## Richard Rorty


Reprinted from *Philosophy and Social Hope*
(Penguin Books, 1999)

If there is anything to the idea that the best intellectual position is one which is attacked with equal vigor from the political right and the political left, then I am in good shape. I am often cited by conservative culture warriors as one of the relativistic, irrationalist, deconstructing, sneering, smirking intellectuals whose writings are weakening the moral fibre of the young. Neal Kozody, writing in the monthly bulletin of the Committee for the Free World, an organization known for its vigilance against symptoms of moral weakness, denounces my 'cynical and nihilistic view' and says 'it is not enough for him [Rorty] that American students should be merely mindless; he would have them positively mobilized for mindlessness'. Richard Neuhaus, a theologian who doubts that atheists can be good American citizens, says that the 'ironist vocabulary' I advocate 'can neither provide a public language for the citizens of a democracy, nor contend intellectually against the enemies of democracy, nor transmit the reasons for democracy to the next generation'. My criticisms of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* led Harvey Mansfield - recently appointed by President Bush to the National Council for the Humanities - to say that I have 'given up on America' and that I 'manage to diminish even Dewey'. (Mansfield recently described Dewey as a 'medium-sized malefactor'.) His colleague on the council, my fellow philosopher John Searle, thinks that standards can only be restored to American higher education if people abandon the views on truth, knowledge and objectivity that I do my best to inculcate.

Yet Sheldon Wolin, speaking from the left, sees a lot of similarity between me and Allan Bloom: both of us, he says, are intellectual snobs who care only about the leisured, cultured elite to which we belong. Neither of us has anything to say to blacks, or to other groups who have been shunted aside by American society. Wolin's view is echoed by Terry Eagleton, Britain's leading Marxist thinker. Eagleton says that 'in [Rorty's] ideal society the intellectuals will be "ironists", practising a suitably cavalier, laid-back attitude to their own belief, while the masses, for whom such self-ironizing might prove too subversive a weapon, will continue to salute the flag and take life seriously'. Der Spiegel said that I 'attempt to make the yuppie regression look good'. Jonathan Culler, one of Derrida's

chief disciples and expositors, says that my version of pragmatism 'seems altogether appropriate to the age of Reagan'. Richard Bernstein says that my views are 'little more than an ideological apologia for an old-fashioned version of Cold War liberalism dressed up in fashionable "post-modem" discourse'. The left's favorite word for me is 'complacent', just as the right's is 'irresponsible'.


The left's hostility is partially explained by the fact that most people who admire Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida as much as I do - most of the people who either classify themselves as 'postmodernist' or (like me) find themselves thus classified willy-nilly - participate in what Jonathan Yardley has called the 'America Sucks Sweepstakes'.

Participants in this event compete to find better, bitterer ways of describing the United States. They see our country as embodying everything that is wrong with the rich post-Enlightenment West. They see ours as what Foucault called a 'disciplinary society', dominated by an odious ethos of 'liberal individualism', an ethos which produces racism, sexism, consumerism and Republican presidents. By contrast, I see America pretty much as Whitman and Dewey did, as opening a prospect on illimitable democratic vistas. I think that our country - despite its past and present atrocities and vices, and despite its continuing eagerness to elect fools and knaves to high office - is a good example of the best kind of society so far invented.

The right's hostility is largely explained by the fact that rightist thinkers don't think that it is enough just to prefer democratic societies. One also has to believe that they are Objectively Good, that the institutions of such societies are grounded in Rational First Principles Especially if one teaches philosophy, as I do, one is expected to tell the young that their society is not just one of the better ones so far contrived, but one which embodies Truth and Reason. Refusal to say this sort of thing counts as the 'treason of the clerks' - as an abdication of professional and moral responsibility. My own philosophical views - views I share with Nietzsche and Dewey - forbid me to say this kind of thing. I do not have much use for notions like 'objective value' and 'objective truth'. I think that the so-called postmodernists are right in most of their criticisms of traditional philosophical talk about 'reason'. So my philosophical views offend the right as much as my political preferences offend the left.

I am sometimes told, by critics from both ends of the political spectrum, that my views are so weird as to be merely frivolous. They suspect that I will say anything to get a gasp, that I am just amusing myself by contradicting everybody else. This hurts. So I have tried, in what follows, to say something about how I got into my present position - how I got into philosophy, and then found myself unable to use philosophy for the purpose I had originally had in mind. Perhaps this bit of autobiography will make clear that, even if my views about the relation of philosophy and politics are odd, they were not adopted for frivolous reasons.

