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Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism

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Omniversal Liberty

THOMAS CROWTHER

Durham University

tgw.crowther@hotmail.co.uk

ABSTRACT

“Liberty,” as a word, is thrown about contemporary society as casually as a ball is on a summer’s day, and yet, does anyone have a grasp on what it is? If it is freedom from limitation, then liberty must represent nothing less than consciousness without restraint. But though this straightforward definition implies its acquisition to be equally straightforward, the full spectrum of liberty would certainly prove to be one of the most elusive concepts imaginable. As a result, what we have, and what we throw about so indifferently, is a Substitute—a poor kind of replica of the real thing. True liberty—Omniversal liberty—is much less tangible however, and represents the equilibrium that occurs when anything is possible, but where the capacity to ever allow one possibility to dominate over another becomes impossible to maintain.

Keywords

liberty, omniverse, universal, modernity, freedom

Introduction: “What is Liberty anyway?”

Liberty is the battle-cry of our age, pronounced from the lips of every politician, reporter and soldier within every war of the modern era, with great and terrible civilizations rising and falling in its name. Lady Liberty thus acts as modernity’s Helen of Troy, with a thousand warships setting off to attain her at a moment’s notice. And yet, there is a question that few people ask when the call to arms is declared—what is liberty anyway?

It is often regarded as the most basic of human rights—the right of autonomy; that is, the right to choose for yourself without being influenced by outside forces. In this regard, liberty represents the freedom to define who we are or who we wish to become without restrictions being imposed upon us. As

expressed in this article, both autonomy and self-determination have become critical components of the “modern attitude” and have aided in the creation of a liberal mentality in which identity is now thought to be something which is chosen and gained rather than something that is ascribed at birth. However, the idea of self-determination (i.e. the freedom to define what and who we are) is increasingly becoming manipulated for commercial ends.

As explored in the first half of this article, the autonomous agent of contemporary society is actually highly influenced by an identity market which supplies a selection of choices from which the “sovereign-self” can ultimately be constructed. But despite the fact that the outside force and influence of the market certainly opposes the original idea of self-determining liberty, there is a greater issue still to be analysed—that autonomy, and any sense of the self, is restrictive and opposes a potentially higher form of liberty.

The autonomous agent could certainly be regarded as free in one sense, because instead of the nature of reality being dictated to them as a series of given classifications and meanings, the autonomous being defines reality as he/she sees fit; defining their own sense of self away from what may be conceived as the traditional and the given. But what is important to remember is that all definition—whether chosen or given—confines potential, as the purpose of definition is to bound and categorize reality. This means that all our free choices—all the ways in which we choose to identify ourselves and the universe around us—ultimately imprison not only the ways in which we each perceive reality, but also our own sense of being. By creating meaning through definition then, we limit possibility, and so self-determining liberty can thus only ever represent the freedom to limit the self and the universe in our own terms. Because of this, we do not have liberty, but possess only a substitute of the genuine thing, and this will be outlined in detail throughout.

Full liberty, Omniversal liberty as it is described in the latter sections of this article, goes much further than the simple right of sovereignty, and represents the only thing which liberty can be—consciousness without restraint. However, though this straightforward *definition* implies its acquisition to be equally straightforward, the full spectrum of liberty must defy its own confinement and may thus prove to be too slippery, elusive and contradictory to imagine, let alone create. But before attempting to investigate Omniversal liberty further, it is first necessary to examine the ways in which the modern concept of self-determining liberty—what I term the “Substitute”—has been developed, and how it has influenced the creation of a very modern kind of being—the autonomous and self-defining agent; a being free to choose their own path in life, though nevertheless restricted in that freedom.

The Substitute: The Decline of the Tradition-Defined Self

Liberty is one of the “rights” inscribed within such founding documents as the Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen: “all men are created equal...endowed...with certain inalienable rights...among these...life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”; “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights, the aim of every political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are liberty, the ownership of property, security and the right to resist oppression.”

These documents, which are so significant when considering the construction of the modern character, do not attempt to define liberty as such, but instead imply that it is something intrinsically linked to the idea of self-determination and autonomy. It is these assumed “rights” that have become the essential fabric of what we would term “the modern attitude”; a fabric which was originally cast in the intellectual forge of the Enlightenment.

Kant (1792 [1784], 54–60) originally wrote that “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without guidance of another...The motto of Enlightenment is therefore: *Sapere Aude!* Have courage to use your own understanding.” Kant’s statement, coupled with the philosophic writings of Grotius, Kierkegaard, Locke, Montesquieu and Rousseau during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, developed the idea that the individual was autonomous and self-defining, possessing the right to construct themselves away from the controls of society. Influential in the collapse of the tradition-defined self, it is the emergence of the self-determining agent throughout the early modern period which gave credence to humanist philosophy; an essential component of the autonomous attitude.

Representative of the secular and non-religious, humanism regards human beings as the measure of all things and recognizes that human reason is all we can rely upon. As a consequence of this, modernity’s icons have tended to be rationalists—e.g. Darwin, Marx and Freud—who foregrounded the belief that it was *only* the self that held the answers. The rise of rationalism was further accompanied by concepts of social evolution (Morgan 1877; Spencer 1870, 439–440; Tylor 1871) whose universal cultural progression, regardless of time or space, argued a development from irrationality to rationality, from “primitive” religion to scientifically educated atheism (Bowman 1995, 139–149), and most importantly, from the tradition-defined self to the autonomous, self-defining agent.

However, speaking on the collapse of the tradition-defined self and the rise of the “*Sapere Aude*” inspired agent, Durkheim (1992) argued that religion was actually applicable within both “primitive” and “modern” societies, believing it to be a belief system that holds a community together around that which it holds sacred (Durkheim 1995), and defining the sacred as literally anything capable of being sacralized. As the Enlightenment’s battle-cry had been “*Sapere Aude*,” Durkheim insisted that modernity had sacralized the self and instituted a religious “Cult of Man,” (Durkheim 1984, 122; 1994, 70) in which “the individual institutes for himself [or herself] and celebrates for himself [or herself] alone” (Durkheim 1995, 44). Together with the rise of modern rationalism, the “religious” and “sacred” expression of the self has become thoroughly embedded within the modern mind-set and has been highly influential in the collapse of the traditional-self—something which is essential if autonomous liberty is to be achieved by any individual.

But the collapse of the tradition-defined self was not just the result of growing rationalism and a sacred self-belief, for it was also greatly advanced through progressive forms of liberalism (and relativism), denoting acceptance toward divergent opinions and views. Standing against traditional principles and morals, modern liberalism has included phases such as the “Century of the Child” (Key 1909), and the sexual revolution proposed by the likes of Margaret Mead and D.H Lawrence; all of which weakened the mental framework of the tradition-informed, and helped build a liberal, self-determining mentality. Indeed, if the tradition-informed self represents the agent who thinks in terms of external loci of authority, influence and providence rather than relying on themselves like the modern-self does (Ambler 1996, 134–151; Heelas 1996, 155), then all that is regarded as “traditional” may also be considered opposed to the freedoms of autonomy originally proposed during the Enlightenment. This is especially true when considering Rousseau’s notion of self-determining liberty whereby the agent is only free when he/she decides for him/herself what concerns them, rather than being shaped by external influences (Taylor 1989, 1991).

With all this in mind, we can see that modernity does not represent an era, but that it is an attitude instead; an attitude which acknowledges the right of self-assertion and has helped build a liberal-minded society in which the subjective, rationalising, sovereign individual has become foregrounded. However, though this attitude has been vital in the fall of the tradition-informed and the rise of the self-determining agent, it is also intrinsically linked to the emergence of the modern consumer within enterprise culture, and it is this consumer who now functions as the model champion of Enlightenment ide-

als, especially with regards to autonomous liberty.

The substitute: Purchasable liberty

Rooted within individualistic values managed to improve productivity, the concept of an enterprise culture was advanced by Thatcherism and Reaganomics which sought to link consumer sovereignty to the ideology of self-determining liberty (Slater 1997, 37), with the enterprising consumer utilising responsibility, inventiveness, creativity, self-autonomy, and above all he/she stands on his/her own feet rather than being dependent on others (Heelas 1991, 72–90). These values clearly attempt to ally consumers to the Enlightenment’s core ideas of liberty, freedom, reason and progress through individual choice—with the market now supplying that choice.

Enterprise culture thus champions the self-motivated consumer (Keat 1991, 1–17)—a self who values his/her own identity, his/her own freedom of expression, his/her own conviction, agency, power and creativity, but above all else, this is a being which criticizes the tradition-informed. In this way, the self-determining liberty heralded during the Enlightenment has led to traditional conceptions of social identity—as something fixed in space-time, unwavering and unchangeable (Tilley 2006, 7–32)—being replaced by enterprising notions of self-identity as something intensely variable, invented, abstract, and changeable, with the “created” state of the self thought to significantly diverge from the acquired baggage of social institutions. Individuality now lies in potentiality, with identity being achieved instead of ascribed, and with the modern agent in a constant state of self-exploration, supposedly free from the assimilated information and ideals handed down to them.

This has resulted in what must be one of the greatest social changes of our time: i.e. the massive subjective turn of modern culture, which includes the progressive loss of both objectivity and the traditional definitions of the world, and thereby permitting the radical subjectivation of the self within a distinctly consumerist, enterprising and individualized context. I would contend then that with the rise of this modern attitude, Gellner’s (1994, 100–104) original concept of the modern worker—the “Modular Man”—as the ever replaceable human agent has been substituted for the consumer, whose social fixation upon the self rather than the group is foregrounded. But I would also contend that although the self-searching consumer is closely linked with the original idea of liberty—the freedom to choose how to define oneself—the journey of self-definition is more often than not accompanied by a sense of incompleteness. Quite simply, this is because concepts such as “the self” are difficult to define (Rees 1985), and although this permits the

consumer to define the self in their own terms, it also hints that the consumer requires help in the process of defining.

As the market within enterprise culture responds to the needs of the consumer, a world imbued with possible journeys towards self-discovery becomes essential, and so a vast catalogue of choices become available—a notion which certainly moves away from the idea of liberty as that of individual autonomy; the individual now being influenced and in turn influencing the outside force of the market. As such, this represents a general social philosophy in which the agent is still regarded as sacred but is nevertheless incomplete and so is in need of assistance. Strongly resembling modernity's fixation on perfectibility, the modern consumer thus stands incomplete and fragmentary, requiring progressivistic and constructivistic attitudes akin to the values of enterprise culture. It is here then that the original concept of self-determining liberty becomes integrated with the concept of consumer sovereignty.

Though the consumer is supposed to amalgamate distinctly modern and liberal virtues built up over the last few centuries: i.e. self-perfectibility, self-improvement, identity construction, self-esteem development, positive thinking, and “self-empowerment and transformation through the technology of the self” (Foucault 1988), all of these can be acquired from the market. The original idea of self-determining liberty has thus become amalgamated with the ideals of the marketplace. Indeed, the languages of freedom, liberty and consumerism have become entangled and are virtually identical; freedom indicative of the individualistic freedoms provided by the market and supposedly being “free to choose,” permitting the consumer within the context of the “Cult of Man” to explore the commercial realm for their true—yet distinctly indefinable—self.

The liberty to develop our identities is thus embedded with the idea of consumer sovereignty, with consumers possessing self-autonomy over their needs, desires and wants, whilst also holding the right to formulate their own projects and identities. But the search for self-identity is nonetheless problematic in a society where the secure social networks of family and community have broken down (Langman 1992). Social deregulation within consumer society thus materializes as a crisis of identity, with identity being neither ascribed nor fixed by a stable social order. This fuels the already popular notion that identity has to be chosen and constructed by consumers, and as market competition guarantees producers react to the preferences of consumers, the full spectrum of human culture can become purchasable in the market itself. In this way, modern agents can search the commercial sphere for identity; seeking cultural merchandise that assures agent identification through possession and display. However, because everywhere there are only

other replicas of our own sanctified individuality, individuals become increasingly self-constraining, and therefore difference (i.e. the essence of individuality) becomes the essential identity commodity.

In response, “cultural specialists” (Bourdieu 1984, 48) within the market scour through cultural and social traditions in order to produce fresh interpretations of meaning which can be consumed, creating an endless supply of purchasable “Otherness”—existent, fanciful and fantastical—and thereby sustaining the consumer obsession never to say “enough is enough.” Indeed, the “Other” represents a new cultural opiate ripe for capitalist plucking, and the result is a market of Otherness, with producers selling simulated traditions in a marketplace; producing countless self-help books and similar practices to support the exploitative assumption that there are always more ways in which people can construct their own identities. Individual development, fostered largely through the “buy our product and change your life” advertising, thus places human meaning on the supermarket shelf along with all other obtainable value systems (Featherstone 1991).

It would thus seem that in the process of exercising individual liberty through free-choice, the consumer actually dismisses the original aspiration of modern western citizens to be free, rational, autonomous and self-defining, and instead allow their identities to be constructed by external influences—a marketplace which fully understands the need to supply individuals with simulated difference (Baudrillard 1983). Indeed, the concept of self-determining liberty within a consumer context has maintained the gradual corrosion of large, social value systems (e.g. Christianity), and has fostered a sense of confusion in which the question, “what is it to be human?” is not only left open, but is seemingly unanswerable, and thereby providing us all with a bittersweet taste of mass nihilism.

In such a context as this, consumers can only go on searching for their own identities, ever hopeful that they will eventually gain an individual answer for themselves. But each choice made, each selection chosen from the marketplace, is a bounded cultural and social category used in an attempt to define who we are. This can only mean that within each mind of the modern consumer, an infinite number of walls are being built; different elements of our pick-and-mix culture become entangled to form what many assume to be our “character.” But each new wall, each new selection we add to ourselves, naturally conflicts or juts up against another, and in time, they can form something akin to a labyrinth; mazes that create the illusion of a character, but which become impossible to navigate.

Indeed, the existence of an identity-market means that many agents fail in their attempt to create a solid sense of self anyway. This is because the selections and decisions we each make for ourselves naturally conflict with other choices; choices which are perpetually exposed to us from within the market. In a society of such idealized individuality, the selections we make for ourselves are also likely to conflict with the selections made by other people too, and this potentially fosters a society of aggressive and antagonistic individuals; a concept which cultivates the Hobbesian view of the individual being as a creature purely motivated by self-interest; a being ideally suited to a flourishing capitalist society, with each person channeling their supposed innate aggressiveness through an economic arena. It is no wonder then, that in noticing this, many consumers romanticize older, “better” eras, when life seemed simpler; golden ages when identity was “fixed.” But this, like almost everything else, can be exploited by the market, with consumers now able to buy nostalgia to which they can “escape.”

With the ill-defined but powerful catchall term “liberty” behind it, the ambiguous self-searching and self-perfecting (Hervieu-Leger 2001, 161–175), sovereign individual which underpins modernity is well suited to modernity’s accompanying corporate empire, within which, any banding together must be a fragile phenomenon indeed. The original concept of liberty as the freedom of self-determination has thus materialized into a state of mass disorientation regarding any unified conception of what and who we are. With regards to this sense of confusion, I refer back to what Gellner originally identified as “the cultural freak” of modernity—the “Modular Man”—the ever replaceable, and thus exploitable, human individual. I would contend that such human equivalents are actually a threat as they retain the ability to collectively identify themselves against their condition and thus preserve the capacity to identify the “human” within each other. But it is obvious that the individualistic capitalist society to which we all belong thrives under such uncertainty with regards to human meaning, and this, in turn, motivates us further towards purchasing possible meaning from the market.

All in all then, the belief that liberty represents the freedom of self-determination and the right of autonomy has played no small role in the production (and reproduction) of socially antagonistic human beings; each one provided with the idea that they are free to design their own lives, but each one actually being highly influenced by outside forces. By associating this “freedom” with what we call “liberty,” we can only ever have a substitute of the real thing, because this liberty is, in fact, highly susceptible to exploitation by others. The question is, if what we have is a Substitute, what is the real thing? The

answer given at the beginning of this exploration was that it is consciousness without restraint. However, the gap between the Substitute and this liberty is enormous and would not be traversed with ease, and this is due to the existence of Universals.

The Universal

Here, I use the word “Universal” to represent any single judgement which we make and which is maintained through criteria. We set Universals to everything we perceive, and they signify anything which we set a boundary around, representing all which we define or categorize. When we observe a stationary chair for example, we make the judgement that this object is a chair; a recognized object upon which we sit. The word chair thus acts as a Universal—i.e. a judgement. Around that initial Universal, we naturally set others: for example, that this particular chair is decorative and possesses certain distinct styles, etc. Around the Universal of “chair” then, we set a congregation of other Universals, as we attempt to bind the object to a series of categorizations in our minds.

Another example is that if I were to say, “My name is Nicholas,” I am creating a Universal. Here, I inform you that I am something and around that I create a boundary that others cannot enter unless they share that same characteristic—i.e. that they are also called Nicholas. So in my mind and in yours, a boundary is created into which I place myself (and into which I am placed at birth)—I am Nicholas; you are not.

