rorty's radicalism, I have had a matching one decrying him as a slavish defender of the status quo. Earlier in his career Rorty was attacked for tearing down the treasures of Western civilization; now he is attacked as one of its most uncritical proponents. Cornel West led the way in 1985:

Rorty's neopragmatism only kicks the philosophical props from under bourgeois capitalist societies; it requires no change in our cultural and political practices. What are the ethical and political consequences of adopting his neopragmatism? On the macrosocietal level, there simply are none. In this sense, Rorty's neopragmatism is, in part, a self-conscious post-philosophical ideological project to promote the basic practices of bourgeois capitalist societies while discouraging philosophical defenses of them.<sup>49</sup>

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48. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 397-398.

49. In slightly different forms, this passage recurs in Cornel West's essay in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, 267 (see n. 46), and in his *American Evasion of Philosophy*, 206. Here I have combined his two versions.

As mentioned earlier, subsequent critics have agreed in increasingly unbuttoned language.<sup>50</sup> Jeffrey Stout, for instance, associates Rorty with "smug approval of the status quo."<sup>51</sup> Stout continues:

My point is not that Rorty is himself a myopic, smug or insensitive man. I am talking about the impression created by his writings; an impression I believe he regrets but has had trouble disowning or undoing. In fact, when Hilary Putnam says it would be "facile" to accuse Rorty of "conservatism," I wholeheartedly agree. "Rorty," Putnam writes, "is as 'wet' a liberal as they come." And yet, Putnam goes on to say, "If Rorty is not conservative, he does, at times, seem ever so slightly decadent."<sup>52</sup>

Stout and Putnam highlight the important oddness of Rorty's current situation: He is a feminist<sup>53</sup> and egalitarian<sup>54</sup> who condemns "greedy and stupid conservatives" (p. 170) and "greedy and shortsighted capitalists." (p. 175) Why is he being accused of complacent conservatism?

Rorty's recent work is built around the Romantics' ideal that associates self-creation with mastery, autonomy, and masculinity.<sup>55</sup> While Rorty attempts to distance himself from the masculinist and elitist elements within Romantic thought, he fails to appreciate how his model of self-creation subtly but systematically deflects his gaze away from his egalitarian aspirations. Rorty encapsulates his ideal in the notion of the "strong poet," whom Rorty celebrates as "humanity's hero" (p. 26), "the vanguard of the species." (p. 20) "In my view," Rorty notes, "an ideally liberal polity would be one whose culture hero is [Harold] Bloom's 'strong poet' rather than the warrior, the priest, the sage, or the truth-seeking, 'logical,' 'objective' scientist." (p. 53) Bloom is famous for his

50. See notes 10-13 above.

51. Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, 230.

52. *Ibid.*, 230. Quoting Hilary Putnam's "Liberation Philosophy," *London Review of Books* 8 (March 1986), 5.

53. Richard Rorty, "Feminism and Pragmatism," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 30 (Spring 1991): 231-259.

54. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 84. Future references to this work are noted in parentheses in the text.

55. For an earlier feminist critique that points out the masculinist bias in Rorty's Romanticism, see Naney Fraser, "Solidarity or Singularity? Richard Rorty between Romanticism and Technocracy," reprinted in Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 93-110. For another's thoughts on the relationship of pragmatism and feminism, see Margaret Radin, "The Pragmatist and the Feminist," *Southern California Law Review* 63 (September 1990): 1699.



analysis of the "anxiety of influence": the Romantics' view that poets are driven by a "horror of finding [themselves] to be only a copy or replica." (p. 24) Rorty notes the strong poet's "fear that one might end one's days in . . . a world one never made, an inherited world."<sup>56</sup> (p. 29) One can avoid this fate by offering a "metaphorical redescription" (p. 28) that "impress[es] one's mark on the language." (p. 24) "[T]o have figured out what was distinctive about oneself," Rorty says, would be to "*demonstrate* that one was not a copy or a replica. One would have been as strong as any poet has ever been, which means as strong as any human being could possibly be." (p. 24)