## Early Years

When I was 12, the most salient books on my parents' shelves were two red-bound volumes, The Case of Leon Trotsky and Not Guilty. These made up the report of the Dewey Commission of Inquiry into the Moscow Trials. I never read them with the wide-eyed fascination I brought to books like Krafft-Ebing's Psychopathia Sexualis, but I thought of them in the way in which other children thought of their family's Bible: they were books that radiated redemptive truth and moral splendor. If I were a really good boy, I would say to myself, I should have read not only the Dewey Commission reports, but also Trotsky's History of the Russian Revolution, a book I started many times but never managed to finish. For in the 1940s, the Russian Revolution and its betrayal by Stalin were, for me, what the Incarnation and its betrayal by the Catholics had been to precocious little Lutherans 400 years before.

My father had almost, but not quite, accompanied John Dewey to Mexico as PR man for the Commission of Inquiry which Dewey chaired. Having broken with the American Communist Party in 1932, my parents had been classified by the Daily Worker as Trotskyites', and they more or less accepted the description. When Trotsky was assassinated in 1940, one of his secretaries, John Frank, hoped that the GPU would not think to look for him in the remote little village on the Delaware river where we were living. Using a pseudonym, he was our guest in Flatbrookville for some months. I was warned not to disclose his real identity, though it is doubtful that my schoolmates at Walpack Elementary would have been interested in my indiscretions.

I grew up knowing that all decent people were, if not Trotskyites, at least socialists. I also knew that Stalin had ordered not only Trotsky's assassination but also Kirov's, Ehrlich's, Alter's and Carlo Tresca's. (Tresca, gunned down on the streets of New York, had been a family friend.) I knew that poor people would always be oppressed until capitalism was overcome. Working as an unpaid office boy during my twelfth winter, I carried drafts of press releases from the Workers' Defense League office off Gramercy Park (where my parents worked) to Norman Thomas's (the Socialist Party's candidate for president) house around the comer, and also to A. Philip Randolph's office at the Brotherhood of Pullman Car Porters on 25th Street. On the subway, I would read the documents I was carrying. They told me a lot about what factory owners did to union organizers, plantation owners to sharecroppers, and the white locomotive engineers' union to the coloured firemen (whose jobs white men wanted, now that diesel engines were replacing coal-fired steam engines). So, at 12, I knew that the point of being human was to spend one's life fighting social injustice.

But I also had private, weird, snobbish, incommunicable interests. In earlier years these had been in Tibet. I had sent the newly enthroned Dalai Lama a present, accompanied by warm congratulations to a fellow eight-year-old who had made good. A few years later, when my parents began dividing their time between the Chelsea Hotel and the mountains of north-west New Jersey, these interests switched to orchids. Some 40 species of wild orchids occur in those mountains, and I eventually found 17 of them. Wild orchids are uncommon, and rather hard to spot. I prided myself enormously on being the only person around who knew where they grew, their Latin names and their blooming times. When in New York, I would go to the 42nd Street public library to reread a nineteenth-century volume on the botany of the orchids of the eastern U S.

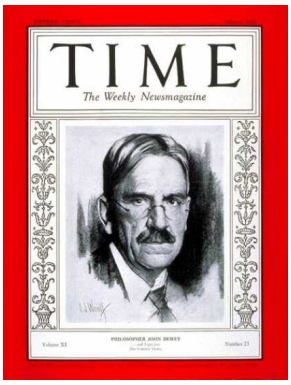
I was not quite sure why those orchids were so important, but I was convinced that they were. I was sure that our noble, pure, chaste, North American wild orchids were morally superior to the showy, hybridized, tropical orchids displayed in florists' shops. I was also convinced that there was a deep significance in the fact that the orchids are the latest and most complex plants to have been developed in the course of evolution. Looking back, I suspect that there was a lot of sublimated sexuality involved (orchids being a notoriously sexy sort of flower), and that my desire to learn all there was to know about orchids was linked to my desire to understand all the hard words in Krafit-Ebing.

I was uneasily aware, however, that there was something a bit dubious about this esotericism - this interest in socially useless flowers. I had read (in the vast amount of spare time given to a clever, snotty, nerdy only child) bits of Marius the Epicurean and also bits of Marxist criticisms of Pater's aestheticism. I was afraid that Trotsky (whose Literature and Revolution I had nibbled at) would not have approved of my interest in orchids.