Universals are all the mental confinements such as these. There are huge, sweeping ones of course, such as gender; and there are smaller ones, such as names. Nevertheless, all of them represent the judgements we each make; they are the criteria that we fill our brains with throughout life. They don't just apply to each of us, but also, to the ways in which we experience everything around us too. Even time, which is perhaps the most complicated and fluid facet of creation, we attempt to deconstruct and confine to categories and criteria. Indeed, even the fact that I write this in English represents a Universal act, and each word is a Universal in itself. The word “they” for example suggests a foreign group; it implies a set of people, which are then confined to that word. This word can be opposed by other Universals of course, such as “I,” which suggests independence, but both are equally bounded by the original judgements I make.

Likewise, we are each of us confined to Universals. Every individual is defined by himself and others by means of an immeasurable number of Universals, many of which are fluid from birth until death. Each one of us further belong

to other, larger Universal categories (e.g. family, community, nation, species, etc), and though each larger element possesses a countless number of Universals in their own right, each one also imposes their own set of Universals and expectations on the individuals which are judged to belong to it. This demonstrates the ways in which Universals can come together to create other Universals. When we bake a cake for instance, we use multiple ingredients, each one being independent at the beginning, and we use these to create something which we regard as new and independent—the cake itself. Our original set of Universals come together to create a new Universal. However, though multiple Universals within one category may not always conflict, they inevitably can. The bringing together of those ingredients may make a good cake, but it could also make something that is wholly inedible. And it is the same with each of us.

Although each one of us remains highly elusive to any kind of solid categorization, when we meet new people, we inevitably make judgements upon them; we force them into a series of categories which we construct in our minds. Some of the Universals we create for these individuals may conflict with the ways in which we define ourselves, and some of which may not. However, it is this collection of Universals which nevertheless gives us an impression of that person. But we can never truly capture that being through the method of creating Universals, and this demonstrates the futility in attempting to confine reality to category, even though we nevertheless still attempt to do so.

An example of this futile endeavour regards love. Love is a word, and this word acts as a Universal because it attempts to capture, and thus confine, a plethora of feelings. But the full nature of love cannot be confined to that word. And yet, when in love, we make judgements and attempt to force our experience into criteria rather than simply experiencing it for the fluid and intensely complex thing that love actually is, and this provides us with a sense of comfort and security, safe in the illusion that we know exactly what is going on. An example of this is that when we are in love, we often say that the person we are in love with is “mine,” or that you are theirs, and this is but one small way in which we attempt to bound and categorize a part of what love is.

And so, Universals, whether big or small, simply represent the boundaries we create when we make judgements on something. But behind every Universal we create, there is power. Whether the Universal seems to be a trivial or a mortal one, every Universal is imbued with power because each one confines reality into category; each Universal we create forces the scope of perceived reality into bounded mental spaces. Now, if liberty represents consciousness without restraint, then we could argue that the very existence of Universals counters this sense of liberty. With this in mind, I wish to briefly

refer back to the Substitute, as noted in the last section.

I would contend that the Substitute does blur the boundaries (and thus restrictions) of certain Universals (e.g. culture, nationhood, religion), especially those regarded as absolutes or those relating to a sense of community or society. However, though the dogmatic and intensely Universal nature of modern science may require a single objective view of the world and demand of us a full understanding regarding the structure of “reality,” the tolerant and liberal attitudes espoused by the Substitute have allowed mass relativism to flourish, and this has permitted a countless number of “Other,” smaller Universals to remain in the social pot. In place of absolutes then, the Substitute provides us with a marketplace which sells as many “Other” Universals as possible; categories that can be purchased to help build our own distinctly individual identities.

Capitalist institutions thus expose and filter cultural and social Universals into the market, thus providing the self-determining individual—fearful of meaninglessness—with a multiplicity of supposedly meaningful Universals from which they can each choose, and it is this which is linked to the concept of self-determining liberty. The resulting world is not a place in which “nothing is sacred,” but is a state in which everything is portrayed as *potentially* sacred; the differing Universal elements of humanity utilized to personify the market as a “human” entity that has the potential to give meaning to the individual. And yet, the self-determining agent (the being which is supposed to represent liberty), is in fact only immersing him/herself in a collection of cultural and social Universals provided by an outside force.

A liberty of consciousness without restraint represents a life without Universals altogether, and though it may be argued that the existence of Universals demonstrates a natural requirement within us all to make judgements, they nevertheless represent the restrictions we place on ourselves, on others and on the entire cosmos that we are each immersed within. Indeed, as Rousseau so famously declared, man is born free, and is everywhere in chains. The links which make up those chains are Universals, and ultimately, we are the ones who place them on ourselves and on others. Though our capacity to remove them may obviously lie beyond the ability of our minds, as each one of us perpetually create Universals from birth until death, there is at least one story that captures how one woman broke free from her Universal bonds and attained the liberty that exists without them (i.e. the Omniverse), and that is the tale of The Fall.

The Fall: Perceiving the Omniverse

Last year, whilst attending church, I heard a sermon on the tragic tale of Eve—the first woman—who was made out to be the prime antagonist of the

human race. We, the congregation, were told that Eve was the original sinner; the fallen; the weaker twin of God's last creation, and a shameful example of humanity's ravenous nature. But as the story unfolded, it became obvious that Eve symbolized nothing less than the personification of liberty itself.

As I listened, I imagined this mythical woman in the utopian Garden of Eden. Gazing up at the rotten fruit hanging beneath the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, with its blackened and crumpled skin, she realizes that this is her mortality; her death. For her, this fruit is the only temptation in the world however; it is her only restriction, and watching it in wonder, she attempts to gather the courage which liberty requires so that she can stretch out her hand to grasp it and thus be free of this single limitation. She does of course, and bringing the fruit to her lips, she sinks her teeth into its skin.

I then pictured Eve clutching at her chest as her heart took its first beat. She falls to the ground, and as mortality crashes down upon her, it takes mere seconds for her flawless skin to blemish and for the golden glint of divinity, which moments ago had shimmered across her eyes, to fade and dull. She reawakens into a wilderness. She is human; subject to all the indescribable terrors (and pleasures) that the term "mortality" can only tentatively imply.

It's a somewhat terrifying story, and whether you regard yourself as Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Atheist, or a "not really sure," it is still regarded as one the most shameful allegories that has ever been told. To many, it is the quintessential tale of weakness and sin. But I believe it's not a fable of weakness or sin at all, because subtly underlying it is a story that illustrates exactly what liberty is.

When we recount this long-told tale to ourselves, we imagine Eden to be utopia—the grand idea of perfection which we dream of (re)gaining; with Eve herself being perfect. The loss of that perfection is a result of humanity's fall from grace, and indeed, our recovering of perfection is an idea very much linked to that of the self-determining consumer expressed earlier. But what is often forgotten is that when we come to define what perfection is, we are forced to create criteria—we are forced to create Universals. This means that for perfection to exist in reality, everything outside of our selected criteria (i.e. the imperfect) must be relegated onto the heap of defective culture. In this way, our quest for perfection acts as a limewash over almost all human thought, employing Universals to bound and categorize exactly what and who we are to become. The very concept is thus imbued with a sense of singularity, restriction and power.

Although the destruction of dissidence may allow the sustainment of a constructed view of perfection, dissidence against criteria still remains within the spectrum of possibility, and it is actually the *possibility* which I believe to be fundamental to liberty, and here's why.

In the story, Eve is a woman who chooses to go into the wilderness instead of remaining in what is essentially a utopian state of perfection. But why would she make this choice? Because only in the wilderness are there no restrictions whatsoever. I think this is why liberty is so often attributed to social revolutions, because only in the total destruction of a previous system can a small sense of liberty subtly be witnessed as the blank future suddenly laid bare before the “liberators.” This is true in Eve’s story too, because out in the wilderness, for a very brief moment in time, anything is possible for her—there are no Universals, there is just the possibility of anything and everything.

This demonstrates exactly what liberty is: it is the possibility of every possible possibility. What this means is that it is the potential of any Universal, (i.e. a possibility which is created), but the actual creation of none. It is the void before all judgement, and in the story of Eve, it is the wilderness itself which represents this.

The existence of all Universal possibilities in one place means that liberty is nothing less than the social Omniverse—where every possible Universal is possible, but where no one Universal is ever actually created. In this way, the Omniverse is both nothing and everything: it is all truth, every truth and at the same time, and even then it is everything outside of truth too. It is all worlds, all cultures, all visions, all sense of madness and all sense of sanity.

To our Universal-constructing minds, this abstract vision seems to be filled with contradictions and paradoxes. But the Omniverse lacks the judgement required to ever see the contradictions and conflicts between possibilities in the first place, meaning that all possibilities can exist together in harmony, each one equal and indistinguishable to the other. As soon as any Universal is created however, as soon as any judgement occurs and a boundary is made around a possibility, the Omniverse is lost, and liberty is lost along with it. For Eve, the judgement and resulting shame of her own nakedness is her first Universal, and it is then that she loses liberty.

However, Eve’s story hints at an original objective for humanity, which is not to rebuild utopian Eden—the supposed enterprise of modernity; what I believe to be the restraint of minds in the quest for “self-perfection”—but is instead a mission to regain Omniversal liberty; that is, to step into the wilderness, as she does. With this in mind, we can see how this kind of liberty is not the kind which we aspire towards in our own society. The Omniverse shouldn’t be confused with the Substitute and its accompanying marketplace, in which a range of Universals are brought together for purchase by identity seeking consumers. It should be remembered that the self-perfecting and autonomous individual

of the Substitute exists due to the social expectations of western society, which adopts a philosophy of self-determination. In this way, the consumer is wholly bounded not only by the Universals which they use to construct their own characters, but is also restricted by the expectations of society itself, which espouses individuality—a contradiction in itself. And yet, I believe very few people (if anyone at all) could even imagine such a concept as the Omniverse anyway, let alone begin to forge it for themselves. So discovering the ways in which human beings can achieve this extremely abstract liberty are thus going to be far more difficult than discovering what liberty is.

The obvious method of achieving it would be to reject that which lies behind every Universal we create—i.e. judgement. But to ignore what must be our most basic instinct is surely impossible for any human mind to master. This suggests that the rejection of judgement may not be the answer to attaining liberty. Instead of discarding our judgements then—and thus our capability of creating Universals—the only way to achieve liberty would be to contradictorily create an infinite number of Universals within each mind. Therefore, this is a philosophy that supposes it is only an excess of judgement which can resolve the issue of judgement in the first place. Let me explain why.

In order to blur the boundaries between Universals, we would have to create as many Universals as possible. For example, imagine that I currently conclude that my name is Michael. However, in my attempt to attain Omniversal liberty, instead of rejecting the idea of “name” (which is a Universal), I would add to it, providing myself with every possible name there is, despite the conflicts that such a position would inevitably create. By doing so, this would blur not only the power of the Universal “name,” but would also distort a small part of my own individuality in the process; something that is essential if Omniversal liberty is to be achieved.

With infinite Universals on every possible subject being fostered within our minds like this, an infinite number of boundaries would be created. The inestimable amount of paradoxes produced would force the mind into a constant state of inconsistency, and as such, the original boundaries between Universals would become blurred as they would each lose their power of dominating over others. The lack of boundaries between Universals removes the ability to judge in the first place, and thus, power is void and Omniversal liberty is attained.

So instead of the individual searching for their own criteria, class and sense of belonging which the Substitute advocates as a “natural right,” Omniversal liberty goes much, much further to not only invalidate individuality—which is a concept that actually counters true liberty as it requires each person to create the Universals which they believe are right for them—but it also

invalidates the very idea of society itself. In replacement is an unimaginably abstract being who holds an infinite number of Universals in their minds; each one a possibility within the human spectrum, but most importantly, each one never able to dominate over any other due to the chaos that comes to exist when all Universals are brought together. It is only by creating as many Universals as possible like this that we would then be able to witness the Omniverse—every possible possibility—without the judgement required to ever make any single possibility a solid reality—i.e. a Universal.

To our minds, which are currently bounded by innumerable Universals, this may imply liberty to be something terrifying and intensely anarchistic; afterall, we should remind ourselves that it was the devil that persuaded Eve to take liberty in the first place. Indeed, it implies liberty to be beyond all codes of morality. But it should be remembered that morals, as a form of unwritten law, are a way of harmonizing relations in society. In attempting to do this, they act as a method of reducing conflict; aspects that threaten the equilibrium of society. Yet the catalyst behind conflict is judgement; the creation of bounded ideas of something or someone, which in turn conflict with other judgements. Liberty is life without judgement however, and is thus without society, and is thus without power. So in liberty there is no need for morality because there are no judgements left for us to counter.

If this is what liberty is then, I'm forced to conclude by asking the necessary question: are we really capable of achieving such an elusive thing?

Conclusion: Stepping into the wilderness

Liberty is the Omniverse. It is nothing less than life without structure; life without Universals, but with the possibility of them all. It is fluid existence without confinement, where the profane and the sacred are indistinguishable from one another, and where the boundaries between the self and the rest of existence are utterly distorted.

Whether this is believed to be a vision of anarchy and chaos is irrelevant however. Take it or leave it, this is what liberty is. But what becomes obvious is that this is not our world. Nor is it any world before ours, and likely, any world after it either. In fact, I doubt that Omniversal liberty is even within the scope of reality. This is because, as in the story of Eve, the price of liberty is that it is momentary.

When Eve takes the forbidden fruit and walks into the wilderness, she gains liberty. But as a life on a timer is presented to her, her liberty is exchanged for the full range of restraints which permeate human existence. Likewise, with regards to every revolution in history, each one becomes a somewhat tragic

tale of “today we gain liberty, but tomorrow it will be gone”; the blank slate of infinite possibilities quickly becomes cluttered again.

This is true because liberty would require a limitless, ubiquitous mind. Indeed, instead of the human mind, it would require something akin to the divine-like mind that Eve possesses before she leaves Eden. In her story, as soon as liberty is gained, when that mortal-bearing fruit is held within her hands, her mind becomes imprisoned to the body and is opened up to all the terrors and limitations which can result from this confinement. Her liberty is then further countered by the emergence of time, with its deadly inclination towards linear decay, and this means that our bodies will gradually fail us. Above all else, it is the resulting prospect, fear and encroachment of death which forces our species into situations of “society,” and it is within these Universal-creating factions that we attempt to live as long as possible, constraining not only our own minds in the process, but other’s too. This view is, perhaps, behind the essence of power—the very rejection of liberty.

And yet, despite the terrible consequences of Eve’s momentary grasp on liberty, I believe liberty can, and should be the aspiration of all things that become aware of their own existence, despite the fact that its attainment will almost certainly remain elusive—after all, we inhabit a Universal; a single possibility created from the Omniversal potential. However, my argument here is that the power which is manifest due to the existence and limitations of that Universe must always be countered, and it can be by those who either desire it (whether consciously or unconsciously), or by those who wish to destroy it. To do the latter however, we would have to remove our own ambitions for power, and we can only do that by pursuing Omniversal liberty; that is, to throw ourselves into the wilderness, as Eve did; immersed in every possible Universal until our capacity for judgement, and thus power, is blurred and eventually nullified.

Unlike the Substitute however, Omniversal liberty cannot be placed within the market, but can only to be discovered in the wilderness, and in conclusion, I wish to assure you that it will take much more than a mere self-reliant attitude to step into that brave and boundless world of infinite possibilities.

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Learning to Understand Others: The Pragmatic Rhetoric of Ethnography and Religious Ethics in Clifford Geertz's *Works and Lives*

BETH EDDY

Worcester Polytechnic Institute

bleddy@wpi.edu

ABSTRACT

This article examines literature from cultural anthropology for insights into ethics. It particularly addresses the moral issue of justly understanding those people different from oneself. Clifford Geertz, pragmatist as well as anthropologist, draws upon the rhetorical theory of Kenneth Burke in his 1988 book *Works and Lives*. Just this sort of cross-disciplinary borrowing offers resources for understanding what were once religiously-based ethics in a humanistic context. The rhetorical style of various cultural anthropologists serves to inform the rhetorical forms of appeal of theistic and non-theistic ethics.

Keywords

otherness, pragmatism, rhetoric, translation, dialogue

The recent death of Robin Williams has caused me renewed nostalgia for his role as teacher in the film “Dead Poets Society.” Williams epitomizes the comic genius, “at wit’s end,” as Henry Levinson once put the difficult state of spiritual affairs (Levinson 1990). William James, in his own *Talks to Teachers* writes about coming to understand what makes life worth living for those who are very different from ourselves. In his essay, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” (James 1899), James tells of the difficulty of making ourselves familiar with the goods of the lives of others who initially strike us as strange. In this essay James even speaks of an episode described by Robert Louis Stevenson of young men hiding their light sources underneath their jackets as they trek off into the woods to clandestinely read and write poetry

for each other. After reading “On a Certain Blindness” I have never again been able to watch “Dead Poets Society” without seeing in the teacher Williams portrays a romantic desire to bring alive young expressive selves in a way deeply influenced by literary Romanticism. The Dead Poets Society that the schoolboys form in the film calls forth their best expressive selves to each other, in the process making, as Novalis would have described the situation, “the strange familiar and the familiar strange.” I have always understood my task as a religious studies teacher to be largely what that romantic Novalis advocated doing: helping my students to see their own familiar religious traditions as stranger than they thought and those religious traditions foreign to them as familiar. Another way of stating this task is to describe religious studies as an interpretive task, showing “the innocence of things hated, and the clearness of things frowned upon or denied.” James ties off his discussion of the joys and goods of differing sorts of human beings, goods not immediately apparent to just any casual observer, with the appeal:

Hands off: neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands. Even prisons and sick-rooms have their special revelations. It is enough to ask of each of us that he should be faithful to his own opportunities and make the most of his own blessings, without presuming to regulate the rest of the vast field. (James 1949, 284)

James, who spent some time considering what was good for various sorts of human beings had theistically-tinged reasons for reining in his own perspectives. Santayana and Kenneth Burke, who echoed James’ views on this particular matter had less theistic reasons for wanting to accomplish the same moral/aesthetic task. James, Santayana, Burke, and Levinson are just a few of the many thinkers who have drawn and still draw their perspectival humility as interpreters of religious traditions for such reasons. For theists with God in the center of their moral universe, no single self and no “we” could ever occupy that space, decentering the self to make room for differing others just as humanly worthy of joy as their own selves. For these people, finding ways to hold together lives worth the living, with the resources at hand in some time and place amounted to doing moral philosophy.