To understand how Rorty's focus on strong poets deflects his gaze from his egalitarian goals, one must place the strong poet in the context of Romantic thought. Marlon Ross explores in elegant detail the masculinist bias in Romantic imagery.<sup>57</sup> Ross concludes that the Romantics used gendered imagery to establish the moral and intellectual authority of the strong poet. One strategy entailed associating poets with potency and strength—the latter association picked up by Harold Bloom in his image of the "strong" poet and by Rorty in his assertion that strong poets are "as strong as any human being could possibly be." Bloom and Rorty carry on an intellectual tradition that began with Wordsworth, who identified poeticizing as a (the?) quintessential expression of masculine maturity.<sup>58</sup> Wordsworth did this consciously and explicitly; Rorty does so implicitly by associating success in life with unstoppable strength.

Ross explores the cultural background for the Romantic poet's obsessive insistence on his virility. Ross reminds us of the stereotypes of pale, emasculated male writers<sup>59</sup> and points out that male poets' sexual anxiety may have intensified in the Romantic period because of the emergence of an influential group of women writers.<sup>60</sup> The original

56. Can a poet, however strong, hope to avoid ending his or her days in an inherited world? Of course not, a fact that highlights the acute tension between Rorty's claims for the strong poet and nonfoundationalism's social theory of knowledge. Every rebellion assumes huge areas of agreement, cf., Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 115, so every poet's self-creation occurs firmly within a background in which large areas of tradition are left intact. When Rorty gains some distance on his romance with the strong poet, he recognizes this. See Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 46.

57. Marlon B. Ross, *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). Earlier studies include *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 98-99, 219-220, 401-403, 460-462. I am grateful to Martha Woodmansee for bringing Ross's book to my attention.

58. Ross, *The Contours of Masculine Desire*, 22, 87-186.

59. *Ibid.*, 39.

60. *Ibid.*, 51.

Romantics felt a particular need for masculinized metaphors because their project was to celebrate the emotions—an arena traditionally the province of women. The "Wordsworthian agenda of transforming the vulnerability of passive emotion into the power of manly heroic action"<sup>61</sup> transformed "unmanly vulnerability into manly self-control."<sup>62</sup>

Mastery and autonomy were key themes in the Romantics' celebration of the strong poet. The Romantic focus on autonomy reflected the assumption that self-creation entailed (to quote Wordsworth) "a song of myself."<sup>63</sup> This celebration of self is traditionally interpreted as evidence of Wordsworth's contribution in unleashing subjectivity; Ross stresses instead the peculiarly masculine assumption that self-realization involves the solitary autonomy of the quest.<sup>64</sup> The Romantics persistently used themes of quest and conquest—of the Alps,<sup>65</sup> of other poets,<sup>66</sup> of the reading public.<sup>67</sup> Wordsworth's persistent association of the poet with conquerors and empire builders of the past<sup>68</sup> reflected the masculinist assumption that influence over others involves mastering them.<sup>69</sup> Wordsworth and his successors sought, and succeeded in, the mastery of the reading public by establishing the norms that ensured their greatness. By associating greatness with the mastery and autonomy of the strong poet, the Romantics used masculine gender ideology to exclude women.

Definitions of self that stress autonomy and mastery are the norm within our culture, but they were (and to a substantial extent remain today) unacceptable for women.<sup>70</sup> Thus the strong Romantic association of poetry with songs of masculine selves ensured that women poets would have difficulty conforming to the Romantic norms of greatness. The

61. *Ibid.*, 54.

62. *Ibid.*, 31, 34, 50.

63. *Ibid.*, 22.

64. One could add that a Wordsworthian exploration of self is the prerogative of the powerful. It rests on the assumption that the self-discoverer's emotions should be important to those around him. Critical race theorists have pointed out that women and other marginalized groups have never had this luxury. See, for example, Angela P. Harris, "On Doing the Right Thing," *Vermont Law Review* 15: 125-137, 131 (1990). In a sense the male Romantic's insistence that his emotions form part of the objective reality of those around him entails the exercise of a new form of masculine power.