At fifteen I escaped from the bullies who regularly beat me up on the playground of my high school (bullies who, I assumed, would somehow wither away once capitalism had been overcome) by going off to the so-called Hutchins College of the University of Chicago. (This was the institution immortalized by A.J. Liebling as 'the biggest collection of juvenile neurotics since the Children's Crusade'.) Insofar as I had any project in mind, it was to reconcile Trotsky and the orchids. I wanted to find some intellectual or aesthetic framework which would let me—in a thrilling phrase which I came across in Yeats—'hold reality and justice in a single vi-

sion'. By reality I meant more or less, the Wordsworthian moments in which, in the woods around Flatbrookville (and especially in the presence of certain coralroot orchids, and of the smaller yellow lady slipper), I had felt touched by something numinous, something of ineffable importance. By justice I meant what Norman Thomas and Trotsky both stood for, the liberation of the weak from the strong. I wanted a way to be both an intellectual and spiritual snob and a friend of humanity—a nerd recluse and a fighter for justice. I was very confused, but reasonably sure that at Chicago I would find out how grown-ups managed to work the trick I had in mind.

When I got to Chicago (in 1946), I found that Hutchins, together with his friends Mortimer Adler and Richard McKeon (the villain of Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*), had enveloped much of the University of Chicago in a neo-Aristotelian mystique. The most frequent target of their sneers was John Dewey's pragmatism. That pragmatism was the philosophy of my parents' friend Sidney Hook, as well as the unofficial philosophy of most of the other New York intellectuals who had given up on dialectical materialism. But according to Hutchins and Adler, pragmatism was vulgar, 'relativistic', and self-refuting. As they pointed out over and over again, Dewey had absolutes. To say, as Dewey did, that 'growth itself is the only moral end', left one without a criterion for growth, and thus with no way refute Hitler's suggestion that Germany had 'grown' under his rule. To say that truth is what works is to reduce the quest for truth to the quest for power. Only an appeal to something eternal, absolute, and good - like the God of St Thomas, or the 'nature of human beings' described by Aristotle - would permit one to answer the Nazis, to justify one's choice of social democracy over fascism.



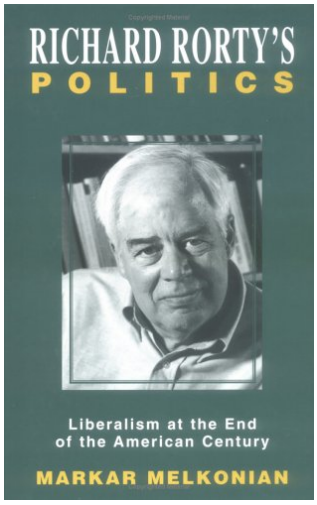

This quest for stable absolutes was common to the neo-Thomist and to Leo Strauss, the teacher who attracted the best of the Chicago students (including my classmate Allan Bloom). The Chicago faculty was dotted with awesomely learned refugees from Hitler, of which Strauss was the most revered. All of them seemed to agree that something deeper and weightier than Dewey was needed if one was to explain why it would be better to be dead than to be a Nazi. This sounded pretty good to my 15-year-old ears. For moral and philosophical absolutes sounded a bit like my beloved orchids - numinous, hard to find, known only to a chosen few. Further, since Dewey was a hero to all the people among whom I had grown up, scorning Dewey was a convenient form of adolescent revolt. The only question was whether this scorn should take a religious or a philosophical form, and how it might be combined with striving for social justice.

Like many of my classmates at Chicago, I knew lots of T. S. Eliot by heart. I was attracted by Eliot's suggestions that only committed Christians (and perhaps only Anglo-Catholics) could overcome their unhealthy preoccupation with their private obsessions, and so serve their fellow humans with proper humility. But a prideful inability to believe what I was

saying when I recited the General Confession gradually led me to give up on my awkward attempts to get religion. So I fell back on absolutist philosophy.