Religious ethicists who think of themselves as pragmatists, having traded the search for universally acceptable foundations in for inquiry about other ways to hold lives together, appear to be divided into “we-focused” and “other-focused” camps in ways that tend to cross theistic/atheistic boundaries. Their theism or atheism is not the most relevant way of categorizing ethical approaches, but rather, we-centeredness or other-centeredness hits the target

more accurately in both instances. At least since George Santayana, there have been those atheistic religious ethicists who protested against a wholly prudential ethics and valued charitable human traditions that (at least in theory) made room for apprehending human goods other than their own or those enjoying cultural dominance in a given time and place (see Levinson 990). (It matters, I think, that Santayana was raised both Unitarian and Catholic; *mestizos* of various sorts pervade this other-focused camp I want to consider.) Religious ethicists like Stanley Hauerwas praise the necessity of a specifically Christian ethnocentrism for shaping up a view of human goods (see Hauerwas 1981). Other permutations come to mind: for example, an atheistic ethicist like Richard Rorty came down on the side of a “liberalized” ethnocentrism in order “to extend our sense of “we” to people whom we have previously thought of as ‘they’” (Rorty 1989, 192). But a particular tradition in culture criticism that can be traced from the romantics, to James, to Santayana, through the works of Ruth Benedict on the more ethnographic end of the spectrum and the works of Kenneth Burke on the more rhetorical side, shows up in the writings of Clifford Geertz. These die-hard pluralists remain not yet sold on wholesale ethnocentrism, whether their reluctance is born of a commitment to political liberalism or just a nagging feeling that some habit worth saving still lurks in a theocentric tradition that they can no longer ground in a metaphysics or theology. To those unable or unwilling to supply or rely upon theological reasons for their reluctance to abandon traditional practices that involve cultivating periods when a person can be practically worthless such as James recommended (1949, 272), Geertz’s book *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (hereafter *Works and Lives*) offers a bridge between disciplines. A detour from philosophical ethics into cultural anthropology provides fresh ways of thinking through old dilemmas; this book shows the potential connectedness (despite differences) of ethnography and pragmatic ethics, playing up the way those respective fields could nourish and stimulate each other when it comes to gaining familiarity with an “other.”

The reasons Durkheim or Levi-Strauss once had for caring about ethnographic enterprises may not be the same reasons a sub-group of scholars of religion would want to give for attending to them now. For a generation of theologically-ambivalent scholars emerging out of theistic traditions, neo-humanist appeals to scientific authority and secular awe at the potential power of the hard sciences may have looked more like the anti-humanist theological traditions that fathered them than appears now. Whether the Good was then taken to be the Good for the Human (anthropologist as high priest) or the Good was understood as the Social (sociologist as high priest),

both priestly enterprises rested on social *science* to reveal ethical essentials. Taken as enlightening academic disciplines geared to inform instrumental human *action*, the power of reason still wielded what authority the disciplines had; ultimately whoever could not be persuaded by reason would need to be coerced to the Good for their own good. Some of these scholars of religions have in the past read anthropology to develop an understanding of the essential Human as a neo-humanist alternative to a theological essence for their discipline.

The conviction of some pragmatic others—that goods are plural and not necessarily overlapping—turns concerns with “The Social” into, more simply and less essentially, “social” concerns as one aspect of religion among others. These intellectual descendants of Durkheim might take themselves to be Durkheimian with a difference; they bear family resemblances to their forefather in their attention to the socially stabilizing functions of religious practices and beliefs, but have other intellectual features not traceable to him.

Another reason that religion scholars concerned with social practices might want to read anthropology involves distinguishing two relatively new academic disciplines. To argue over whether some particular cultural practice is magic, science, or religion is to ask, at least in part, how do we divide up disciplinary fields? The division deals partly with how ethnographic others view their practices that differ from our own, but the division has also been caught up in questions of institutional boundaries and power dynamics all our own in the academy. Once “getting to the heart of things” mutates into getting to the hearts of things, religious studies begins to look a lot more like ethnography; we other-centered religious ethicists are philosophically moving into the same spot that ethnographers have occupied for some time.¹

Examining and talking about the goods of other humans, without the help of foundational essences, calls for attention to and respect for the ability to persuade without coercing or inducing resentment. Geertz’s emphasis on the ways anthropologists persuade comes across, not as an expose that reveals dirty little professional secrets about anthropology as a discipline or on the other hand instruction in disciplinary mysteries, but more like a keeping of one’s own house. Both housekeeping and priestcraft are straightening up activities, but housekeeping, unlike priestcraft, doesn’t usually deal in absolutes of cleanliness outside of the occasional obsessive.

1. See James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Authority,” *Representations*, 2 (1983, 125) who discusses how various theories try to “get to the heart” of a culture.

Dirty hands in ethnography

Works and Lives takes a hard look at how anthropologists persuade their readers to trust their accounts of strange and inaccessible people and places. Geertz picks a “key” text for each of four anthropologists—Claude Levi-Strauss, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Ruth Benedict—and uses it to organize a discussion of that writer’s rhetorical techniques. This might seem to be an “in-house” production, useful to professional anthropologists, but largely irrelevant to the rest of us. But I want to suggest that the issues, political and stylistic, for anthropologists are much the same as those for ethicists and moral philosophers in the field of religion. Though *Works and Lives* is not the only book to take up this task, Geertz’s clarity, style and refusal of ideological uniform make it the best place to start delving into ethnographic practices. Growing to understand what ethnographers are up to, I maintain, will allow new perspective on what we ethicists and moral philosophers do.

In the spirit of attention to social context, I should note that Geertz’s book centers around an already heated-up discussion going on within anthropology’s disciplinary walls over the purveyance of authority by those who author ethnographic texts. In order to get the sense of Geertz’s book as one voice participating in a conversation, I will frequently need to refer to his conversation partners. An essay collection, practically concurrent to Geertz’s book, gathered together by James Clifford and George E. Marcus illustrates elements of the discussion; the status of anthropology as a science or alternatively, as a humanistic endeavor hangs in the balance. This collection of essays, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, wrestles through a proposed new set of rules for a new game, designed for anthropologists with heightened self-consciousness about the institutional power they wield. Most of the participants in this discussion, all-too-aware of the imperialistic origins of their discipline, are looking for a way to walk away from the power-laden game of anthropology. Renato Rosaldo, for example, points out the traces of anxiety in anthropological texts that try to separate the purity of their accounts of others from the contaminating political contexts which secured them (Rosaldo 1986, 88). Some other discussants in *Writing Culture* have chosen to attempt cleaning up the act by taking one step back from (or above?) the fray by writing metaanthropology (Rabinow 1986, 242–243). Paul Rabinow claims that while James Clifford exemplifies the metaanthropological approach to anthropology’s purity problem, Geertz differs from Clifford in that Geertz’s interests still lie more with the ethnographic others he ostensibly describes than with his connections or disconnections to other anthropologists and

their texts (Rabinow 1986, 242). I frankly think the balance of Geertz's concern lies more on the side of describing anthropologists than it does with explicating Balinese, Javanese or Moroccans—or at least more so than Rabinow credits. But Rabinow is right to notice a difference, though, in Clifford's and Geertz's approach to understanding *what anthropologists are*. Aiming to know who anthropologists are (like knowing who ethnographic others are—synchronically) forces a blind spot about knowing what anthropologists are becoming. Rather than take a step back from ethnographic practice, Geertz steps into it with both feet. Anthropologists are, for Geertz, nothing more definitive than what individual and tainted anthropologists do and what they accomplish through describable and institutionally supported means, however imperfect, non-uniform, or morally embarrassing those means might be.

The point I think Geertz would want to make about these sorts of disciplinary blemishes, is not to find a really pure account to put forward as a model, but to accept the inevitable contamination of ethnographic descriptions by dubious institutional power arrangements along with the responsibilities that those arrangements entail. In Geertz's view, anthropologists may undertake consciousness-raising about what others before themselves have done, but they will not raise their own consciousnesses about what they themselves are doing; some later critic coming later in the conversation will have to do that for them. Every "authorizing" inevitably commits the sins of totalizing pretenses that others will need to make apparent. Even a revised ethnography that attempts to portray ethnographic practice as an open-ended dialogue between the ethnographer and those she studies cannot evade the responsibility that the author must ultimately assume for the text she finally produces; as Stephen Tyler, another *Writing Culture* contributor points out, "even as [ethnographers] think to have returned to 'oral performance' or 'dialogue,' in order that the native have a place in the text, they exercise total control over her discourse and steal the only thing she has left—her voice" (Tyler 1986, 128). How any person, having been *there* could do anything else while standing *here* appears to be the problem. Cultural anthropologists as "ethicists" of others inevitably create authored representations, at best aspiring to a scientific ideal of truth. There are no metavocabularies for justifying a particular description, but there are tainted and responsible vocabularies, better and worse, for explaining some field experience in particular to someone in particular—ways that more or less succeed in communicating. Geertz pokes fun at suffering fieldworker after suffering fieldworker insofar as they try to earn the right to describe the meaning world of another: their buttock boils, genital-grasping bear-hugs, and hassles with the "uncooperative," if substantially decimated, natives serve as grist for

his mill, not because these anthropologists ought not try to interpret others, but only when their pretenses to suffering aim to purify their accounts.

At first glance, *Works and Lives* seems to be heavy on the works of Geertz's chosen ethnographers and less interested in their lives. At times the book is, for my taste, biography-deficient and "text" heavy.² Geertz anticipates this charge in his preface and claims that the emphasis comes with no ideological intent attached. That he happens to rely nearly solely on a given author's texts to talk about his or her life (the one exception I notice is a few bits of testimony about Malinowski's personality from his students and friends on page 80) is not meant to imply an acceptance of the dogma that texts are the only permissible places to look to understand authors. Maybe everything we need for a particular purpose will be in a text; but maybe not—erasures, omissions, deformations, and blind spots happen. But granted for a moment that I accept Geertz's lack of ideological belief on his own terms, why does his practice still disturb me? If he doesn't *believe* that texts are the only proper materials for critics to examine, then why does he act *as if* he does? I worry that customs and prejudices Geertz does not in fact accept still influence his critical practice—that by not resisting those influences Geertz reinforces their institutional power. A writer as strong and institutionally secure as Geertz could afford to resist them. If there is nothing particularly wrong with looking at the personal and private elements of anthropologist's lives, if the particularities of their persons make important differences to the way they practice anthropology or the credence we give their accounts, then why the avoidance? I don't mean to insist on a biographically reductive account; I merely mean to suggest that accounts others give about an anthropologist's life and works, accounts that look at what those anthropologists *did*, matter as much as what those anthropologists *said* about themselves in their own works. Neither approach to understanding an author is the interpretation of interpretations; both types of accounts can be useful depending on the sort of question we ask of a particular text at a particular moment (Stout 1982). To be fair, Geertz still manages to wring an amazing amount of autobiography from his choice of anthropological texts; *Tristes Tropiques*, for example, tells at least as much about the circumstances, fears, and attitudes of Levi-Strauss in the 1940s, his love-hate relation to "Western Civilization," as it does about indigenous Brazilians. But on second glance at Geertz's title, the "lives" part of *Works and Lives* plays off a fundamental ambiguity of the book. One of the integral issues of the book,

2. See David Bromwich, "Some Uses of Biography" from *A Choice of Inheritance* (1989) for a discussion of these issues that influences my own.

as indicated by the sub-title of the last chapter, “Whose Life Is It Anyway?,” is precisely “With whose lives do ethnographers reckon: the culture studied, the anthropologist’s life, or inevitably both?”. For better or worse, Geertz maintains, the lives of ethnographic others **and** ethnographers are inseparable from the social institutions and structures which represent and sustain them.

Geertz, Clifford, Marcus and company all show that the structure of the game ethnographers have been playing now raises some anxiety for its players. But rather than create a new game, Geertz elaborates the current state of the rules by describing examples of ethnographic practice. He chooses his exemplars, Levi-Strauss, Evans-Pritchard, Malinowski, and Benedict, not because he necessarily agrees with their approaches, but because he thinks each of his chosen authors earns the status of author by creating significant new possibilities for the field of anthropology to follow. By describing how these four play the game of ethnography, by playing the form and content of their work off each other, he subtly alters and stretches understandings of what the rules are for ethnography, without drastically breaking them. He borrows this approach to ethnography’s problems from Kenneth Burke whose work, he claims, serves as the book’s inspiration: if people are addicted to a set of rules, they have to become sectarian when the rules begin to seem unsatisfactory. Alternatively, people can be addicted to the playing of a game and casuistically redefine the rules while retaining continuity when the rules seem unsatisfactory.³ Finding similarities and differences in what various ethnographers do tells and retells the form ethnography takes, by mapping those differences onto underlying similarities.

Of the four examples he offers, Geertz favors Ruth Benedict’s approach to writing ethnography. Benedict explicitly owns the ways she uses her ethnographic descriptions of others for purposes closer to her home, something the others also do, self-consciously or not, but not nearly so forthrightly. She does not try, per Novalis’ formulation, to make the strange familiar, but rather concentrates upon making the familiar strange. But although Geertz most completely favors Benedict’s style, he admires the elevation that Levi-Strauss promises for the discipline of anthropology, Evans-Pritchard’s honest sense of wonder about the ethnographic other, and Malinowski’s recognition and portrayal of the vastness of the problem encountered in writing ethnography. Further, he finds fault in Benedict’s tendency to twist comedy into the sternest moralism and questions her ultimate efficacy at maintaining her place in the institutional canon.

3. See Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* (1961), 133–134. See also in the same book the term “Casuistic Stretching,” 229–232 and “Sect,” 320–321 in the “Dictionary of Pivotal Terms,” 216–338.

Authority: Claiming it and disowning it

Anthropology's moral dilemma as Geertz and others have laid it out stems from its situation as a discipline with two conflicting sources of authority. On the one hand, fieldwork—experiencing the others and participating in their lives (the ethnographer has Been There)—establishes the anthropologist's "right" to create representations of that other denied to other non-anthropologists. Talal Asad, in my view one of Geertz's most provocative conversation partners and another contributor to *Writing Culture*, describes how fieldwork feels. As he puts it, the anthropologist is pushed beyond the limits of his or her own habits (Geertz 1988, 157). On the other hand, anthropology earns its institutional authority by latching onto the coattails of the positivist sciences, through claims to distanced, objective accounts of another culture wiped clean of subjective moral prejudices. The anthropologist first earns the right to author through passive experience, through being acted upon by the natives—or, if you will—through being charmed, bewitched or impressed by their charisma and their ability to disrupt and command the fieldworker's experience in ways that seem at first uncanny. But Back Here, in the halls of academia, institutions grant respect to those anthropologists who can demonstrate that they possess powerful command of the dominant language by communicating uncanny things to a broad audience—the broader the audience, the more powerful the command. The anthropologist takes the anthropological spectator (the reader) on an imaginative trip through the field, making it seem as if they too had been there, bureaucratically making the experience seem widely available. Fieldwork requires excellence in receptivity; authoring calls for excellence in activity. This conflict of action and passion creates the identity crisis for the anthropological discipline. The anthropologist is called upon both to have been "one of them" and to be "one of us." The ethnographer must be both subject to experience and in command of it—must be an inside outsider (Clifford 1983). The ethnographer undergoes the dilemma of wanting to bewitch others—to take them outside of their own norms and linguistic limits—yet wanting to communicate with them precisely through those norms and inside those limits. All this puts the ethnographer in the untenable position of acting "as translator and critic at one and the same time" (Geertz 1988, 164). A discipline premised both upon the existence of differing sorts of humans and upon the totalizing pretensions that justify a science of human identity can't help but become disoriented at the point where one way of viewing shifts into the other. Differing human meaning worlds to inhabit based upon differing subsets of human fears, needs and

desires demand a description of the *poetic sense* of “necessity” or what has to be as opposed to the empirical sense of what happens to be. Two senses of necessity, close enough to be conflated, compete for dominance: the problem becomes how to simultaneously maintain the moral integrity of “what we/they fear/want”—what *has* to be (*erhabene*) and “what there is”—what *happens* to be. Both ideas dance around the concept of necessity, but neither is necessity in the causal sense in which the sciences traditionally have looked for it. The claim for relation to the sciences still holds, I think, and for reasons that have less to do with what a science is and more to do with the *traditions* of institutional power reserved for the sciences. Ethnography gets its “scientific and moral authority” through a tradition of “redemptive ethnography,” that is, through paternalistic assumptions institutionalized in the sciences (Clifford 1986, 112–113). In this tradition, the particular requires representation in terms of the general; the other is weak and needs to be represented, the other’s essence is its past, now destroyed by historical change and by the very act of giving it textual existence. Science has justified the moral authority to represent that authentic past because textual representation seemed the only way to save that essence within traditionally exclusive intellectual institutions.