65. *Ibid.*, 38.

66. *Ibid.*, 87-111.

67. *Ibid.*, 37 49-51.

68. *Ibid.*, 41.

69. *Ibid.*, 49.

70. A contemporary example of this phenomenon is the popular sentiment that labels "working mothers" as "selfish" to the extent they do not subordinate their career aspirations to their children's needs. Implicit in this view is the notion that adult women, but not adult men, should subordinate their desire for autonomy to the needs of their children.

female poets who competed with the Romantics were pioneers in a traditionally masculine realm; to mute the cultural sense that "woman poet" was a category mistake, they wrote poetry that reassured readers of their essential femininity. Their emphasis on emotion gently modulated and socialized, and on affiliative responsibilities rather than radical autonomy, effectively precluded women's poetry from "greatness" as that term came to be defined by the norms set by the Romantics.<sup>71</sup>

Rorty is attracted to the figure of the strong poet in part because he is fighting a battle for masculine authority that originated with the Romantics: the battle between the poet and the scientist. The Romantic poets were born into a world in which the accepted repositories of male authority were the soldier, the industrialist, and the scientist. The Romantics responded both by analogizing themselves to, and by claiming to supersede, these traditional cultural icons. Rorty, in his effort to decenter the scientist, adopts the Romantic strategy of associating poets with traditionally male attributes as a way of supporting their claim to cultural authority. Yet Rorty's unselfconscious adoption of masculinized imagery subtly deflects his gaze from his own feminist and egalitarian goals. To understand how requires close attention to his discussion of self-creation.

In some passages, Rorty adopts the model of the strong poet virtually intact. He consistently associates self-creation with autonomy<sup>72</sup> (pp. xiii, xix, 141, 144) and adopts as well the idea of creating the intellectual universe that will ensure the greatness of its creator. (pp. 24, 29, 40) Once he adopts these tenets, though, he is left face to face with the Romantic notion of a mastering genius and a mastered public. Here's an example: "Autonomy is not something which all human beings have within them and which society can release by ceasing to repress them. It is something which certain particular human beings hope to attain by self-creation, and which a few actually do." (p. 65) In thus equating autonomy with self-creation, this passage appears to limit self-creation to a few strong poets.

Elsewhere Rorty is careful to distance himself from the genius/rabble syndrome in Romantic thought. He starts by recommending Freud over

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71. Ross, *The Contours of Masculine Desire*, 158-167, 187-316.

72. Indeed, Rorty's description of successful self-creation sometimes sounds like Jake, the paradigmatic male voice described by Carol Gilligan. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982), 24-38. I would argue that this is because the paradigm of maturity Gilligan critiques shares with the Romantics' "strong poet" the assumption that maturity means autonomy. Both these images are part of a larger pattern of gender and political ideology in which men are associated with the values celebrated within liberalism. See Joan Williams, "Domesticity as the Dangerous Supplement of Liberalism," *Journal of Women's History* 2 (1991): 69-88.

Nietzsche because "Freud does not relegate the vast majority of humanity to the status of dying animals." (p. 35) Freud "shows us how to see every human life as a poem," Rorty continues. This makes the intellectual just a special case—just somebody who does with marks and noises what other people do with their spouses and children, their fellow workers, the tools of their trade, the cash accounts of their businesses, the possessions they accumulate in their homes, the music they listen to, the sports they play or watch, or the trees they pass on their way to work. Anything from the sound of a word through the color of a leaf to the feel of a piece of skin can, as Freud showed us, serve to dramatize and crystallize a human being's sense of self-identity. Any seemingly random constellation of such things can set the tone of a life. (p. 37)

As is evident from Rorty's cry of "every life a poem," this passage still starts from the paradigm of the strong poet. Then Rorty veers to avoid the elitism implicit in Romantic thought. In the process, he changes his conception of self-creation in two crucial ways. First, he abandons the notion that successful self-creation necessarily involves mastery. Instead, he greatly widens out the phenomena he considers apt expressions of healthy self-creation, to include not only mastery, but also the experience of beauty, a sense of vocation about one's work, and affiliative ties with lovers, spouses, children, fellow workers, teammates, and fellow sports fans. Once freed from the exogenous skeleton of masculine gender ideology, self-creation is no longer flattened into one-sided mastery of other people. Nor does it focus solely on autonomy. Indeed, many of the things that spring to Rorty's mind when his thoughts about self-fulfillment are unfettered by Romanticism involve affiliative bonds.