I read through Plato during my fifteenth summer, and convinced myself that Socrates was right - virtue was knowledge. That claim was music to my ears, for I had doubts about my own moral character and a suspicion that my only gifts were intellectual ones. Besides, Socrates had to be right, for only then could one hold reality and justice in a single vision. Only if he were right could one hope to be both as good as the best Christians (such as Alyosha in The Brothers Karamazov, whom I could not - and still cannot - decide whether to envy or despise) and as learned and clever as Strauss and his students. So I decided to major in philosophy. I figured that if I became a philosopher I might get to the top of Plato's 'divided line' - the place 'beyond hypotheses' where the full sunshine of Truth irradiates the purified soul of the wise and good: an Elysian field dotted with immaterial orchids. It seemed obvious to me that getting to such a place was what everybody with any brains really wanted. It also seemed clear that Platonism had all the advantages of religion, without requiring the humility which Christianity demanded, and of which I was apparently incapable.

For all these reasons, I wanted very much to be some kind of Platonist, and from 15 to 20 I did my best. But it didn't pan out. I could never figure out whether the Platonic philosopher was aiming at the ability to offer irrefutable argument - argument which rendered him able to convince anyone he encountered of what he believed (the sort of thing Ivan Karamazov was good at) - or instead was aiming at a sort of incommunicable, private bliss (the sort of thing his brother Alyosha seemed to possess). The first goal is to achieve argumentative power over others - e.g., to become able to convince bullies that they should not beat one up, or to convince rich capitalists that they must cede their power to a cooperative, egalitarian commonwealth. The second goal is to enter a state in which all your own doubts are stilled, but in which you no longer wish to argue. Both goals seemed desirable, but I could not see how they could be fitted together.




At the same time as I was worrying about this tension within Platonism—and within any form of what Dewey had called 'the quest for certainty'—I was also worrying about the familiar problem of how one could possibly get a noncircular justification of any debatable stand on any important issue. The more philosophers I read, the clearer it seemed that each of them could carry their views back to first principles which were incompatible with the first principles of their opponents, and that none of them ever got to that fabled place 'beyond hypotheses'. There seemed to be nothing like a neutral standpoint from which these

alternative first principles could be evaluated. But if there were no such standpoint, then the whole idea of 'rational certainty', and the whole Socratic-Platonic idea of replacing passion by reason, seemed not to make much sense.

Eventually I got over the worry about circular argumentation by deciding that the test of philosophical truth was overall coherence, rather than deducibility from unquestioned first principles. But this didn't help much. For coherence is a matter of avoiding contradictions, and St Thomas's advice, 'When you meet a contradiction, make a distinction,' makes that pretty easy. As far as I could see, philosophical talent was largely a matter of proliferating as many distinctions as were needed to wriggle out of a dialectical comer. More generally, it was a matter, when trapped in such a comer, of redescribing the nearby intellectual terrain in such a way that the terms used by one's opponent would seem irrelevant, or question-begging, or jejune. I turned out to have a flair for such redescription. But I became less and less certain that developing this skill was going to make me either wise or virtuous.

### What is Philosophy Good For? *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*

Since that initial disillusion (which climaxed about the time I left Chicago to get a Ph.D. in philosophy at Yale), I have spent 40 years looking for a coherent and convincing way of formulating my worries about what, if anything, philosophy is good for. My starting point was the discovery of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit, a book which I read as saying: granted that philosophy is just a matter of out-redescribing the last philosopher, the cunning of reason can make use even of this sort of competition. It can use it to weave the conceptual fabric of a freer, better, more just society. If philosophy can be, at best, only what Hegel called 'its time held in thought', still, that might be enough. For by thus holding one's time, one might do what Marx wanted done - change the world. So even if there were no such thing as 'understanding the world' in the Platonic sense - an understanding from a position outside of time and history - perhaps there was still a social use for my talents, and for the study of philosophy.

For quite a while after I read Hegel, I thought that the two greatest achievements of the species to which I belonged were The Phenomenology of Spirit and Remembrance of Things Past (the book which took the place of the wild orchids once I left Flatbrookville for Chicago). Proust's ability to weave intellectual and social snobbery together with the hawthorns around Combray, his grandmother's selfless love, Odette's orchidaceous embraces of Swann and Jupien's of Charlus, and with everything else he encountered - to give each of these its due without feeling the need to bundle them together with die help of a religious faith or a philosophical theory - seemed to me as astonishing as Hegel's ability to throw himself successively into empiricism, Greek tragedy, Stoicism, Christianity and Newtonian physics, and to emerge from each, ready and eager for something completely different. It was the cheerful commitment to irreducible temporality which Hegel and Proust shared - the specifically anti-Platonic element in their work - that seemed so wonderful. They both seemed able to weave everything they encountered into a narrative without asking that that narrative have a moral, and without asking how that narrative would appear under the aspect of eternity.