Religion as a field of academic study, has traditionally found cultural problems of meaning more central to their endeavors than has anthropology. Problems of meaning are the loose ends yet to be tied off for anthropology—the anomalies not yet brought into focus through normal science. In light of Geertz’s (1973) earlier focus on religion as a particular aspect of culture, these loose ends may well be, for him and for those who work with his concept, more like the main event or the object of study for religion. For Benedict, as Geertz portrays her, the non-traditional *point* of doing anthropology is *to notice problems of meaning*; not others’ problems, but the problems others raise for the anthropologist and audience. As Geertz shows, Benedict’s portrayal of the post-war Japanese, in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, was intended to strike her American audience as a meaning problem, precisely for that audience: as an “enormous something...that, like an Escher drawing, fails to compute” (Geertz 1988, 116–117). To American sensibilities, Benedict’s representation of the Japanese appears “not just distant but off the map”; the Japanese in her treatment emerge as an “enemy that challenges ‘our powers of comprehension’.” Geertz’s Benedict “does not seek to unriddle Japan and the Japanese.”

Geertz’s account shows that Benedict does not imagine ethnography through a translation metaphor. Instead her work textualizes an utterance in an historical and ongoing dialogue between the “defeated” Japanese and

the “victorious” United States in 1946. Her book throws the conversation off balance; she does not intend it to sum up a proper set of relations, but rather to unsettle a newly presumed one. Though Geertz does not explicitly take up a debate over whether anthropology should use translation or dialogue as its orienting metaphor (at least not to the extent that the contributors to *Writing Culture* do), translation does provide Geertz with one way of thinking through the process of anthropological ethnography. For instance, Evans-Pritchard, in Geertz’s view, buys his authority in his reader’s eyes by making persuasive claims to crystal-clear translation by evoking “transparent” visual images. The frame into which Evans-Pritchard puts his natives’ culture for presentation to his Oxbridge fellows asserts itself to be perfectly adequate to the task of representing that culture. In Evans-Pritchard’s world, the struggle to know the strange has been domesticated into a gallery stroll or a slide presentation. Levi-Strauss uses the translation paradigm, but quite differently relies on playing up the reader’s uneasiness concerning the opacities in the translating medium. He lets authorial gestures at sincerity and especially gestures at *regret* do the cleaning-up work that magical wordsmithing does for Evans-Pritchard. But for Malinowski, participant-observation, what Geertz puns as “I-witnessing,” calls for a more dialogical sort of interaction that pulls the fieldworker into a more disrupted relationship with the persons he studies. Malinowski hits the wall when this relatively private dialogical experience has to be made into a written text for public institutional consumption. The “I” that participates must also, somehow, line up with the “I” that observes.

Geertz’s elaboration of the linguistic problems involved in writing “I-witness” accounts is consistent with his focus on problems of meaning. One need not deny the social nature of language to maintain an interest in the experiences that push the language at hand to its limits. To be sure, not every question we might ask about religion needs to focus on limit situations, but thinkers concerned with the intersection of religion and politics will find themselves focused on these sorts of problems more often than not, I predict. It doesn’t take an ethnographer’s expertise to be able to encounter experiences that don’t on their faces make sense, that strike a person or a group of people as uncanny or unassimilable. When we say to ourselves “I can’t interpret this—it does not compute,” we could represent this confusion verbally to others either as “That’s incoherent” or “I am mystified” depending largely on our habitual and trained propensities to do one or the other. To interpret a bit of one language by translating it into another is one kind of ultimately unsolvable problem; to convey something that defies interpretation in the original language being translated from is a different sort of problem—just

as elusive an endeavor but not exactly the same sort of endeavor. The difference, however, may amount to a matter of scale. Instead of comparing two incommensurable gestalts, the problem at hand is a gash that divides one whole into incommensurable parts. The only person who can convey the latter sort of meaning problem in a situation of translation is the native speaker, the one committed to having to find some way to live with the problem, the one being translated. But in this case, not only does the ethnographer have a problem representing the native's point of view; the native has a problem representing it as well.

I have been playing with the pragmatic taboo on "uninterpreted experience" within a translation paradigm for writing about the goods, traditions, and joys of others—ethnography. The way I propose it, "uninterpreted experience" amounts to anomalous experience, not in principle "ineffable," but resistant to easy translation for reasons that might involve lack of skill, lack of resources, political oppression or social repression. A key advantage in using the translation paradigm instead of a dialogue paradigm lies in its emphasis on the *damage* inherent in making a textual product out of the translation process. We are accustomed to acknowledging loss in translation. If we don't notice damage, we might never get around to asking *who suffers the damage* done in translation; we might never wonder which party emerges to the reader as not the same as it was before. The particular point of translation—the intent behind it—is to structure something *strange to* the translator's own language coherently *in* the translator's own language. Because of the obvious moral dilemmas involved in translation and the simultaneous practical need to produce texts to survive as an ethnographer, Geertz cannot take his chosen profession as seriously as any of the practitioners in *Writing Culture*.

But what does "uninterpreted experience" look like in a dialogical model? Suppose for the sake of argument we change the translator-oriented language and describe the process of learning about the goods of others as dialogue, as conversational fieldwork. This paradigm places the emphasis on fieldwork processes rather than the written ethnographic product. Like translation, dialogue pictures an attempt to communicate, but differently from translation, the center of the process moves around from one person to another. The center of a dialogical context lies not with one author or another but somewhere in transit between them. Thinking about ethnography in terms of dialogue rather than translation has its advantages. Asad quotes Walter Benjamin in order to point out the inadequacies of a translation paradigm for understanding ethnographic practice. "The basic error of the translator," Benjamin claims, "is that he preserves the state in which his own language

happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue” (Geertz 1988, 157). Benjamin’s point, I think, is that the translation process ought to be an unsettling experience. Ethnographers, he might say, were he writing about anthropology, owe it to the people they study to take whatever conceptual damages that occur upon themselves. But would such an ethnographer survive institutionally? Benedict takes the “damages” of her work upon herself. Morally, she can well afford to, living in a “conquering” culture while describing the “conquered” one. Her kind of work intentionally “challenges customary opinions and causes those who have been bred to them acute discomfort. It rouses pessimism because it throws old formulae into confusion...” (1950 [1932], 257).⁴ Isn’t this what Asad wants? Geertz expends plenty of energy praising just that quality of Benedict’s work. Yet Geertz intimates that *what he likes most* about Benedict, may in fact have contributed to her marginalization, academically speaking; in Geertz’s view, the jury is still out as to whether the world will or will not even *notice* her attempt to “vex” and unsettle it (Geertz 1988, 128).

Being there while being here

Geertz’s admiration for Benedict makes a controversial aspect of his previous work on religion hard to minimize. Among other things, Geertz claims in his often cited “Religion as a Cultural System” (leaving the famous definition of religion aside for the moment) that all religions *actively* try to resolve logical contradictions of their language encountered in living (and dying). Or to rephrase things, *one* way to take a puzzling statement (i.e. “a twin is a bird” as the Nuer assert) seriously is to presume that it may be *actively* trying to resolve or successfully resolving a conceptual dilemma—i.e. that Nuer *too* can try to do things with words or other symbols, just as English-speakers try to do. If Geertz is right about this, then social context may be necessary but not sufficient to interpret a religious text. It makes some sense to me that the study of religion has to preserve the possibility of encountering meaninglessness at least on the face of things, not in order to call others somehow less than adequate, but in order to call their religious language as active, alive and spiritually useful as our own. People studying another people’s religion (as opposed to some broader section of culture) would need to be sure that their *method* did not in fact obliterate part of what they set out to study. At least I think this is the sort of moderate and humbled functionalism Geertz brings to his work. Placing Geertz’s book in *Writing Culture’s* conversation makes

4. Benedict (1932), quoted by Geertz (1988, 115).

the controversies over method look like war-banner waving, where practitioners of one method try to steal the insignia of lefter-than-thou authority from each other. As far as Geertz is concerned, overstrict adherence to one method may obscure peculiarly religious problems. Problems of meaning, solved, resolved, or unsolved, lie somewhere near the movable center of Geertz's understanding of religion, a view of religious activity at least as old as the meditations in the book of Job.

Such a view of religion might warn religious studies practitioners away from an *either* structuralism *or* functionalism dilemma. For structuralists, Geertz explains, the holistic picture of the parts, artfully arranged into meticulously balanced symmetries, determines the meaning of any given part of the picture, should that meaning be unclear. The structuralist arranges parts into a whole by ripping them apart out of a diachronic sequence, then laying the parts, metonymically, alongside each other (Geertz 1988, 45). Because the whole has structural coherence, the structuralist borrows the authority of that compulsion to coherence synchronically to infer which deeper parts determine the shallower ones in the relations of things and events laid alongside each other. The elegance and the eloquence of one of Levi-Strauss's holistic constructions lends it its authority; by piecing together something formally elegant, Levi-Strauss infers the power of the structure and the authority of depth removed from historical circumstances. In effect, his aesthetic (and synchronic) appeal lends weight to a reductive and ahistorical causal account of how things fit together inside a culture, just the device *needed* by someone who feels hidden from view by effective history. Structuralists privilege and enforce *the coherence factor of the whole over and against the part* when the problem of meaning seems to be that the two conflict (Geertz 1988, 45). Functionalism, on the other hand, privileges *the construction of the whole from the part*, according to Clifford, in a synecdochic move which is also a synchronic one (Clifford 1983, 125). The analysis of the smooth functioning of the part dictates the structure of the whole whenever the two might seem to be in conflict. Each approach holds an element still while manipulating another element relative to that stillness.⁵

For Geertz, the value of the structuralist program lay in the elevation it promised within academic institutions. It promised to bring together the rather inarticulate, but persistently felt value of the humanistic arts struggling to emerge alongside the existing institutional prestige of the sciences

5. See Hayden White (1987), "Foucault's Discourse: The Historiography of Anti-Humanism," for a discussion of rhetorical tropes that influence my own.

and seduced folks within the academy in ways that crossed disciplinary borders and consequently brought anthropologists the admiring glances which had heretofore eluded them. Whether the structuralist program fulfilled that promise is a question separable from the institutional changes and redrawn boundaries it occasioned. The promise of a “lexicon” of terms that might possibly marry arts and sciences productively moved anthropology from the periphery of things to somewhere near the center according to Geertz and thus made its position within the academy more secure. Geertz claims that it was less the personal charisma of Levi-Strauss or the self-evident correctness of the structuralist program and more the imaginary space he cleared within existing institutions that charmed his many admirers.⁶

The problem Levi-Strauss did not solve remains what I want to call the part-whole problem. Whether the whole is essentially derived from the functioning part or as Levi-Strauss would have had it, the part is essentially derived from the coherence of the whole, the relation is still one of some aspect reducible or translatable into something else, hence analogous to the translation paradigm that annoys Asad. As an alternative, Asad advocates a “contestation” metaphor. At first blush, this looks like a variant on a dialogic view of what anthropologists do. Dialogue seems to solve the part-whole problem, by seeing it instead as a part-part interaction taking place over time. But solving the “translation” problem still leaves Asad with a task of materializing the dialogue into some institutionally acceptable form.

By Asad’s criteria for responsibility, responsible criticism “must always be addressed to someone who can contest it” (Asad 1986, 156). By and large, thinks Asad, accounts in ethnographic texts fail this test for responsibility. But contesting requires some commonality to which the contest can be relative; if translation cannot be responsible without the native’s critique, neither can the critique—the contest—be responsible without mutually accepted ground rules, common definitions, and overlapping concerns. So again, who can contest an ethnographic account? Or, who can translate? In principle, Asad agrees that contestability calls for contestants that use “the same language, belong to the same academic profession, live in the same society” (Asad 1986, 156). This insight suggests that the difference between contesting what someone says and feeling obliged to translate what someone says involves determining whether we see ourselves as relatively the same or relatively different. Geertz and Asad would agree that part of being responsible to a community

6. See Talal Asad (1986, 163), “The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology,” who argues that it is not so much the “personal authority of the ethnographer, but the social authority of his ethnography” that wields influence.

is contesting its use of its language where harmony is not felt, anthropological and other academic communities included. On this Geertz and Asad would agree. Why else would Geertz (1988, 148) regard the liminal crisis of anthropology (“who is now to be persuaded? Africanists or Africans? Americanists or American Indians? Japanologists or Japanese? And of what: Factual accuracy? Theoretical sweep? Imaginative grasp? Moral depth?”) as an *opportunity* for something new to emerge instead of a catastrophe? Geertz’s book raises complicated questions of identity that politically-motivated anthropologists will need to confront in the future. Specifically, anthropologists will need to acknowledge that institutionally speaking they live (or they die) by producing texts. Not only politics “in the field,” but also politics in the hall will need to be made explicit. Rabinow pointedly admonishes:

Asking whether longer, dispersive, multi-authored texts would yield tenure might seem petty. But those are the dimensions of power relations to which Nietzsche exhorted us to be scrupulously attentive....The taboo against specifying them is much greater than the strictures against denouncing colonialism...
(Rabinow 1986, 253)

The idea that all of us, academicians included, observe taboos is Benedictine self-nativising made explicit. Geertz leaves his self-nativising implicit in his text—i.e. editors who try to ward off evil spirits (Geertz 1988, 77), actors in the political and global economy wearing masks on a stage (Geertz 1988, 133). But to acknowledge our own taboos calls for placing them in jeopardy; only then could there be open contest over which taboos ought to be the *really important* ones to hang on to and which ones only cloud up the *real* issues.

Anthropologists will need to face the uncomfortable problem of how to handle their own taboos, and to determine whether institutional existence can endure without them. Geertz concedes that “the world has its compartments still” (alluding to the first class train compartment that separated Levi-Strauss from the English-colonized Indians on whom he speculated and with whom he sympathized. But he thinks that although traditionally an ethnographic representation could not be contested by the people about whom it was written, increasingly it can be and is. Geertz can afford to worry less about the sins of translation and text-production because he views his professional community as one which more and more often *includes* participants that it once excluded in order to feel more secure about describing them. Because his community includes, because one of its texts responds to another in ongoing textualized dialogue, because it does not exempt any of its members from criticism, it therefore takes responsibility for its acts—it cleans up its own mess. If his professional community survives (not a forgone conclusion

for him) it will be because it can find a balance between keeping its moral house straightened up while still wielding influence within the academy. This recommendation applies as easily to moral philosophers who don't think that influence comes from divine favor. If influence is a necessary part of social interaction, but something less than divinely bestowed then we need to know how it works, use it and take some sort of moral responsibility for using it.

Examining influence leads to an important aspect of Geertz's book, to a concept he borrowed from Kenneth Burke: aesthetic appeal as social therapy. The point of *Being There*, for ethnologists or religious philosophers, is to work at understanding the joys of "holding lanterns hidden under one's top-jacket" as James did. The point of *Being Here* is using aesthetic appeal to elicit acceptance of one's ideas that touch upon those of others. Art appeals through coherence. But as Asad rightly points out, a lie can be coherent; coherence does not depend upon accuracy for its compelling qualities. Nor, Asad warns, does coherence mean "defensible" or "justified." Both Geertz and Burke could accept those terms. Aesthetic presentation wields persuasive power in discursive relationships. Asad talks about the compulsion to coherence which may easily make use of "lies, half-truths, logical trickery" when need be. He is not the first to notice that cosmetic pictures of the world serve to repress bits of communication not allowed to surface out of fear of all it would disrupt. The novelist and essayist James Baldwin, for instance, provides a devastating example in a letter to his nephew about the compulsively coherent world of white people. "Try to imagine," he urges him,

how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shining and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality. Well, the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations." (Baldwin 20)

Tyler suggests that "post-modern ethnography is a return to the idea of aesthetic integration as therapy once captured in the sense of Proto-Indo-European **ar*- ("way of being," "orderly and harmonious arrangement of the parts of a whole"), from which have come English "art," "rite," and "ritual...." For good or ill, an art, rite or ritual "provokes a rupture with the commonsense world and evokes an aesthetic integration whose therapeutic effect is worked out in the restoration of the commonsense world," Tyler notes (1986, 134). But aesthetic integration in itself does not preclude coercion as a means of restoring meaning. Aesthetic activity can exist along a spectrum ranging from free play to murderous sacrifice. Clifford warns that finite possibilities for institutional practices place severe limits on the theoretical playfulness

possible in interpretation. For Clifford, there is no “free play” (Clifford 1986, 110). He claims that history eliminates the possibility for free play; free play exists only in theory. In practice, he maintains, we have available only canonical and emergent ways of interpreting meaning (Clifford 1986, 110). But maybe Clifford goes too far. Along with the possibility for aesthetic integration as social therapy, Geertz inherits comedy as a possible check on the more malign possibilities of aesthetic integration from Burke.