Feminists' usual point is that masculinized notions such as that of the strong poet make women feel left out. They do, in two ways. First, to the extent most women identify with the norms of femininity, they will feel alienated, silenced, passed over, if self-creation is described in terms that they could not adopt and still feel like well-adjusted, "feminine" women. Second, masculinist norms that equate self-creation with autonomy alienate many women not only because female gender ideology *tells* them that successful self-creation is not premised on autonomy alone; most women's adult lives *show* them that a full adulthood is not characterized solely by autonomy. To the extent that women want to have children (and most do), a "full life" for women is defined in terms of

affiliative bonds *as well as* in terms of autonomy.<sup>73</sup> (This is in part, of course, because well-socialized men feel justified in deflecting their children's needs onto their women—thereby preserving for themselves a much broader range of autonomy than those women enjoy.)

Those points are important ones, though I have been careful to express them a little differently from the way they usually are expressed. This usual formulation is to say that equating self-creation with mastery and autonomy leaves out women's voice, because women define themselves in terms of relationships. Note how this not only perpetuates—by feminizing—the devaluation of affiliative bonds; it also recreates a culture in which men of good faith literally *fail to see* that they, too, value affiliative bonds as key elements in a successful adult life. Masculinist ideology is destructive not only because it leaves out women, but because it blinds both men and women to the full range of their concerns and aspirations. The full results of this phenomenon are rarely recognized: It leads to a particular, and undesirable, construction of the political.

Rorty sharply constricts his definition of the public sphere in order to make the world safe for strong poets. "[A]n ideal liberal society is one which . . . has no purpose . . . except to make life easier for poets and revolutionaries while seeing to it that they make life harder for others only by words, not deeds." (p. 61)<sup>74</sup> This suggests a construction of the political much narrower than Rorty's earlier work implied. That earlier work presented the polity in a positive light. Rorty's essay on "Solidarity or Objectivity?" is replete with complimentary references to "our community."<sup>75</sup> "Solidarity" (comradely overtones intact) is recommended as the best antidote to epistemological chaos. Rorty locates in communal life the only truth we've got or can hope to achieve. Integral to this description is a focus on the democratic process of forging truths from amongst the welter of contested certainties<sup>76</sup> within American culture.

73. Note that my point is *not* that women are naturally focused on relationships while men are naturally focused on autonomy, but that gender ideology associates women with affiliative concerns and men with autonomy. Male gender ideology therefore tends to deflect the attention of both men and women from the extent to which men in fact focus on affiliation as well as autonomy; female gender ideology similarly tends to deflect the attention of both men and women from the extent to which women aspire to autonomy as well as affiliation. See Williams, "Domesticity as Dangerous Supplement," 74-76.

74. Rorty does not explain his belated addition of utopian revolutionaries to his list of humanity's heroes. Why does he suddenly add the revolutionary? What makes the revolutionary a culture hero? See Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 52, 60.

75. Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, ed. John Rajchman and Cornel West (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 12, 13, 15.

76. See Daniel T. Rodgers, *Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics Since Independence* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

Rorty's imagery of solidarity carries a Deweyan sense of purpose about the intellectual's role in helping to forge new social truths, in a way that melds the social theory of knowledge to Americans' romance with democracy.