About 20 years or so after I decided that the young Hegel's willingness to stop trying for eternity, and just be the child of his time, was the appropriate response to disillusionment with Plato, I found myself being led back to Dewey. Dewey now seemed to me a philosopher who had learned all that Hegel had to teach about how to eschew certainty and eternity, while immunizing himself against pantheism by taking Darwin seriously. This rediscovery of Dewey coincided with my first encounter with Derrida (which I owe to Jonathan Arac, my colleague at Princeton). Derrida led me back to Heidegger, and I was struck by the resemblances between Dewey's, Wittgenstein's and Heidegger's criticisms of Cartesianism. Suddenly things began to come together. I thought I saw a way to blend a criticism of the Cartesian tradition with the quasi-Hegelian historicism of Michel Foucault, Ian Hacking and Alasdair MacIntyre. I thought that I could fit all these into a quasi-Heideggerian story about the tensions within Platonism.

The result of this small epiphany was a book called *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Though disliked by most of my fellow philosophy professors, this book had enough success among non-philosophers to give me a self-confidence I had previously lacked. But Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature did not do much for my adolescent ambitions. The topics it treated - the mind-body problem, controversies in the philosophy of language about truth and meaning, Kuhnian philosophy of science - were pretty remote from both Trotsky and the orchids. I had gotten back on good terms with Dewey; I had articulated my historicist anti-Platonism; I had finally figured out what I thought about the direction and value of current movements in analytic philosophy; I had sorted out most of the philosophers whom I had read. But I had not spoken to any of the questions which got me started reading philosophers in the first place. I was no closer to the single vision which, 30 years back, I had gone to college to get.


As I tried to figure out what had gone wrong, I gradually decided that the whole idea of holding reality and justice in a single vision had been a mistake - that a pursuit of such a vision had been precisely what led Plato astray. More specifically, I decided that only religion - only a non-argumentative faith in a surrogate parent who, unlike my real parent, embodied love, power and justice in equal measure – could do the trick Plato wanted done. Since I couldn't imagine becoming religious, and indeed had gotten more and more raucously secularist, I decided that the hope of getting a single vision by becoming a philosopher had been a self-deceptive atheist's way out. So I decided to write a book about what intellectual life might be like if one could manage to give up the Platonic attempt to hold reality and justice in a single vision.

That book - C*ontingency, Irony and Solidarity* - argues that there is no need to weave one's personal equivalent of Trotsky and one's personal equivalent of my wild orchids together. Rather, one should try to abjure the temptation to tie in one's moral responsibilities to other people with one's relation to whatever idiosyncratic things or persons one loves with all one's heart and soul and mind (or, if you like, the things or persons one is obsessed with). The two will, for some people, coincide - as they do in those lucky Christians for whom the love of God and of other human beings are inseparable, or revolutionaries who are moved by nothing save the thought of social justice. But they need not coincide, and one should not try too hard to make them do so. So, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre seemed to me right when he denounced Kant's self-deceptive quest for certainty, but wrong when he denounced Proust as a useless bourgeois wimp, a man whose life and writings were equally irrelevant to the only thing that really mattered, the struggle to overthrow capitalism.

Proust's life and work were, in fact, irrelevant to that struggle. But that is a silly reason to despise Proust. It is as wrong-headed as Savonarola's contempt for the works of art he called 'vanities'. Singlemindedness of this Sartrean or Savonarolan sort is the quest for purity of heart - the attempt to will one thing - gone rancid. It is the attempt to see yourself as an incarnation of something larger than yourself (the Movement, Reason, the Good, the Holy) rather than accepting your finitude. The latter means, among other things, accepting that what matters most to you may well be something that may never matter much to most people. Your equivalent of my orchids may always seem merely weird, merely idiosyncratic, to practically everybody else. But that is no reason to be ashamed of, or downgrade, or try to slough off, your Wordsworthian moments, your lover, your family, your pet, your favorite lines of verse, or your quaint religious faith. There is nothing sacred about universality which makes the shared automatically better than the unshared.  There is no automatic privilege of what you can get everybody to agree to (the universal) over what you cannot (the idiosyncratic).