Geertz, quite self-consciously not above the rhetorical fray, woos his own reader by creating a sense of collusion with him in playful writing. Unlike Evans-Pritchard, who prefaces his statements with “of course” and dares you to disagree with the power behind his assumptions, Geertz differentiates himself from that style by sending it up: he represents Evans-Pritchard seeking the praiseworthy end of “the disenstrangement of apparently bizarre...ideas, feelings, practices, values, and so on....” through the pretentious means of an “equanimous ‘of course’ tone in which *one* talks, if *one* is who *one* is, about *one’s* own values, practices, feelings, and the like” (Geertz 1988, 69, my emphasis). Geertz’s critique always keeps the goods he shares with Evans-Pritchard in full view. In this way, he leaves space to take up Evans-Pritchard’s broader aspirations while abandoning his particular means. His joke is still a kind of daring the reader to disagree, but the levity of his style leaves both Evans-Pritchard and the reader, should she care to differ, with some residual dignity, though perhaps looking a little deficient in sense of humor. For Geertz, it’s not religion per se that leads to faction, but religion’s purity-talk which has a tendency to turn violent and coercive. Geertz actively uses humor against purity-talk. Not every contest is a war; some contests are play. In some contests the stakes are kept high enough to be captivating, but low enough to avoid various sorts of injury or fatality, since serious injury and fatality are still commonly held by most of us to be less than humorous.

Translation from ethnography to religious studies

Anthropology’s either/or debate over authority and method could and should be the point of departure for studying religious problems. In part, I’ve tried to highlight Geertz’s self-conscious connection to a particular neglected tradition of religious philosophy traceable at least from William James, through Santayana and Kenneth Burke and a strand of ethnography/culture criticism picked up by Benedict and followed through by Geertz and Rosaldo. But also in part, I have described Geertz’s book as situated in the details of a larger institutionalized conversation that includes the contributors to *Writing Culture*. A set of conceptual options open to religious philosophy was dropped

by religious ethicists in favor of an exclusively theistic (or atheistic) religious ethics and was picked up by cultural anthropologists, less preoccupied with the existence or non-existence of God, instead. What we lost was a non-theological way to retain a traditionally theocentric trait—its decentering move. The traditional virtue of humility and some of the practices which inculcate it *still make sense* for reasons that hold outside theistic belief systems. These reasons are compatible with and adaptable to a more humble brand of humanism that *aspires* toward inclusion without always having the practical conceptual means immediately at hand to accomplish it. Regaining this theological vestige of humility would allow us to hold something not *yet* achievable as yet still desirable. The humility needed to tolerate playfulness and ambiguity in words and less-than-perfect productions from others and ourselves could bridge gaps without filling them in; it would allow language users to aim toward future continuities and use partial ones without denying present discontinuities.

Ultimately, who do religious practices seen as symbolic acts aim to influence? The “other”? We can *try* to persuade the other, but failing at that we can only change ourselves (if we disavow coercion, which when perfected becomes totalitarianism.) As Geertz, Benedict, Swift, Aesop and some other comic satirists know, our encounters with the other can sometimes deal more fruitfully with our own decisions about “us” than with our categorizing of “them” since “they” have a tricky habit of being as vital and changeable as “we” are. Sometimes “we” turn out to be “them.” Calling no “native” assertion meaningless can be one sort of humility engendering activity. It could alternate and contribute to “self-nativising.” These alternating practices could shore up hope for approaching inclusive visions of the world in which we actually live. Geertz puts it this way: doing anthropological fieldwork serves “to open (a bit) the consciousness of one group of people to (something of) the life-form of another, and in that way to (something of) their own.” To write anthropological texts, on the other hand, is ritually “to convey in words ‘what it is like’ to be somewhere specific in the lifeline of the world: *Here*, as Pascal famously said, rather than *There*; *Now* rather than *Then*.” Fortunately, people who study religion don’t have to profess either one method or another, since they exemplify the field that studies meaning problems and various and varying potential orientations to cope with them that might yet work. And who can tell, some of those orientations may turn out to be surprising gifts from others; some may turn out to be possible creations yet-to-be of human imaginations.

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Evolution and Existentialism

SHARON M. KAYE

John Carroll University

skaye@jcu.edu

ABSTRACT

Many philosophers embrace both evolution and existentialism as though these two views provide a mutually supportive foundation for atheism. The story goes that evolution tells us life is meaningless while existentialism tells us what to do about it. In this article, I aim to debunk this story. I begin by explaining the existentialist quest for the meaning of life. Then I explain why it is inconsistent with the principles of evolution. In the end, I argue that the quest for the meaning of life should be abandoned. It is a misleading project that science renders unnecessary. Looked at in this light, existentialism appears as a stripped down version of religion, vainly clinging to dramatic fantasies about human life. Evolution has had a deep and valuable impact upon philosophy. It will not have completed its work, however, until it stamps out existentialism and its atavistic angst once and for all.

Keywords

evolution, existentialism, meaning of life

It is 1842. Two brilliant men sit barricaded from the world in their book-filled studies. They are feverishly penciling notes for works that will change the future of Western Civilization. One of the men is Charles Darwin (1809–1882). He is developing the ideas that have come to be known as evolution.¹ The other man, just across the North Sea, is Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). He is developing the ideas that have come to be known as existentialism.²

1. In May 1842, Darwin wrote a “pencil sketch” of the theory he would eventually publish in *On the Origin of the Species*. See Desmond and Moore 1991, 292.
2. “In 1842, Kierkegaard was sketching a “new practical underpinning for an older and inherited way of life” (MacIntyre 1984, 43).

Both men were pressured by their fathers to enter the clergy and earn a respectable living preaching protestant Christianity. Both men were drawn guiltily away from this fate by an inner genius requiring that they publish ideas that would ultimately undermine religion. Both men tried and failed to be good Christians. Their respective ideas, evolution and existentialism, have for the last century and a half done more than any other ideas to erode belief in God.

There are, of course, Christian evolutionists just as there are Christian existentialists. That these marriages are less than amicable is evident in the plethora of bad arguments attempting in vain to defend them. I am not interested in these unhappy marriages. In this article I would like to explore another unhappy marriage, that between evolution and existentialism. I do not wish to defend the marriage but rather to recommend a speedy and decisive divorce.

While there are some striking similarities between the lives and careers of Darwin and Kierkegaard, the difference between the two men is profound and irreconcilable: Darwin is a scientist; Kierkegaard, a poet. While Darwin struggles to *explain* the world, Kierkegaard struggles to *express his emotional reaction* to it. Like so many third parties caught up in a marital dispute, I cannot hide my bias. I feel Darwin has done a great service to humanity by advancing the state of our knowledge and that Kierkegaard has done us a great disservice by unleashing a secular substitute for the drama of religion.

Atheism is, of course, common among philosophers. Recently, I've begun to notice the extent to which my atheist colleagues base their irreligion on a combined foundation of evolution and existentialism.³ They take it for granted that the two ideas are consistent and even mutually supportive, suggesting that any truly enlightened world view will incorporate both. Why? Because evolution tells us that life is meaningless and existentialism tells us what to do about it. At any rate, this is how the story goes, the story I wish to debunk.

Darwin has had a profound impact upon the field of philosophy. Perhaps the single most important philosopher working today is Daniel Dennett, who has devoted his career to showing how a proper understanding of evolution dissolves even the most intractable of the traditional problems of philosophy,

3. Robert Solomon, for example, who was perhaps the most visible American existentialist philosopher of the last two decades, casually combines evolution and existentialism in "Existentialism, Emotions, and the Cultural Limits of Rationality" (1992, 619). William Irwin seamlessly intertwines the two in *Existential Answers*, forthcoming.

such as the nature of “the soul.”⁴ Yet, even Dennett is too easy on existentialism. While not an existentialist himself, he validates its heart-wrenching search for the meaning of life when he writes “This is the defining theme of existentialism in its various species: the only meaning there can be is the meaning you (somehow) create for yourself... Darwinism does have some demystification to offer in its account of the process of meaning creation... *importance itself*, like everything else that we treasure, gradually evolves from nothingness” (Dennett 1995, 184).

What on earth does it mean to say importance “evolves from nothingness” if not simply that people make it up? My thesis is that the whole idea of “the meaning of life” is made up and that the notorious “search for the meaning of life” is nothing but a vestige of our enslavement to religion. While religion had a perfectly understandable role to play in the evolution of human culture, there is no denying that it is a racket. The clever purveyors of religion convinced us that we had a God-shaped hole in our hearts in order to sell us the very God that would fill it. Existentialists have rejected that God while retaining the belief that they have a God-shaped hole. They interpret this God-shaped hole as an intrinsic need to find the meaning in life, and they give it the secular name “existential angst.” I argue, however, that this supposed need is not intrinsic at all. It was artificially planted in us by the religious culture in which we are immersed and have been immersed for several thousand of years.

Are we prepared at last to evolve beyond religion? Yes, let’s already! And one thing is for certain: If we are going to reject God we must also reject the God-shaped hole. This means rejecting existentialism.

This article is divided into three parts. In the first part, I explain the existentialist quest for the meaning of life. In the second part, I demonstrate that this quest is inconsistent with the principles of evolution. In the third part, I argue that the quest for the meaning of life should be abandoned. I conclude that, while evolution has had a deep and valuable impact upon philosophy, it will not have completed its work until it stamps out existentialism and its atavistic angst once and for all.

The existentialist quest for the meaning of life

First of all, it should be noted that existentialism is the single most popular philosophy among lay persons in the United States. Most Americans never studied philosophy and many of those who did never bothered to adopt a

4. Dennett’s latest book is *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2007).

philosophy for themselves. Among those who have, however, existentialism is the number one choice. On the street, you never hear about alethic realism or epistemological representationalism—two views very popular among professional philosophers—but you do hear about existentialism. Existentialism is regularly celebrated in novels,⁵ movies,⁶ and even on TV.⁷ There is no doubt that it is saying something that resonates with a great many people in our culture.

What does existentialism say? Like all popular ideas, existentialism is not easily pinned down. Nevertheless, the first and most eminent American spokesman of this philosophy, namely, William Barrett captured its core. In a 1959 article for the *Saturday Evening Post* called “What is Existentialism?” Barrett writes:

If the modern era began with the way of thinking launched by Descartes, then we must, to save ourselves, recast our fundamental way of thinking. The world Descartes portrays—of material objects stripped of all qualities, extended in mathematical space of three dimensions, and with only quantitative and measurable properties—is not the world in which we live as human beings, but a high-level abstraction from the world that surrounds and involves us, exalts or enchants or terrifies us. We live in the human world, not in the world of science. And it is from the context of this human world that all the abstractions of science ultimately derive their meaning.⁸

Barrett sets up a diametrical opposition between the “world of science” and the “human world,” which produces “meaning” and cannot be understood in scientific terms.⁹

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5. In fact, many existentialist philosophers wrote novels. For example, Albert Camus wrote *The Stranger*, one of the most famous novels of the twentieth century.
 6. The independent film *Waking Life* (Richard Linklater 2001) explicitly features existentialist philosopher Robert Solomon; the mainstream movie *I Heart Huckabees* (David Russell, 2004) is tagged as an “existentialist comedy”; and people regularly find and write about existentialist themes in Academy Award-winning blockbusters such as *Forest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis 1994).
 7. Blackwell and Opencourt each sponsor a philosophy and popular culture series featuring volumes dedicated to exploring philosophical themes in popular TV shows, such as *The Simpsons*, *Buffy the Vampire-Slayer*, *The Sopranos*, and *Lost*. The essays in these volumes regularly demonstrate how these shows exemplify existentialism.
 8. William Barrett, “What Is Existentialism?” *Saturday Evening Post* (November 21, 1959), 129. William Barrett taught philosophy at New York University. His book, *Irrational Man*, which is a definitive study of existentialist philosophy for the general reader, is now a classic.
 9. Does this sound familiar? Many of today’s creationists are happy to grant that evolution can explain everything except our species. See, for example, Kenneth Poppe, *Exposing*

Why can't the human world be understood scientifically? Because the human world "exalts or enchants or terrifies us" and these emotions are beyond the reach of science. In Barrett's view then, existentialism is a necessary concomitant to science. Let science be the abstract lens through which we explain the world; let existentialism be the concrete feelings through which we experience it.

Existentialists have patented one particular feeling that they deem to be the quintessential human response to the world. In a work produced during his year of stewing in his study, Kierkegaard christened it "the concept of anxiety" (Kosch 2006, 124). It is also known as "dread" or "existential angst" and it is the experience of our freedom and responsibility. When human beings face a choice there is nothing within us to determine our action and as a result we are to blame for it. Because we face choices constantly throughout our lives and because we become who we are through these choices, we are to blame for who we are.

Existential angst is a direct consequence of removing God from the system. With no creator in the picture to validate us, all responsibility falls upon ourselves. As Barrett put it, we must "save ourselves." We are each the little god of our own lives. Not only must we judge what we do as good or bad, we must decide what *constitutes* good and bad. Even if our culture dictates values, it is up to us to accept or reject these values, thereby leaving us incredibly alone and directionless. Any alliance we may forge or path we may take is utterly arbitrary in the vast sea of possibility confronting us. Hence life itself is absurd and meaningless.¹⁰

I submit that astute individuals will be very suspicious of any view claiming that once you remove God from the picture life becomes absurd. This, of course, is precisely what the proponents of religion want us to believe—not that God and the whole framework he comes with is absurd, no no!—but rather, that life itself is absurd once you take God away. In this single statement, which is its driving force, existentialism reveals its affinity to religion. Existentialism is commonly thought of as the thinking man's alternative to religion. By cultivating emotional distress at the prospect of losing God, however, existentialism shows its true colors as a surrogate religion.

Darwinism's Weakest Link: Why Evolution Can't Explain Human Existence (2008).

10. While acknowledging the difficulty of defining existentialism, Mark Tanner (2008, 10) proposes "the basic principle of the indeterminacy of all that exists" as the common denominator of existentialist thought.

Nor has the conviction that existentialism is a requisite concomitant of science died out in the half century since Barrett's exposition. In a recent article, philosopher Barbara Forrest gives the same thesis a specifically evolutionary spin. She writes,

What science shows us about ourselves has seriously undermined—or at least forced changes in—the belief that human existence is either naturally or divinely endowed with predefined meaning. Humans must achieve meaning in the sense enunciated by various existentialist thinkers, and evolution has endowed us with the capacities essential for this achievement. (Kosch 2006, 124)

This passage reveals the hidden assumption that leads philosophers to the conclusion that they need existentialism to complement their belief in evolution. The assumption is that the need for meaning is an innate human trait just like the need for food and water.

If this were true, then it would make sense for us all to embrace a doctrine that meets the need. In that case, whether one embraced Christianity or existentialism wouldn't make much difference to me, much as it makes no difference to me whether you meet your nutritional needs by eating beans and rice or meat and potatoes.

On what grounds do existentialists prove that human beings have an innate need for meaning? On the grounds that we feel this need, as a concrete emotion, the moment God is taken away from us. But this is not proof of innate need at all! On the contrary, it shows only why religion has been so trenchantly effective for so long. It does not just instill belief in God; it instills the need to believe in God. This way, anyone who manages to eject the belief will still have the need and will therefore be more likely to come crawling back.

Apparently, existentialists take the need for meaning as a biological endowment.¹¹ Why else would they accept it as inevitable? They themselves insist that human beings are free to accept or reject all cultural endowments. Yet, according to them, we are stuck with the need for meaning. Hence it must be biological. I suspect that existentialists would dispute this charge if confronted with it.¹² In so doing, however, they only seal their own doom. Because, if

11. Forrest suggests that the need for meaning evolved in us just like any other adaptation when she writes, "When human beings began to wonder whether we ourselves serve a purpose—the ability to wonder about this having been made possible by the ability to examine our lives representatively through language—the search for meaning in the higher sense began" (2000, 864).

12. Forrest seems somewhat conscious of the problem when she writes, "I also argue that meaning in the higher sense is an existential artifact, constructed out of capabilities we possess by virtue of the particular evolutionary path we have traveled" (2000, 863). By

the need for meaning is a cultural endowment, and human beings have the ability to accept or reject all cultural endowments, then we should reject the need for meaning and thereby avoid the existential angst in the first place.

My position is that the need for meaning is just as much of a cultural endowment as is the belief in God. In saying we should reject them both, I'm not saying this is easy. It took me years to undo my own childhood belief in God. There was a time when I would have sworn that I felt the presence of God deep in my bones. Once I'd let go of that, I naturally turned to existentialism, because it acknowledged the painful emptiness I felt without God. There was a time when I would have sworn that I felt the need for meaning deep in my bones. I've only just recently let go of that. You can't just decide over night that you're not going to experience a certain emotion anymore. Like someone with a debilitating fear of snakes, however, you can decide that you're going to work on it, and you can, in time, make it go away.

Why the existentialist quest for meaning is inconsistent with evolution

So far I have explained that existentialism is built on the experience of existential angst caused by the realization that life is meaningless without God. I have argued that existentialists illegitimately take their angst to be an inescapable human trait when it is more reasonable to suppose that it is a cultural construct that can and should be overcome.

Perhaps the existentialist will respond that, even if existential angst is a cultural construct, it is not one we should try to overcome, because to do so would be to purge a distinctively human response to the world which is precious in its own right. They might point out that a lot of great art and great literature is inspired by existential angst. They might pity me for purging my existential angst, convinced that I've lost a rich dimension of uniquely human emotion.