Though *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* preserves the language of human solidarity, it sharply constricts its sphere. Rorty still views as important the project of forging solidarity from contested and contingent truths, but he now wants to construct a wall between the private pursuit of perfection and one's duty as a citizen. In the final pages of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, he notes:

[A] central claim of this book, which will seem . . . indecent to those who find the purity of morality attractive, is that our responsibilities to others constitute *only* the public side of our lives, a side which competes with our private affections and our private attempts at self-creation, and which has no *automatic* priority over such private motives. . . . Moral obligation is, in this view, to be thrown in with a lot of other considerations, rather than automatically trump them. (p. 194)

This division into public and private reflects Rorty's fear of a voracious morality that demands automatic priority over private self-creation. We have seen this morality before: Its voraciousness is that of the Golden Rule, which defines an ambit of responsibility so wide we are threatened with self-obliteration. Either we live with a guilty sense of hypocrisy or we join Mother Theresa in Calcutta.

Rorty attempts to solve this problem with a wall between public and private. It is a wall he does not need. Haskell suggests a much simpler solution: to acknowledge that—given the insane ethical ambitiousness of our form of life—we must necessarily draw a line beyond which we will not act on the mandate to love others as ourselves. We must, moreover, accept that line as an artificial one. Once we accept our responsibility for choosing our truths, we must accept our responsibility for deciding at which point we will fail to live up to our sweeping and illimitable ideals. This is exactly the kind of acceptance that pragmatism can help us achieve. Pragmatism's recognition of the contingency of our ideals, and its theme of self-responsible freedom, can help us accept the inevitability of arbitrary lines in the context of our particular form of life. To exaggerate only a little, my sense is that Rorty's line between public and private stems from his concern to protect Marcel Proust. Rorty notes the central role of Proust in structuring his argument that "the ironist's final vocabulary can be and should be split into a large private and a small public sector, sectors which have no particular relation to one another." Although I am no expert on Proust, I shall reinterpret Rorty's interpretation of Proust in a way that eliminates the need for a wall between a

narrow public and a broader private sphere. Proust, I shall argue, was involved not in the mere pursuit of private perfection, but in a cultural project with profound public consequences.

Proust's work is designed, first, to remind us that there is no God's-eye point of view. His project was a contribution to nonfoundationalist thought, not a mere frolic of his own. Proust's project was public in a second way as well. He wished to draw from this nonfoundationalist premise a point of profound political importance, namely, that people who present themselves as authorities can be de-divinized by redescribing them as simply people. No man's a hero to his valet; Proust turned this truism into a strategy for undercutting authority figures by reducing the conceptual distance between leaders and ordinary people. If we take this argument as far as the assertion that political power is everywhere, we see it as an explicitly political argument. Proust presents his concern as involving only *private* life, but ultimately Proust's project was part of a broader reconceptualization of political power.

In addition to Proust's contributions to philosophical and political thought, *Remembrance of Things Past* helped reconstruct the ethical consciousness of the Western world. Proust's detailed description of the experience of eating a cookie carried profound ethical messages. Proust's close attention to the experience of a small child signaled, first, the antihierarchical judgment that a small boy's experience could help adults define what it means to be a human being. Proust's focus on sense experience followed the Romantics in redeeming sensuality in the face of Christianity's traditional distrust. The ordinariness of the experience reinforced a major theme in Western ethics, one Charles Taylor calls the affirmation of ordinary life.<sup>77</sup> In prior periods, Taylor notes, family life was viewed as important primarily because it provided the infrastructure for men's pursuit of ethical goals in the "higher" sphere of public life. Taylor documents the shift that made ordinary family life seem central to what makes a life worthwhile.<sup>78</sup> Taylor also argues persuasively that Proust's book carried crucial modern messages about the fragmentation of self and about the need in the modern world to construct a centered self through exercise of will.

I could go on, but perhaps this is enough to explain Proust's contributions to ethical and political life. It is these contributions that show us why Rorty needs no wall between public and private to protect Proust or anyone else. Given the scope of Proust's (severe) personal limitations, he defined his ambit of responsibility very broadly—in fact he served his fellows far better than most of us manage to do. This is not to justify the life of every self-proclaimed genius who claims to serve

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77. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 211-302.