## Obligations

This means that the fact that you have obligations to other people (not to bully them, to join them in overthrowing tyrants, to feed them when they are hungry) does not entail that what you share with other people is more important than anything else. What you share with them, when you are aware of such moral obligations, is not, I argued in *Contingency*, 'rationality' or 'human nature' or 'the fatherhood of God' or 'a knowledge of the Moral Law', or anything other than ability to sympathize with the pain of others. There is no particular reason to expect that your sensitivity to that pain, and your idiosyncratic loves, are going to fit within one big overall account of how everything hangs together. There is, in short, not much reason to hope for the sort of single vision that I went to college hoping to get.

So much for how I came to the views I currently hold. As I said earlier, most people find these views repellent. My *Contingency* book got a couple of good reviews, but these were vastly outnumbered by reviews which said that the book was frivolous, confused and irresponsible. The gist of the criticisms I get from both left and right is pretty much the same as the gist of the criticisms aimed at Dewey by the Thomists, the Straussians and the Marxists, back in me 1930s and 1940s. Dewey thought, as I now do, that there was nothing bigger, more permanent and more reliable, behind our sense of moral obligation to those in pain than a certain contingent historical phenomenon - the gradual spread of the sense that the pain of others matters, regardless of whether they are of the same family, tribe, color, religion, nation or intelligence as oneself. This idea, Dewey thought, cannot be shown to be true by science, or religion or philosophy - at least if 'shown to be true' means 'capable of being made evident to anyone, regardless of background'. It can only be made evident to people whom it is not too late to acculturate into our own particular, late-blooming, historically contingent form of life.

This Deweyan claim entails a picture of human beings as children of their time and place, without any significant metaphysical or biological limits on their plasticity. It means that a sense of moral obligation is a matter of conditioning rather than of insight. It also entails that the notion of insight (in any area, physics as well as ethics) as a glimpse of what is there, apart from any human needs and desires, cannot be made coherent. As William James put it, 'The trail of the human serpent is over all.' More specifically, our conscience and our aesthetic taste are, equally, products of the cultural environment in which we grew up. We decent, liberal humanitarian types (representatives of the moral community to which both my reviewers and I belong) are just luckier, not more insightful, than the bullies with whom we struggle.'


This view is often referred to dismissively as 'cultural relativism'. But it is not relativistic, if that means saying that every moral view is as good as every other. Our moral view is, I firmly believe, much better than any competing view, even though there are a lot of people whom you will never be able to convert to it. It is one thing to say, falsely, that there is nothing to choose between us and the Nazis. It is another thing to say, correctly, that there is no neutral, common ground to which an experienced Nazi philosopher and I can repair in order to argue out our differences. That Nazi and I will always strike one another as begging all the crucial questions, arguing in circles.

Socrates and Plato suggested that if we tried hard enough we should find beliefs which everybody found intuitively plausible, and that among these would be moral beliefs whose implications, when clearly realized, would make us virtuous as well as knowledgeable. To thinkers like Allan Bloom (on the Straussian side) and Terry Eagleton (on the Marxist side), there just must be such beliefs - unwobbling pivots that determine the answer to the question: Which moral or political alternative is objectively valid? For Deweyan pragmatists like me, history and anthropology are enough to show that there are no unwobbling pivots, and that seeking objectivity is just a matter of getting as much intersubjective agreement as you can manage.

Nothing much has changed in philosophical debates about whether objectivity is more than intersubjectivity since the time I went to college - or, for that matter, since the time Hegel went to seminary. Nowadays we philosophers talk about 'moral language' instead of 'moral experience', and about 'contextualist theories of reference' rather than about 'the relation between subject and object'. But this is just froth on the surface. My reasons for turning away from the anti-Deweyan views I imbibed at Chicago are pretty much the same reasons Dewey had for turning away from evangelical Christianity and from the neo-Hegelian pantheism which he embraced in his 20s. They are also pretty much the reasons which led Hegel to turn away from Kant, and to decide that both God and the Moral Law had to be temporalized and historicized to be believable. I do not think that I have more insight into the debates about our need for 'absolutes' than I had when I was 20, despite all the books I have read and arguments I have had in the intervening 40 years. All those years of reading and arguing did was to let me spell out my disillusionment with Plato - my conviction that philosophy was no help in dealing with Nazis and other bullies - in more detail, and to a variety of different audiences.