My first response to this objection is that, I don't need to experience existential angst in order to appreciate the art inspired by it any more than I need to experience insanity in order to appreciate van Gogh's paintings. Consider the fact that poster prints of van Gogh's paintings continue year after year to be among the very top selling poster prints in popular culture.¹³ It is a well known fact that van Gogh was mentally ill, and his illness is evident in his work (Callow 1990, 264ff.). This does not imply, however, that the myriad

calling it a "constructed artifact," she suggests that it is a product of culture but by calling it a "capability resulting from our evolutionary path," she suggests it is biological.

13. According to "Art's Not Dead: Be Unique," http://www.artsnotdead.com/Vincent-van-Gogh-art-print-poster-Cornfield-Lark-p/vangogh_0028.htm

of college students and house decorators who buy prints of his paintings are also secretly insane. It is more likely that they are fascinated by the unique perspective of someone very different from themselves.¹⁴ Likewise, I find it fascinating that existentialists invented a secular surrogate to religion when it was announced that God is dead and I continue to appreciate existentialist art and literature as an expression of this historical development. I'm probably not going to get all suicidal about it the way existentialists do. But actually, that's probably a good thing.

My second response to the claim that we should retain existentialism as a welcome complement to evolution is to say that here existentialists remind me of my Catholic students when they tell me that, as long as evolution doesn't prove God doesn't exist, we should believe in both because it makes for a more satisfying story. My response to my students is always as follows. The central thesis of evolution is that every living thing is the product of natural selection by random mutation. If God is pulling strings from behind the scenes, then it's not natural selection by random mutation. You can't claim to be committed to evolution if you reject, or even restrict, its central thesis.

Existentialists, just like my Catholic students, are in no position to maintain their supposed commitment to natural selection by random mutation. Recall that existentialism is a response to the world characterized by profound anxiety caused by the disappearance of God. The reason God's disappearance is so upsetting is because it means we must each become our own gods, choosing what we will become amidst limitless possibility. In advancing this conception of choice, existentialists endorse the medieval Catholic notion that human beings have free will. Evolution, in contrast, tells us that human behavior is a function of genetic predispositions and environmental influence. The choices we make are fully explicable in terms of their antecedent conditions. This deterministic account of human behavior leads to a very reduced conception of human responsibility. We are responsible for what we do only in the same way that a volcano is responsible for what it does. Our behavior is more modifiable than the behavior of a volcano; nevertheless, we are no more to blame for what we become than are volcanoes to blame for becoming mountains.¹⁵

14. It is, of course, a matter of philosophical dispute exactly what enables individuals to appreciate works of art. See Richard Eldridge, *Philosophy of Art* (2003), chapter seven. Suffice it to say that the theory that one must oneself suffer what artists suffer in order to appreciate their work is just one of a number of (in my view more plausible) theories.

15. For an eloquent exposition of the account of human choice consistent with evolution, see Derk Pereboom, *Living without Free Will* (2006).

Existentialists need to reject this determinism and hold onto the thesis of free will in order to support the much more weighty conception of human responsibility that generates existential angst. This conception of responsibility depends not only on the thesis that human beings have free will, but also on the thesis that we have an essence. That existentialists presuppose human beings have an essence is evident in the Jean-Paul Sartre's classic exposition of existentialism. Sartre writes:

When we think of God as the creator, we are thinking of him, most of the time, as a supernal artisan. ... Thus each individual man is the realisation of a certain conception which dwells in the divine understanding... Man possesses a human nature; that "human nature," which is the conception of human being, is found in every man; which means that each man is a particular example of a universal conception.... [So, on the theistic view,] the essence of man precedes that historic existence which we confront in experience.

Atheistic existentialism, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man... (Sartre 1989, 290)

In this passage we see once again very clearly existentialism's affinity to religion. Religion tells us that God created the human essence; existentialism, making humans into little gods, tells us that we create the human essence.

On a superficial reading, this reversal would seem to be consistent with evolution because evolution defines species as provisional categories that come into existence and go out of existence, changing constantly in response to conditions.

Evolution also holds, however, that these changes in species are the direct result of natural selection by random mutation. And existentialists cannot concede that human nature is a provisional category resulting from random mutation. If they did, they would forfeit the hyperbolic sense of responsibility they need in order to generate their all-important existential angst. The existentialist commitment to a non-random conception of human essence is evident as Sartre continues. He writes:

If, moreover, existence precedes essence and we will to exist at the same time as we fashion our image, that image is valid for all and for the entire epoch in which we find ourselves. Our responsibility is thus much greater than we had supposed, for it concerns mankind as a whole. If...I decide to marry and to have children, even though this decision proceeds simply from my situation, from my passion or my desire, I am thereby committing not only myself, but humanity as a whole, to the practice of monogamy. I am thus responsible for

myself and for all men, and I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him to be. In fashioning myself I fashion man.

Existentialists reject the religious doctrine that essence precedes existence only to replace it by the doctrine that existence precedes essence. Regardless of which comes first, we are still stuck with an essence, which flies in the face of evolutionary theory.

We see Forrest struggling with this contradiction when she writes:

If evolution is the source of intentionality, and conscious intentionality is the matrix of the possibility of existential meaning, then existence really does precede essence, as Sartre asserted—if we define essence as the kind of conscious intentionality that has evolved in human beings and accept the temporality and mutability—the *historicality*—of this kind of essence. (2000, 877)

Forrest is trying to save the notion of a human essence while at the same time rendering it temporal, mutable, and historical. Even supposing that we could stretch the concept of essence to make it temporal, mutable, and historical, the crucial question remains: is this “human essence” ultimately attributable to random mutation or not?

If “human essence” is attributable to random mutation, then Forrest preserves her commitment to evolution while forfeiting the existentialist conception of responsibility, because we cannot be blamed for what we become if what we become is traceable to random mutation. If, on the other hand, “human essence” is not attributable to random mutation, then Forrest preserves her commitment to the existentialist conception of responsibility, while forfeiting evolution. Like my Catholic students, she has smuggled in a god-like factor behind the scenes. You just can’t have both the existentialist conception of responsibility and natural selection by random mutation.

Why the quest for the meaning of life should be abandoned

As I mentioned, my atheist colleagues think evolution and existentialism are the perfect pair because the first tells us life is meaningless while the second tells us what to do about it. But evolution does not tell us that life is meaningless. It doesn’t have anything whatsoever to say about life’s meaning or lack of meaning.

You might be tempted to reply that any account of reality that does not supply meaning is by default meaningless. Just as a dog that fails to have sight is blind, evolution, in failing to provide a source of meaning implies that there is none.

I dispute this reply, however, on the grounds that the analogy does not hold. A dog is the kind of thing that must either have sight or lack sight, or

perhaps some degree of sight in between. A coffee cup, in contrast, is not the kind of thing that can have or lack sight—in any degree. It would be absurd to assert that your coffee cup was blind simply because it cannot see. Your coffee cup is neither blind nor not-blind because it is not in the category of things to which this description applies.

Poets love to say non-sensical things like “The coffee cup is blind.” This may be fine for poetry, whatever that may be worth. But it is a logical error otherwise. Philosophers call the error a “category mistake.”¹⁶ It is a fairly common error and accounts for all manner of mischief in philosophical theory.

The theory of evolution is all about life. It aims to be an exhaustive account of this wondrous phenomenon in all its manifestations. The reason evolution has nothing at all to say about life’s meaning or lack thereof is because the category of meaning does not apply to life.

What is meaning? Meaning is what someone intends by a word or deed. For example, suppose you place a sign in your yard displaying a picture of green grass surrounded by a red circle with a red slash through it. I ask you, what do you mean by this? And you reply that you mean you do not want anyone to step on your grass. When human beings express themselves it is always fair game to ask, “what did you mean?” They may sometimes answer that they didn’t mean anything at all. In that case their expression is meaningless. But the category still applies: human expressions are the kinds of things that either have or lack meaning.

The idea that life could have a meaning originates with the religious thesis that life is the creation of God. Being an anthropomorphic projection, God is thought to express his intentions the same way human beings do. Therefore, everything he makes is in the category of things that either have or lack meaning. And God makes everything, including human beings. So, on the religious view, each and every one of our lives has meaning.

Existentialists rightly reject the idea that God created human beings thereby supplying us with meaning. They then jump to the conclusion that human life is meaningless. This is the wrong conclusion to draw. If human life is not the intentional expression of a higher power, then it is not the kind of thing that could have or lack meaning. Like a coffee cup that is neither blind nor not blind, human life is neither meaningful nor meaningless. The age old question, “What is the meaning of life?” is literally unintelligible. On the surface, it looks like an ordinary sentence, but on closer examination it is as silly

16. The twentieth-century British philosopher Gilbert Ryle is credited with first identifying the notion of a category mistake in his book *The Concept of Mind* (1949).

as asking whether colorless green ideas sleep furiously.¹⁷ I blame Kierkegaard for proliferating the foggy poetic thinking that results in category mistakes.

So, if we jettison the notion that life has meaning as well as the notion that it lacks meaning we are left with just evolution. There is no need for Christianity or existentialism to supplement it.

But does evolution alone give us a robust enough outlook on life? You bet.

It explains otherwise puzzling human behavior and releases us from the tyranny of religious gloom and doom. You can't mean anything with your life, but you can continue to mean what you say and do. You can experience the panoply of emotions you've been built with and know that they are there because they randomly evolved at some point and somehow promoted or at least didn't prevent survival. You can enjoy surviving and reproducing for its own sake, not for the sake of some further end.

Conclusion

Existentialism is nothing but a stripped down version of Christianity that not only adds nothing useful to evolution but actually contradicts it, in virtue of its overblown conception of personal responsibility based on free will and human essence. It may be that we needed existentialism as a security blanket for a little while after evolution snatched God away from us. But it is time now to grow up and get over it.¹⁸ Let me be clear: I'm not saying that there is no meaning in life and we have to just accept this and soldier on. On the contrary, this is exactly what the existentialist is saying! I'm saying that the whole idea of there being or not being a meaning in life is incoherent. We will not find happiness until we purge the lie and realize what an artificial cultural drama it has been all along.

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17. Many philosophers before me have asserted that the meaning of life is a category mistake. Most notably, Douglas Adams makes this point in his philosophical novel *Life the Universe and Everything* (Del Rey, 1997), when his characters discover that the meaning of life is 42.

18. My view is very much like the view David N. Stamos defends in the last chapter of his book, *Evolution and the Big Questions: Sex, Race, Religion, and Other Matters* (2008).

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Values for Humanists

PHILIP KITCHER

Columbia University

pkitcher@columbia.edu

Abstract

please provide abstract

Keywords

values, humanism, philosophy

this text
needs to
be adapted
to an arti-
cle, not a
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It is a privilege to speak to this meeting, and to an organization fashioned by Paul Kurtz. As Nathan Bupp has pointed out in his recent book *Meaning and Value in a Secular Age*, Paul was an extraordinary man, a man who designed and built the Secular Humanist Organization not once but twice. Throughout his professional life, he carried through the Deweyan, pragmatic strain of secular humanism, bringing it to a general audience, keeping it alive in the United States. That seems to me a very important thing indeed to have done.

~~My subject this evening~~ The subject of this article is the nature of values. One of the great challenges that is always presented to humanists is, how we can make sense of values? How do you give meaning to your life? How do you avoid some kind of relativism or subjectivism about values? Dostoevsky's great character Ivan Karamazov asserts boldly, if God is dead, everything is permitted. And that's a common attitude among non-humanists.

I want to start taking up that challenge by considering how religious people answer the question, because the religious solution to the problem of values grounded in the divine will has been in trouble for about 2,000 years or more, ever since Plato wrote a wonderful dialog called *Euthyphro*. In that dialog Euthyphro, one of Socrate's many, many victims as he wanders round showing people they don't know as much as they think, is about to put his

father on trial. Socrates says to him, “Euthyphro, you must feel very sure of yourself prosecuting your own father.” And Euthyphro says “yes, yes I know I’m doing what’s right.” Socrates asks, “well how do you know you’re doing what’s right?” Euthyphro answers by explaining that doing the right thing is acting in accordance with the will of the gods. And then Socrates lets him have it. He says “alright tell me Euthyphro, is what is right and good and just and pious good because the gods will it? Or is it that the gods will it because it’s already antecedently good and pious?” And this puts poor Euthyphro in a terrible dilemma because either he has to admit that there is something else that is a source of value prior to the divine will to which the divine will responds, or that God’s will, a purely arbitrary will, makes up values. Thoughtful people have struggled with this dilemma in religious ethics ever since Plato wrote. But they don’t have a solution to it. So why then does religion still seem the inevitable context and foundation of values? The answer is, I think, because the secular substitutes for giving a theory of value turn out to be not very convincing. (Perhaps that is because philosophy is often hard to understand—but I think there’s more to it than that.)

Let me try to be very precise about what the problems are. We talk about things being valuable and worthwhile and right and wrong and good and bad, and something seems to make right actions right, wrong actions wrong, worthwhile things worthwhile. So we need an answer to the question, what is it that’s the source of rightness and wrongness? Of goodness and badness? Of value and non-value? And then we need to know also how people figure this out. Because it’s useless having an account of what’s valuable and what makes things valuable unless you can somehow explain how human beings can figure out what it is. The difficulty arises in fitting those two things together.

Philosophers, like religious people, have labored and striven and tried very, very hard over the centuries to find compelling answers to these two questions and it seems to me they’ve failed. Which is what accounts for the perseverance of the rather simple and straightforward religious solution, and therefore to the question, “well how do you humanists account for values?” I want to outline an account of values that will answer those questions. I’m going to take a completely different approach from that taken by most (but not quite all) of my philosophical colleagues.

There is a hero who will keep coming back throughout the talk. I’ll sum up my view initially with a slogan—we make values. We human beings make values but we don’t do it arbitrarily. So there are three parts to my view. First of all, values are not discovered but invented. Second, they’re not invented by individuals, they are invented collectively. And third, those inventions aren’t

arbitrary. They respond to something about the human predicament.

Let me try to explain those three aspects. This is where my hero enters: in the text book on ethics that he wrote with James Tufts Dewey offers a slogan—morals grow out of the conditions of human life. OK, so now I invite you to consider your own ethical lives. You, like all human beings, are heirs of a project in which human beings have been engaged for tens of thousands of years. I call this the *ethical project*. It's decisively transformed the way we live. **In the little lyric Nathan just read**, there was a line about not living well together. And that actually seems to me the start of it.

You see, I think like other related animals—primates and great apes, in particular—human beings have a tendency to be social. We want to live together. There's been interesting neuro-scientific research on this, about the drives that bring us to live together. But we're not very good at living together. When you look at our evolutionary cousins, the chimps and the bonobos, you see that they can do it but they can't do it very well. Now our ancestors in the Paleolithic lived in societies much like those of chimps and bonobos. Their groups were not very big; they could be the size of the group of people in this room tonight, although the age distribution would be a bit different. But unlike many primate societies there was a lot of mixing by age and sex. Many primates solve their social problems by limiting the number of males who are around to cause trouble, or simply by having a couple of senior animals and their offspring. That's one way of making a relatively stable society. But like the chimps and like the bonobos, our ancestors were able to live in groups that were mixed by age and sex. And we were probably just like chimps in getting into trouble with one another all the time, having tense and fragile social lives.

Any of you who have ever been to one of these wonderful environments where you can see chimps or bonobos interacting with one another in the wild (or semi-wild), will have seen how tensions break out, how the organisms sit down and groom one another, hours and hours in a day, three hours on a good day, six hours on a bad day. And we would be like that too if we hadn't invented some technique for learning to live together. But we have. And that technique is what we call ethics or morality. Like chimpanzees, human beings have tendencies to respond to one another. We can identify the wishes and the intentions of other human beings just as chimps can identify the wishes of some of their fellows. And we can respond to them. Sometimes we cooperate; we do things that help one of our fellows reach his or her goal. But that doesn't actually happen in the wild among chimpanzees that often. They do it a bit but they often fink out on one of the animals with whom they live. They have *limited* responsiveness.

Now we also have something else, something also partially shared by chimpanzees and found in small children. We have the ability to structure our lives by limiting our desires on particular occasions. Frans de Waal, a great primatologist, has done some lovely work recording how chimpanzees will take turns when they need to go to a water source and get water. They do it in an orderly way. Chimps and little kids sometimes structure certain kinds of interactions with partners so that there's a rule that governs behavior, a regularity by which the animals seem to be abiding. These are the basic building blocks out of which ethical behavior gets built.

But how? It gets built through the ability of human beings, or our hominid ancestors in the very distant past, to recognize some of the kinds of actions that were getting them into trouble and to refrain from those. To increase our natural but rather limited responsiveness by taking into account the attitudes of the members of our society. Once human beings had language, this ability developed into the kind of activity we see among hunter-gathers today. People sit down together and they figure out how their lives together are going to be run. They sit down in what David Hume called "the cool hour" and they work out the structures, the patterns of their shared lives. They do that on terms of relative equality, at least among the adult members. Once that started, once that got underway, you have agreed-on rules—for example, you've got a structure in the society that says, ok we all agree that when resources are limited we're going to share. Similarly, we all agree that we don't want to initiate violence against members of our group.