78. *Ibid.*, 292.

humanity by sitting in a padded room. For most of us, Proust's form of service is not available or not enough. We need to include our fellow humans in our projects of self-creation in quite different, much more direct ways.

Rorty's fears for Proust bring him face to face with a central challenge of our ethical tradition: how to live in peace with a voracious Golden Rule. To accomplish this, we must take a step back from our form of life and remind ourselves that ours isn't the only way to organize the universe. This, in turn, can give us a steady appreciation of the limitations as well as the strengths of our form of life, humility we urgently need in an imperialistic world. A fresh sense of the contingency of our ideals can also help us to forgive ourselves, with the knowledge that our ethics are structured so that most adherents cannot reach their ideals. Pragmatism holds the promise of serenity.

Rorty correctly senses that any egalitarian must approach the Golden Rule with a certain sense of resignation, with the certain knowledge that our commitment to the equal dignity of others will entail an arbitrary line beyond which we simply fail to love our neighbors as ourselves.

All this, however, evades the harder question of where we should draw that line. Rorty is ambiguous on the topic. He defines the key public goal of liberal society as avoiding cruelty. But the scope of this mandate is unclear because his definition of cruelty is ambiguous. At the center of Rorty's field of vision is the cruelty of inflicting physical pain. (pp. 35, 36) If the key goal of a liberal polity is to eliminate the torture of innocents, then the scope of the public sphere is narrow indeed. But Rorty quickly widens out his notion of cruelty to include actions that "produce that special sort of pain which the brutes do not share with the humans—humiliation." (p. 92) Once he does so, the floodgates quickly open wider and wider.

[T]he best way to cause people long-lasting pain is to humiliate them by making the things that seemed most important to them look futile, obsolete, and powerless. Consider what happens when a child's precious possessions—the little things around which he weaves fantasies that make him a little different from other children—are described as "trash," and thrown away. Or consider what happens when these possessions are made to look ridiculous alongside those of another, richer child. (p. 90)

What happens indeed?<sup>79</sup> If a defining goal of liberals is their desire "that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease"

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79. Perhaps the reason Rorty does not answer this question is that, in this passage, he is discussing irony and redescription, not cruelty.



(p. xv), and if poverty is recognized as a key source of personal humiliation, then the scope of the public sphere is wrenched wide open. Once poverty is defined as cruelty, redistribution becomes a moral mandate.

One of the most distasteful and unconvincing aspects of those models of self-creation that extol autonomy and mastery is their assumption that true self-fulfillment lies solely in sustained pursuit of self-interest. The Romantic model of the strong poet is part of a much larger family of cultural images that flatten out our sense of what enriches human life. If we include in our notion of self-creation our mutual interdependence not only with those with whom we share affiliative ties—children, lovers, sports fans—but also with a broader range of strangers; if “we have a moral obligation to feel a sense of solidarity with all other human beings” (p. 190); if we liberals “are people who include among [their central beliefs and desires] their hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease” (p. xv), then we can’t adopt a notion of self-creation that defends people’s right to be as “privatistic, ‘irrationalist,’ and aestheticist as they please so long as they do it on their own time—causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by those less advantaged” (p. xiv). Or—to be more precise—we can, so long as we recognize that the conditions after the dashes are not met. We live in a society in which white households on average have ten times as much wealth as black households,<sup>80</sup> in which over half of black children live in poverty,<sup>81</sup> and one-quarter of young black males are involved in the corrections system;<sup>82</sup> in a society where three out of every five people with incomes below the poverty line are women,<sup>83</sup> and as many as one-half of all women experience domestic violence;<sup>84</sup> in a society in which one-fourth of all children live in poverty<sup>85</sup> while one percent of all households hold one-third of the personal

80. Robert Pear, “Rich Got Richer in the 80’s: Others Held Even,” *New York Times*, January 11, 1991, A1, col. 2

81. Delores Kong, “Funding, Political Will Crucial To Saving Babies’ Lives,” *Boston Globe*, September 13, 1990, 1.

82. One-fourth of African-American men between the ages of 20 and 29 are in jail, prison, on parole, or on probation. *Christian Science Monitor*, July 23, 1990, 20.