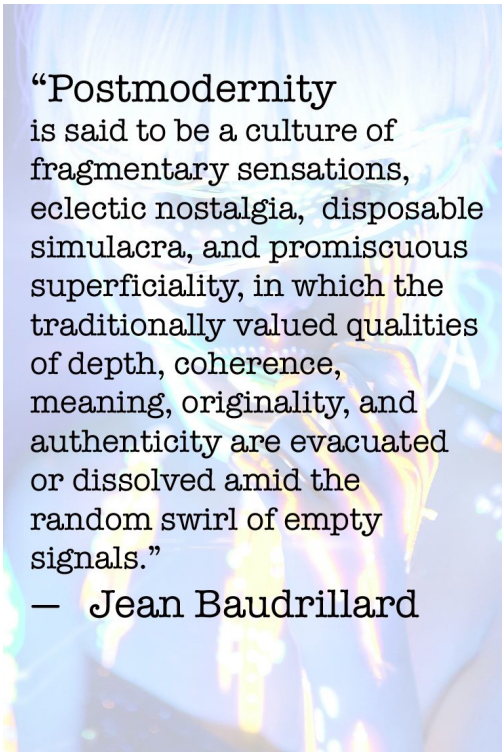
### Two Cultural Wars


At the moment there are two cultural wars being waged in the United States. The first is the one described in detail by my colleague James Davison Hunter in his comprehensive and informative *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. This war - between the people Hunter calls 'progressivists' and those he calls 'orthodox' - is important. It will decide whether our country continues along the trajectory defined by the Bill of Rights, the Reconstruction Amendments, the building of the land-grant colleges, female suffrage, the New Deal, Brown v. Board of Education, the building of the community colleges, Lyndon Johnson's civil rights legislation, the feminist movement, and the gay rights movement. Continuing along this trajectory would mean that America might continue to set an example of increasing tolerance and increasing equality. But it may be that this trajectory could be continued only while Americans' average real income continued to rise.

So 1973 may have been the beginning of the end: the end both of rising economic expectations and of the political consensus that emerged from the New Deal. The future of American politics may be just a series of increasingly blatant and increasingly successful variations on the Willie Horton spots. Sinclair Lewis's It Can't Happen Here may become an increasingly plausible scenario. Unlike Hunter, I feel no need to be judicious and balanced in my attitude toward the two sides this first sort of culture war. I see the 'orthodox' (the people who think that hounding gays out of the military promotes traditional family values) as the same honest, decent, blinkered, disastrous people who voted for Hitler in 1933. I see the 'progressivists' as defining the only America I care about.

The second cultural war is being waged in magazines like Critical Inquiry and Salmagundi, magazines with high subscription rates and low circulations. It is between those who see modern liberal society as vitally flawed (the people handily lumped together as 'postmodernists') and typical left-wing Democrat professors like myself, people who see ours as a society in which technology and democratic institutions can, with luck, collaborate to increase equality and decrease suffering. This war is not very important. Despite the conservative columnists who pretend to view with alarm a vast conspiracy (encompassing both the postmodernists and the pragmatists) to politicize the humanities and corrupt the youth, this war is just a tiny little dispute within what Hunter calls the 'progressivist' ranks.

People on the postmodernist side of this dispute tend to share Noam Chomsky's view of the United States as run by a corrupt elite which aims at enriching itself by immiserating the Third World. From that perspective, our country is not so much in danger of slipping into fascism as it is a country which has always been quasi-fascist. These people typically think that nothing will change unless we get rid of humanism', 'liberal individualism', and 'technologism'. People like me see nothing wrong with any of these -isms, nor with the political and moral heritage of the Enlightenment - with the least common denominator of Mill and Marx, Trotsky and Whitman, William James and Vaclav Havel. Typically, we Deweyans are sentimentally patriotic about America - willing to grant that it could slide into fascism at any time, but proud of its past and guardedly hopeful about its future.




Most people on my side of this second, tiny, upmarket cultural war have, in the light of the history of nationalized enterprises and central planning in central and eastern Europe, given up on socialism. We are willing to grant that welfare state capitalism is the best we can

hope for. Most of us who were brought up Trotskyite now feel forced to admit that Lenin and Trotsky did more harm than good, and that Kerensky has gotten a bum rap for the past 70 years. But we see ourselves as still faithful to everything that was good in the socialist movement. Those on the other side, however, still insist that nothing will change unless there is some sort of total revolution. Postmodernists who consider themselves post-Marxists still want to preserve the sort of purity of heart which Lenin feared he might lose if he listened to too much Beethoven.