All this is primitive, very simple rules that probably got our ethics started. Once that began, though, you get a new kind of process in human evolution, a cultural selection of these rules and structures. That's where our ethical life comes from. Our ethical life is something that has come out of many, many, many generations of experimentation in ways of living together and we've inherited some of the successful stuff. But we've also inherited a lot of other less good things.

Along the way, human life has gotten transformed. Our distant ancestors lived in much smaller groups. Somewhere in the late Paleolithic we learned to live in larger groups. About 8,000 years ago we were living in the first cities, about 1,000 people or more people living together. That's a huge increase in group size. For most of human history people lived in groups of 30–100. But in the last 8,000 years or so we've lived in larger groups. For a much longer time we've probably had division of labor, that is, division of tasks among members of the group. We've had roles and institutions. We've also had something which I think is uniquely human and is clearly visible in the

re-write?
first written documents: namely the thought that in partnerships where you cooperate with somebody on a continued basis, you start to be interested not just in the outcome but in the way it's achieved. **So for example, if Nathan and I are interacting with one another on a daily basis to achieve common goals, it matters to us not only that we achieve those goals but also that each of us responds to the other.** Each of us tries to figure out what the other is doing and wanting and intending and we try to respond to that. That gives rise to central ideas about human relationships. So lots of good stuff has happened to human beings in the evolution of this project.

But I also want to talk about a couple of things that have been distorted by the development of the project. One is the general erosion in equality that comes in once you start getting domesticated animals and differentiation in ownership of those animals. Private property becomes invested in livestock. That changes things. It changes the ways in which roles get developed and institutions get developed. It's a commonplace among anthropologists that most of human history is dominated by a carefully maintained, artificially maintained, condition of relative equality. But since the Neolithic probably about 10–15,000 years ago, that equality has been eroded. It's given way to much more stratified societies. So that's one thing that has changed in the development of the ethical project.

There's another. Almost all societies of which we know, not only invented religion, but they've invented a particular role for their religion. And that role is a very clever device for enforcing compliance to the rules of the group when other group members are absent. Imagine: we all go out and do our various tasks. We hunt and we gather, we go and find resources, we go and find water, and we go and find shelter. We're often out of sight of one another. When I'm away from all of you, who's to keep me on track? Well, here's an idea: invent a being or if there's a being you already think exists, give that being a new property. That being can look on and inspect all members of the group, even when other human beings aren't watching. Call this being "the transcendent policeman." Often supposed to be in the sky, (as many, many ethnographies record) the policeman can look down and enforce the group's rules. Now that's actually a very good idea from the point of view of getting compliance. But it's a very bad idea from another perspective, because, once that idea is in place, when we have our discussions at the end of the day about how we should live together, one of us may claim—successfully—to know what the transcendent policeman really wants. Perhaps he doesn't want women doing certain kinds of jobs or perhaps he doesn't want two women or two men going off together for a bit of sexual exploration. That gets inscribed in the

code of the group on the authority of a particular individual.

I said at the beginning that I wanted this to be an account of values that made the invention of values a collective affair. But once you have the idea of the transcendent policeman, a new thought comes in; the thought of potential ethical authorities. We are heirs to that. Religions do it but so do secular institutions. There are professional experts, people who tell other people what's valuable and what isn't. Philosophers often claim this role. I'm not going to claim it. I want to insist from the beginning that it's a collective business.

All right: I've told you a story and I think the story is very likely true about where our ethical life comes from and I've told you a little about how I think it's developed. Now is it just a series of experiments? Do different groups satisfy themselves in different ways and whatever each group decides is right at least for that group? I don't think so. Some sorts of potential rules, including some that have actually figured in human history, seem intolerable—objectively wrong. Can we make sense of that?

There are moments in history where it seems that human beings make genuine ethical progress. They give up on slavery, or they accept the idea that women should have a broader role in society. Or take a revolution we're living through, I think all the people in this room have witnessed this revolution, changing attitudes towards same sex love. It's a very dramatic change in my lifetime. And here's another example, one that you may not be familiar with; in the earliest law codes we have, the law we think of as *lex talionis* is formulated in a very different way from the one we know. If somebody murders the son or the daughter of another individual what should happen? You don't take the life of the murderer. You take the life of the son or daughter of the murderer. Can that be right? It's literal compensation. Now, that law occurs about 4,000 years ago as part of the ethical life of Mesopotamian groups. A thousand years later, it's gone; it's been replaced with the familiar idea of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life. You take the murderer's life. That may not be the last word on the subject but it's surely an improvement on killing some poor innocent kid because her father happens to have murdered somebody else's daughter.

It's very hard, I think, confronted with these examples not to think that there are progressive changes in our ethical life. I want to suggest that we can make sense of ethical progress. Go back to my original thought; ethics is what got us out of this awful chimpanzee bind where we live in small societies with lots of tension. Think of the root cause of trouble in those societies as limited human responsiveness. Ethics is a way of artificially extending our respon-

siveness to others. Ethics is a kind of social technology that responds to a deep and fundamental human problem. The problem is founded in our predicament: we evolved to live together, but when we live together we need to be more responsive to one another than we have evolved to be. Progress consists in solving problems. It's not progress towards some fixed ethical order. It's progress *from*, you make progress by overcoming a problem that arises in your society as a result of a type of failure to respond to others.

Dewey, my hero again, thinks of ethics as permanently unfinished, and so do I. It's not marching towards some fixed and final goal, any more than transportation technology is marching towards some ideal system of transportation that we'll someday realize if we're lucky. No, you make progress by continuing to resolve problems. Ethical truth is what you get along the way.

Let me give you an example of what I think of as ethical truth. I think there is a generalization, very rough but a true generalization, that tells us that we ought to tell the truth to one another. Why was it a progressive move when we introduced that idea into our ethical life? Because we depend on one another for information, we are beings who require information from others. We respond to one another by giving sincere and truthful reports. To fail to give sincere and truthful reports is typically—almost always, although not exactly always—to fail to respond to your interlocutor. There are cases, though, when you should fail to respond. If the person who asked you the question is going to use the knowledge for some awful, nefarious purpose, if that person himself is going to fail to respond to the needs of many others, then you should refuse the information. Or if giving the information would be terribly destructive to the person, you should refuse the information. So responsiveness is always the root of questions of honesty and deception, and it gives rise to the idea that honesty should be the default policy. As long as human life persists, we're going to need to talk to one another and therefore as long as we continue to make ethical progress we are going to need this sort of maxim.

I wanted to suggest to you that ethical truth isn't, as it were, ordained in advance but it's what you get when you make ethical progress, when you solve ethical problems. In William James' language, "truth is what happens to an idea." Truth is what emerges as stable progressive elements in human ethical life. So the challenge for all of us today is to figure out, not only how our ethical project is, but how it should continue. I think that when we look back at history, including the history of the episode I alluded to, the liberalization of attitude on same sex relations, we can see that typically ethical progress is made by accident. It's really revealing if you go back and you look at the

New York Times reports on the Stonewall Resistance. Those early reports in the New York Times suggest that a bunch of perverts and deviants stood up against the legitimate authority of the police, but three or four years later the Times was reporting things in very, very different tones. What happened at Stonewall was a bit of consciousness-raising, voices that previously had not been heard got heard for the first time. For the first time, people came to realize just how multi-dimensional sexual life was for people who love others of the same sex. And as that consciousness came into being, attitudes changed. But it changed pretty much as the result of an accident. And pretty much as the result of courage and people saying “I can’t, I won’t take this anymore.”

Dewey’s hope, the humanist hope I think, is that we can do better than that, that we don’t have to wait for the accidents in history before we make positive changes in our values. We can actually learn to think things through, to understand our ethical predicament and our ethical problems and to understand the places in which we are failing to respond to one another. So I think history can teach us two kinds of things. It can teach us first of all, the ways in which our ethical life has been distorted by the arbitrary imposition of certain kinds of claims and maxims. As I **wrote** earlier, once you’ve got the transcendent policeman in place, it seems as though people start claiming access to the policeman’s will and then write their own prejudices into the rule book. Recognizing that, we can go back and observe the ways in which, not only religions but also various kinds of secular philosophies have done that. We can try to correct for those failures of responsiveness to others.

We can do something even more ambitious. If we think about the story that I’ve told about a society beginning to come together and figuring out how the needs of all of its members should be responded to, that can serve as a guideline for our own ethical thinking in a world where our societies are not 30–100 people. With respect to many kinds of problems, the relevant society is the whole human species and our descendants. So when we think about environmental problems, in particular the challenge of global warming, we have to think about this in pan-human terms. We have to think about providing for the needs of all. Now in this discussion, and I want to emphasize this again, none of us individuals has a privileged role. This is a collective enterprise in which we stand together. And so our ethical discussion shouldn’t be a matter of a priest or a rabbi or some secular teacher or some ethical expert prescribing from on high, it should be something more like what goes on in parts of medical practice. Physicians come together with representatives of various points of view. And the more the better, not the more the merrier, but the more the better. So an ideal ethical conversation would be one in which a

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large variety of human perspectives were represented. In which factual errors were eliminated—and that would mean the elimination of the idea that any kind of religious or secular text was the last word on ethical matters. Finally, like the discussants in the cool hour, those who engage in this conversation must be mutually engaged, must be trying to respond to all others and trying to find the solution perhaps that not all rank first, but a solution that all can live with. That is something I think we can learn from genealogy, learn from our ethical history.

Let me say a little bit more about what I have in mind. As we look back into the past, our ethical past, we can learn things about how to go on and we learn about them in much the ways that we sometimes learn mundane things in our ethical interactions with other people. I'm sure you've all had the sort of experience I'm about to describe. It's a humbling one, but it's a very important one. You've been talking in a particular way, possibly your entire life; it's a habit you have and one day you're talking in front of some people or with some people and afterwards somebody takes you aside and says, look, what you're saying is deeply offensive to me. It presupposes a way of judging me and judging people like me that completely fails to understand the details of my life. You've been utterly insensitive to what I feel and what I need. Please don't say those sorts of things again. And you talk with them and you listen and you come away changed and sobered. You very much regret what you've done and you condemn your past habits and you try to change them.

Here's another example, a very famous example from history. I'm sure many of you have read Dickens' great novel *Bleak House*. That novel had an enormous impact in certain social discussions in Victorian England. And it had that impact not simply because it described the plight of living in urban London, living in places like Tom-All-Alones, the slum in which the crossing sweeper Jo lives and dies. People knew that London was a mucky place and there were poor people who were on the edge of existence. One of Dickens' brilliant successes in that novel was to keep on bringing back self-satisfied voices: voices that said things like, "the worthy poor are taken care of" or "the institutions for the poor are excellent" or "nobody should be in want in our great and caring society." Many Victorian readers had said things like that. And just as the person in my little story, who became ashamed when told that he'd said insensitive things, the readers of *Bleak House* came to appreciate the fact that they had said things that now could only seem to them completely hollow and meaningless.

This kind of learning is often, I think, downplayed by philosophers. Philosophers like to talk about reasons, and giving reasons. But reasons are always

given within a framework. Many moments of ethical insight seem to me those when through interacting with other people or through the vicarious interaction with other people that we sometimes get through great works of drama or literature or film, you come to change your framework. That's really important. Our ethical discussions today need that kind of interaction among many different perspectives, need that kind of mutual engagement, so that we change a lot of the framework.

That leads, it seems to me, to a very simple proposal, and it can only be a proposal, because as I keep saying this is a collective matter. Any one individual can only propose things for discussion. The proposal is that our ethical lives should be guided by an egalitarian ideal that all people the world over should have the preconditions and the opportunities for a worthwhile life. That would demand, I think, a deep reshaping of our economic and social and political institutions. We should not take those for granted. We should not think of the secondary measures of growth and GDP as if they were primary values. The primary values arise from the source that got this project started, namely our limited responsiveness to others. I think an egalitarian ideal might grow out of that and that ideal should be at the foundation of the truly political economy.

At this point, I want to step back and conclude by looking at something else. I've just alluded to the idea of a worthwhile life. So far I've really been talking about ethical life in terms of actions and structures and patterns we should set up for dealing with one another. But there are other kinds of values and they've crept into my conversation and I need to address them. One of them, a very important one, is the idea of a way of being that is genuinely worthwhile or a worthwhile life. Now the question of how to live, what is a worthwhile life is the oldest question of philosophy. It's the question that drew the rich young men of the ancient world to the various schools so they could learn from the various teachers (the Sophists primary among them). Now for about 1,500 years that question lapsed in the Christian west because it seemed to be answered. A worthwhile life is a life devoted to God that prepares you for the life hereafter. But about 200 years ago with the Enlightenment the question came back again. When it came back, it was reintroduced in a new way. It was reintroduced first in the more egalitarian way, that the good life was not just for the privileged few but also possibly for the many. And it came with a new ideal, the ideal of autonomy: a worthwhile life is one the individual makes for himself or herself. This is a deep thought in Kant, in Humboldt and in John Stuart Mill. Mill thinks the fundamental form of freedom is the freedom to figure out who we want to be, what's important to us, and to pursue it.

He's right about that, I think. I think he's also right to add the idea that in making up our ideal for our own life and in pursuing it, we must not impinge upon the like freedom of other people. But that's too weak.

I suggest that the idea of the responsiveness to others that lies at the heart of the ethical project, also lies at the heart of the idea of the valuable life. The valuable life is the one that makes a difference to others. Lives that matter are those that touch the lives of others. And there are many ways of doing this, large and small. It's easy to think that the only lives that really are significant are the very great ones, the ones of the great writers or the great scientists or the great statesman. I don't want to go in for that sort of elitism. I want to recognize that there are many, many, many different ways in which people's live intersect with those of others and make a difference to those of others.

Now, at this point I want to close by facing up to what I think is a deep challenge that comes sometimes from religious people. It usually begins by thinking that life is deprived of its significances by our death. Death seems to pose a problem for people who don't have faith, at least that's the way people with faith often think. The problem comes in two forms; the problem of our death, our own cessation, and the deaths of others. Now I don't actually think religious perspectives solve these problems particularly well. I think there's less to the religious rhetoric than meets the eye or ear, but I'm not going to go into that now. Instead I propose that we ought to be able to come to terms with the fact that we are all going to die.

The really difficult problem is the problem of premature death: a death that interferes with a life's fulfilling the pattern it has set for itself. Either because it hasn't had long enough to figure out what it wants to be or because it's figured out what it wants to be and is cut short too soon. The happy life, the worthwhile life is one that develops a theme, a pattern that's worth having, that pursues that project, whatever it is, or those projects, whatever they are, and that is relatively successful at fulfilling them. The really poignant fear I think, is expressed by people like Keats in a famous sonnet when he writes,

When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
Before high pilèd books, in charact'ry
Hold like rich garners the full-ripen'd grain ...

What worries Keats is a very poignant worry—we know he's going to die very young—that his poetry will not emerge from his teeming brain, that he will not have the chance to express himself. Well he could have written so much more, of course. But he wrote enough. Looking back on his life, those of us

who love his poetry can say: it was a good life; it was a worthwhile life; it was sadly short but Keats' fear was in the end unfounded; he did enough. It would have been great if he had lived until eighty, and gone on writing poetry of the same quality as that he wrote when he was twenty—but still, the life he had is no failure.

Religious people tend to think that there's a deep and difficult problem about finitude. They think that the sort of account that I've tried to give of values sells values short. They want more. It's too shallow somehow. So in great religious writers like William James you find again and again this emphasis on human finitude and on the idea that the finitude of human life will undercut the value of everything we do. I want to close by responding to that.

James gives us this really poignant image in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. He sees the predicament of humanity like this: imagine people living in a narrow fjord, on water that is iced over, with high cliffs preventing any escape. The ice is slowly melting. The people know that in the end their celebrations and festivities will all end and they will all be drowned. It's a very powerful image. Images like that inspire not only religious people to talk about the finitude of human life as negating all value but they also lead to a kind of atheistic pessimism in many thinkers and writers.

I want to respond by going to another literary source. It's another novel and a great one, a twentieth century novel, Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*. *Doctor Faustus* is about a composer, Adrian Leverkühn who may or may not have sold his soul to the devil. Late in the novel, Leverkühn has moved onto a farm with the Schweigestill family, and the farm and the farmers bear an uncanny resemblance to his own childhood home and his own parents. The old farmer, Max Schweigestill, dies around the same time as Adrian Leverkühn's own father back at his home in Buchel. Leverkühn is too sick at this stage to travel back to his family home, but he does go to the local funeral for Max Schweigestill. As he comes back from the ceremony, he smells the odor of the old man's pipe. Mann writes:

“That endures,” said Adrian, “quite a while, perhaps as long as the house stands. It lingers on in Buchel too. The period of our lingering on afterwards, perhaps a little shorter or a little longer, that is what is called immortality.”

Almost right, I think. I think Mann shouldn't have used the word “immortality.” But he's pointing to what matters. What matters in Schweigestill's life is the lingering, the effect symbolized by the pipe smoke. But of course it's not just the pipe smoke, it's all that he did. He inherited the farm from his

father. He passed it on to his son. He maintained it. He built it. He leaves things behind. And after a while those things will all be gone. They will be redone and built anew. The farm will be sold. The descendants will eventually be scattered. That doesn't matter. The point is that what Schweigestill has done is to touch the lives of others. His influence radiates out, like the ripples caused when a stone is thrown into a pool. Mann says that's what's important in human lives, that they have that relation to something larger than themselves. They don't need relation to something infinitely large but they do need relation to something larger.