83. Zillah R. Eisenstein, “The Sexual Politics of the New Right: Understanding the ‘Crisis of Liberalism’ for the 1980s,” reprinted in Nannerl O. Keohane, Michelle Z. Rosaldo & Barbara C. Gelpi eds., *Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 77-98.

84. Martha Mahoney, “Legal Images of Battered Women: Redefining the Issue of Separation,” *Michigan Law Review* 90 (October 1991): 3-94.

85. This estimate is from Dr. Michael Weitzman, quoted in Kong, “Funding, Political Will Crucial to Saving Babies’ Lives,” 1. Other sources place the figure at 19%. In New York City today, approximately 40% of children are raised in poverty. *Christian Science Monitor*, May 18, 1990, 7.

wealth.<sup>86</sup> These facts depict a society with deep patterns of systematic brutality. If our goals are egalitarian, making progress on race, class, and gender inequities is a necessary part of our personal projects of self-creation. Moreover, if "the core of liberal society is a consensus that the point of social organization is to let everybody have a chance at self-creation to the best of his or her abilities" (p. 84), then we liberals need to focus on the humiliation of poverty and the existence of a large and growing underclass of Americans whose avenues of self-creation are largely limited to teenage pregnancy<sup>87</sup> and the sale or use of drugs.<sup>88</sup>

Let me conclude by quoting a passage from Dewey often cited by neopragmatists (one Rorty quotes as well) (p. 58):

When it is acknowledged that under disguise of dealing with ultimate reality philosophy has been occupied with the precious values embedded in social traditions, that it has sprung from a clash of social ends and from a conflict of inherited institutions with incompatible contemporary tendencies, it will be seen that the task of future philosophy is to clarify men's ideas as to the social and moral strifes of their own day.<sup>89</sup>

Without absolutes, anything is possible, but everything remains difficult. This is particularly true if one remains committed to proceeding democratically, for any change (particularly a radical one) will be deeply contested. To the extent that what is needed to win elections is exactly the opposite from what is needed to achieve transformative goals, we need less to win elections than to produce deep cultural change.

This is a pragmatist theme over a century old. Though it has sobering implications for the possibility of change, one key attraction is its implication that intellectual life holds the potential for inspiring political action. "The most [human beings] can do is to manipulate the tensions within their own epoch in order to produce the beginnings of the next epoch," as Rorty notes (p. 51), but that is not so very little. It entails a close study of intellectual history to examine rhetorics that persuade Americans of the need to take their egalitarian instincts much

86. Pear, "Rich Got Richer in the 80's: Others Held Even," A20.

87. See Regina Austin, "Sapphire Bound!," *Wisconsin Law Review* (1989), 539-578; Anonymous, "Having a Baby Inside Me Is the Only Time I'm Really Alive," in *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, ed. Gerda Lerner (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 313-314.

88. William Finnegan, "Out There," *The New Yorker*, September 10, 1990, 51; September 17, 1990, 60.

89. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948), 26 (quoted in Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 50).

more seriously.<sup>90</sup> It also involves delving much deeper into the ways apparently neutral concepts (like the Romantic notion of self-creation) create "a certain blindness in human beings."<sup>91</sup> Though one pattern of blindness will be replaced by another, it is time to try a new one whose blind spots do not align so eerily with pervasive patterns of oppression.

### III. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have made two different points. I have first warned nonfoundationalists of the pitfalls of an aestheticist tone when the discussion is one of ethics. If nonfoundationalism is to have any hope of overcoming its severe burden of implausibility, nonfoundationalists need to adopt a reassuring tone when addressing ethical issues.

My second goal has been to challenge Rorty's advocacy of a world carved up into a small public and a large private sphere. Rorty feels compelled to adopt that vision, I suggest, by his desire to defend a notion of self-creation better deconstructed and discarded.

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90. See Joan Williams, "Virtue and Oppression."

91. William James, *Pragmatism*, 134.