I am distrusted by both the 'orthodox' side in the important war and the 'postmodern' side in the unimportant one, because I think that the 'postmoderns' are philosophically right though politically silly, and that the 'orthodox' are philosophically wrong as well as politically dangerous. Unlike both the orthodox and the postmoderns, I do not think that you can tell much about the worth of a philosopher's views on topics such as truth, objectivity and the possibility of a single vision by discovering his politics, or his irrelevance to politics. So I do not think it counts in favor of Dewey's pragmatic view of truth that he was a fervent social democrat, nor against Heidegger's criticism of Platonic notions of objectivity that he was a Nazi, nor against Derrida's view of linguistic meaning that his most influential American ally, Paul de Man, wrote a couple of anti-Semitic articles when he was young. The idea that you can evaluate a writer's philosophical views by reference to their political utility seems to me a version of the bad Platonic-Straussian idea that we cannot have justice until philosophers become kings or kings philosophers.


Both the orthodox and the postmoderns still want a tight connection between people's politics and their views on large theoretical (theological, metaphysical, epistemological, metaphilosophical) matters. Some postmodernists who initially took my enthusiasm for Derrida to mean that I must be on their political side decided, after discovering that my politics were pretty much those of Hubert Humphrey, that I must have sold out. The orthodox tend to think that people who, like the postmodernists and me, believe neither in God nor in some suitable substitute, should think that everything is permitted, that everybody can do what they like. So they tell us that we are either inconsistent or self-deceptive in putting forward our moral or political views.

I take this near unanimity among my critics to show that most people - even a lot of purportedly liberated postmodernists – still hanker for something like what I wanted when I was 15: a way of holding reality and justice in a single vision. More specifically, they want to unite their sense of moral and political responsibility with a grasp of the ultimate determinants of our fate. They want to see love, power and justice as coming together deep down in the nature of things, or in the human soul, or in the structure of language, or somewhere. They want some sort of guarantee that their intellectual acuity, and those special ecstatic moments which that

acuity sometimes affords, are of some relevance to their moral convictions. They still think that virtue and knowledge are somehow linked - that being right about philosophical matters is important for right action. I think this is important only occasionally and incidentally.

### Philosophy's Social Utility

I do not, however, want to argue that philosophy is socially useless. Had there been no Plato, the Christians would have had a harder time selling the idea that all God really wanted from us was fraternal love. Had there been no Kant, the nineteenth century would have had a harder time reconciling Christian ethics with Darwin's story about the descent of man. Had there been no Darwin, it would have been harder for Whitman and Dewey to detach the Americans from their belief that they were God's chosen people, to get them to start standing on their own feet. Had there been no Dewey and no Sidney Hook, American intellectual leftists of the 1930S would have been as buffaloed by the Marxists as were their counterparts in France and in Latin America. Ideas do, indeed, have consequences.

But the fact that ideas have consequences does not mean that we philosophers, we specialists in ideas, are in a key position. We are not here to provide principles or foundations or deep theoretical diagnoses, or a synoptic vision. When I am asked (as, alas, I often am) what I take contemporary philosophy's 'mission' or 'task' to be, I get tongue-tied. The best I can do is to stammer that we philosophy professors are people who have a certain familiarity with a certain intellectual tradition, as chemists have a certain familiarity with what happens when you mix various substances together. We can offer some advice about what will happen when you try to combine or to separate certain ideas, on the basis of our knowledge of the results of past experiments. By doing so, we may be able to help you hold your time in thought. But we are not the people to come to if you want confirmation that the things you love with all your heart are central to the structure of the universe, or that your sense of moral responsibility is 'rational and objective' rather than 'just' a result of how you were brought up.

Despite my relatively early disillusionment with Platonism, I am very glad that I spent all those years reading philosophy books. For I learned something that still seems very important: to distrust the intellectual snobbery which originally led me to read them. If I had not read all those books, I might never have been able to stop looking for what Derrida calls 'a full presence beyond the reach of play', for a luminous, self-justifying, self-sufficient synoptic vision.

By now I am pretty sure that looking for such a presence and such a vision is a bad idea. The main trouble is that you might succeed and your success might let you imagine that you have something more to rely on than the tolerance and decency of your fellow human beings. The democratic community of Dewey's dreams is a community in which nobody imagines that. It is a community in which everybody thinks that it is human solidarity, rather than knowledge of something not merely human, that really matters. The actually existing approximations to such a fully democratic, fully secular community now seem to me the greatest achievements of our species. In comparison, even Hegel's and Proust's books seem optional, orchidaceous extras.