That I think is actually exactly the right answer. So imagine an absurd fantasy. Would it make a difference if Schweigestill's influence on the local agriculture endured as long as the influence of the Homeric epics has endured? For 2,500 odd years. Does it make any difference? No. Suppose humanity survives forever and implausibly Schweigestill's farm and his agricultural life persists and is remembered. Does that make a difference? No. Infinity, eternity isn't the issue here. What matters is there's a contribution to future generations, not that something endures forever.

I think secular humanism can give an account of values, both ethical values and the values of finite lives. Lives are valuable insofar as they make a positive difference to other lives. In the end the problem for secular humanism is not so much an intellectual one, as a practical one. The challenge for all of us is to learn how to continue this project that has transformed human existence. How can we provide for many people the circumstances under which they can live lives that have this enduring impact on others, that last beyond themselves, that are felt with joy and with genuine satisfaction in the lives of others. That's the challenge. And it's a very hard challenge in the contemporary world and it requires a lot of deep rethinking and that rethinking must, I think, go to the heart of the problem—the problem of our limited responsiveness to others. So I'll conclude by saying what I like to say about our ethical life: we can live together with one another, but we can't live together with one another easily. The task for humanism is continually to try to find ways of making our shared lives easier and better—to make values, as Dewey would put it, more stable, more widespread, and more secure.

Atheist Jesus: A Revolution of Paradigms

NICOLÒ SCALZO

Independent Scholar

nicolo.scalzo@libero.it

ABSTRACT

This article examines Jesus of Nazareth through the lens of a theory that challenges the weak points of the two paradigms that dominate the current historical research in this field, while more effectively explaining traits ascribed to the figure of Jesus revealing an incredible humanistic profile. Anthropology, psychology and sociology will contribute in a very important way to the analyses developed in this article.

The strength of the logic based on evidence would have prevailed on propositions which were not demonstrated, nor they were necessary, whose only effectiveness was in being deeply rooted inside men's minds.

(Frova and Maranzana 1998, 29) Galileo Galilei

The secret things¹

These are the hidden words which the living Jesus spoke and Judas Thomas the twin wrote them down. And he said: "Whoever finds the meaning of these words will not taste death." Jesus said: "Let him who seeks continue seeking until he finds. When he finds, he will become troubled. If he becomes troubled, he will be astonished, and he will become king over the all."²

(Incipit of Gospel of Thomas, sayings 1 and 2)

1. This is the translation of the very beginning of the Gospel of Thomas, a text written in Coptic found near Nag-Hammadi in 1945. Usually the translations of this Gospel do not report this opening line ("The secret things"), which is, however, clearly visible in the original Coptic version (Scalzo 2015, 15). The translation proposed here is based on "*Grondin's Interlinear Coptic/English Translation of The Gospel of Thomas*," available on the internet: http://gospel-thomas.net/gtbypage_112702.pdf.
2. The phrase "Thomas, saying," or simply "Saying" will be used to indicate a Saying from the Gospel of Thomas, followed by the number of the Saying itself.

The current scenario

Two paradigms dominate the current scholarly landscape of historical research on the figure of Jesus: “Jewish Jesus” and “mythological Jesus.” These are not to be confused with the “Jesus of the faith” which refers to the Christian “Messiah.” It is important to note that every paradigm, which seeks to explain the “Historical Jesus” will inevitably have to deal with the “Jesus of the faith” and vice versa; in fact, what differentiates the Christian religion from any other form of monotheism is the idea that God has incarnated himself in history. The Christian faith must therefore look for God’s face in that of Jesus, the man who lived in Israel in the first century.

The paradigm of the “Jewish Jesus” is effectively described by the historian Remo Cacitti:

Jesus was a Jew...fully immersed in the religiosity of his time, which is based on the exegesis of the Torah and indicates the way one should live in order to be well accepted by God. (Cacitti and Augias 2008, 142–143)

The paradigm of the “mythological Jesus,” by contrast, expresses the skepticism of those who see in Jesus principally a figure created and shaped by the faith of the first religious Christian communities. Proponents of this paradigm therefore tend to view Jesus as the result of human invention rather than as a real historical figure. This, for example, is the position of professor Piergiorgio Odifreddi (perhaps the most well-known Italian atheist) who, in his book *Perché non possiamo essere cristiani, e meno che mai cattolici* (*Why we cannot be Christians, let alone Catholics*) writes: “On his part, in the most crucial circumstances, Jesus himself speaks by citing the words of the Bible” (Odifreddi 2007, 110), a comment which supports the hypothesis that the figure of Jesus is mainly the product of the first Christians’ faith and invention.

This article proposes a third paradigm: Jesus the atheist.

“How can it be possible,” one might ask, “that the historical research has overlooked this disconcerting aspect of Jesus’s thought?”

I believe the answer lies in the fact that the importance and the peculiarity of the Gospel of Thomas have not been fully understood.

The most recent historical research suggests that this gospel may have been built around an original nucleus of material that has a parallel in the Synoptic Gospels, and therefore its teachings should not differ from theirs: “The perspective is apocalyptic, the awaiting of an imminent upheaval in the world

thanks to an extraordinary intervention by God” (Gianotto 2009, 67)³ and some peculiar traits of the writing of Thomas should be explained by looking at Judeo-Christian tradition:

in particular, DeConick refers to the Jacobite community in Jerusalem as a possible place of origin for the nucleus of the Gospel of Thomas. ... A revival of Jesus’s preaching in view of the eschatological event maintained to be imminent. (Gianotto 2009, 67)

The failure of the prophecies regarding the imminent apocalypse would have prompted the production of new sayings which would have been added to the original nucleus of the Gospel “in order to shift its orientation towards an eschatology which is already fulfilled in the present.” (Gianotto 2009, 67–70)⁴

Conversely, the “Atheist Jesus” paradigm is based on the hypothesis that the Gospel of Thomas precedes the Synoptic Gospels rather than following them, as we shall see.

Atheist Jesus

The theory of “atheist Jesus” can be articulated as follows:

1. Jesus was a historical character, and he was a genius.
2. He left behind an oral collection of sayings. This collection reflects the light of his brilliant mind. We shall call this collection: the source.
3. The gospel of the secret sayings of Thomas (Nag-Hammadi, 1945) is the document, at our disposal, which is most faithful to the source.
4. In saying number four (and in the gospel of Thomas in general) there is hidden an attack against:
 - a. YHWH;
 - b. The holy scriptures (in particular the Torah);
 - c. The cultural structures of the “religio.”
5. According to the gospel of Thomas, the spirit comes into being because of the flesh.
6. The gospel of Thomas is a “portrait/self-portrait” of Jesus himself.

3. Professor Gianotto is one of the most important Italian experts on the Gospel of Thomas.

4. Among the Sayings that would have been added to the original nucleus, Gianotto cites numbers 3, 43, 51 and 113.

This article will not discuss these points in detail, but a few clarifications are necessary. Point 3 of the model explains why we should give priority (in chronological as well as philosophical terms) to the Gospel of Thomas rather than to the canonical gospels. In point 4.c of the model, the latin term “religio,” meaning “religion,” is used in order to indicate the belief that the cult of a particular God or Gods (or of other super-human entities) can favor a country, a people, a group, a sect, or a person. “Religio” often establishes a system of power (authoritarian, political, ideological, criminal or any mix of these types). Points 4 and 5 of the model determines the particular humanistic atheism of Jesus. Jesus’ atheism is not about the existence of God and it does not exclude the divine, rather it deals with *the way* one should search for the divine. A human being, according to the Gospel of Thomas, is really “living” only in the search for the divine.

Why refer to Jesus as an atheist?

The term “atheist” might seem an inappropriate one to describe someone “in search of the divine;” Jesus’s atheism, however, relates to the following points:

- Jesus wanted to break down the pact of faith with YHWH;
- Jesus attacked “religio” as a way to access the divine;
- Jesus thought that divinity springs directly from the flesh of humanity;
- the very concept of the “Father” is the ultimate image of Jesus’s humanistic atheism.

In this article, I will address only the first two points.⁵ Please also note a peculiar characteristic of the Christian religion, which is articulated in the following quotations:

My longtime view about Christianity is that it represents an amalgam of two seemingly immiscible parts. The religion of Jesus and the religion of Paul. Thomas Jefferson attempted to excise the Pauline parts of the New Testament. There wasn’t much left when he was done, but it was an inspiring document.

(A letter from Carl Sagan—an atheist and a scientist—to Ken Schei—the founder and President of “Atheists for Jesus”)

The difference I see between John the Baptist and Jesus is (to use some fancy, academic language) [that] John is an apocalyptic eschatologist.

An eschatologist is somebody who sees that the problem of the world is so radical that it is going to take some kind of “divine radicality.” God is going to descend in some sort of a catastrophic event to solve the world.

5. My books (Scalzo 2014, 2015) deal with all these points (and more).

There is another type of eschatology, and that is what I think Jesus is talking, I am going to call it ethical eschatology. That is the demand that God is making on us—not us on God, so much as God on us—to do something about the evil in the world.

(*John Dominic Crossan* from the documentary: “From Jesus to Christ; the first Christians”)⁶

The “atheist Jesus” at the heart of the Christian religion has long been sensed by the most receptive and brilliant minds, but it has yet to be fully acknowledged.

To return to the main point of this article, whether one sees in Jesus a historical character, a mythological one, or an amalgam of these two models—that is: a mythological character formed from a historical one—this article raises two specific questions relating to the figure of Jesus of Nazareth—questions that can only be explained effectively from the perspective of the “atheist Jesus” model.

The first question: become like little children.

The first question has to do with the particular attention Jesus dedicated to children as a principal theme of his “theological” discourse, a teaching that can be summed up in the following phrase: “if you do not become like a little child, you will not see the kingdom of the Father.” (NB: this phrase is similar, but not identical, to Matthew 18:3).

This teaching represents a “theological inconvenience” within the cultural parameters of first century Jewish society, according to which, children are of little importance in terms of religious discourse. According to the Talmud, for example, children are subject to the “evil inclination”—“*yetzer hara*”—and thus estranged from the Torah. (Cohen 2011, 121–123)⁷

Historians of religion have an ironic rule for evaluating the Bible’s claims about history: the less sense a claim makes, the more likely it is to be true.

That is, the less theological sense a claim makes, the more likely it is to be true.

(Wright 2010, 237)

Furthermore this “inconvenient” teaching is reported by at least two sources, which are historically and philologically independent from one another: the

6. Documentary from PBS frontline, 1998, written and directed by Marilyn Mellowes. J.D. Crossan is one of the founders of the Jesus Seminar and is a respected figure in the field of Biblical archaeology, anthropology and textual and historical criticism of the New Testament.

7. It is important to note that the “evil inclination” was also called the “leaven in the dough”—“*Chametz*” (Cohen 2011, 121 and 127). The Talmud is a stratification of texts, which pertain to different historical eras. The concept of the “evil inclination” as the “leaven in the dough” is very ancient and was surely current at the time of Jesus.

Gospel of Thomas and that of Mark.⁸ These mentions of the teaching provide further evidence of its historicity.

Here is a question for those who see in Jesus only (or especially) a mythological character: “Why (invent) the exhortation to ‘become like little children?’”

To those who see in Jesus a figure who wanted to be a pious Jew, strictly observant of the Jewish faith, I pose another question: “What happens when we view this teaching of Jesus within the cultural context in which he lived?”

The second question: The parable of the leaven

Another of the traits that can be attributed with certainty to Jesus (the mythological as well as the historical figure) is his speaking in parables. In order to introduce the analysis of this point, let us start by considering the parable of the leaven:

He told them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.”

(Matthew 13:33, parallel with Luke 13:20)

Jesus said, “The kingdom of the father is like a certain woman. She took a little leaven, concealed it in some dough, and made it into large loaves. Let him who has ears, hear.” (Thomas, saying 96)

With regards to the “mythological Jesus,” on the one hand, the question arises: “Why attribute to the figure of Jesus a parable so cryptic?”

Respecting the “Jewish Jesus,” on the other hand, we must ask: “What happens if we try to interpret the parable within the cultural context in which Jesus lived?”

Moreover, supporters of both paradigms must ask: “What is meant by the expression: ‘Let him who has ears, hear’? ... And, above all: “Why did Jesus speak in parables? Could he not be more clear and direct?”

The theory of the parable

A fundamental element of the theory of the “atheist Jesus” must now be introduced, that is, the hypothesis that the Synoptic authors have “rationalized” not only the meaning of Jesus’s parables, but also his reason for speaking in parables, in order to render his thought and his historical character compatible with their own mental paradigm—a paradigm completely based on faith in YHWH and in the Torah.

The Synoptic authors illustrate their theory of the parables (that is, their explanation of Jesus’ choice to speak in parables) in the exposition and exege-

8. On this point, see: Stevan L. Davies, “Correlation Analysis,” available at the following address: <http://users.misericordia.edu//davies/thomas/correl.htm> (date of access: March 2013).

sis of the parable of the sower (Mk 4:1–20; Mt 13:1–23; Lk 8:1–15, we will follow the version according to Matthew):

The exposition of the parable of the sower:

Matthew 13:1–9

The theory of the parable according to the Synoptic Gospels:

Matthew 13:10–17

The Synoptic explanation of the parable of the sower:

Matthew 13:18–23

(Please read these passages before keeping on reading the article. You can also read them in “appendix 01” from the PDF attached to this article.)

Matthew 13:14–15 is a citation from the Old Testament (and in particular from the books of the Prophets, “Nevi’im” in Hebrew):

[God] said, “Go and tell this people: “‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’ Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” (Isaiah 6:9–10)

(Please note how Isaiah describes himself as an “emissary of God.”)

The Gospel of Thomas also includes the parable of the sower (in saying 9), but in slightly shortened form and, most importantly, without exegesis or narrative context. Moreover, this Gospel makes no mention of devils, Satan, demonic possession or related subjects (such as the “eternal flames”). Finally, let us consider this saying:

Jesus said, “I shall give you what no eye has seen and what no ear has heard and what no hand has touched and what has never occurred to the human mind.” (Thomas, saying 17)

With this saying, the Gospel of Thomas seems to invert, rather than confirm, the logical underpinnings of the “emissaries” of God (as the prophet Isaiah defines himself).

“Tails, I win; heads, you lose!”: The infallibility of the faith

Returning to the Synoptic Gospels, please note that those who are called to receive the “Word” (the disciples)⁹ are not able to understand the parable, and in fact it is Jesus who provides them with the interpretation; meanwhile,

9. In the Gospels of Mark and Luke, they are referred to as “the twelve”, Mark 4:10, Luke 8:1.

the “others” (“those outside”) are not entitled to understanding, “lest they should turn and be forgiven – Mark 4:12” (Mark 4:10–20; Matthew 13:10–15, Luke 8:9–15).

This theory of the parable proposed by the Synoptic Gospels sounds rather warped; regarding the Synoptic interpretation of the parable of the sower, the scholar Josef Ernst writes (commenting on Mark’s version):

The detailed explanation [of the parable] will show that, at any rate, problems within the community have prompted a new hermeneutic cue, only traces of which can be recognized in the parable. This is intended to highlight in particular the vocabulary borrowed from the language of the Early Christian mission (the concept of the “word”; the various threats to its preaching; the role of Satan). The focus of the explanation is on the fate of the seed as it depends on the condition of the terrain—that is, on the “reception” of the preached word by different groups of listeners. In fact, the metaphor falls apart at the moment when a relationship is established between the “seed” and those “who hear the word.” The problems of the recipient community have merged into the explanation. The original meaning of the parable was therefore seriously eroded, but not completely destroyed. (Ernst 1991, 213)

In other words, certain early Christian communities’ fruitless efforts to preach the “Word” (events that took place some years after the death of Jesus) have been integrated into the explanation of the parable. Hence the possibility that “the original meaning of the parable was seriously eroded.”

In what sense was the original meaning eroded? In order to understand this point, we must back up the traditional expertise of the historian with that of the anthropologist and the psychologist in order to *see* the fundamental assumptions that define the mindset of the faithful.

In particular, we must examine the religion in which we have participated, stripping ourselves of cultural tradition (of the “Word”), following which we have become, for example, Jewish, or Christian. We must look at religion, at its rites, at its traditions and even at its most profound and implicit beliefs as if they did not belong to us; as if we were from the “outside.” When we do this, we will see that the fundamental element of the “*forma mentis*” of every believer is faith.

Now, if one is convinced he is in possession of the “Word of God,” “the Truth,” how to account for the fact that there are people to whom this “Word” has been preached who do not heed it? We must not forget that those communities of believers to whom the Synoptic Gospels were addressed experienced failures in their efforts to preach the “Word”; worse still, they were the first to be persecuted for their faith. How to explain that the “Truth” was

not recognized as such? That there were Jews who did not acknowledge Jesus as the “Messiah”? The theory of the parable and the interpretation of the parable of the sower given in the Synoptic Gospels resolve this theological inconvenience.

If the people to whom they preach the “Word of God” accept it as truth, their faith is reinforced; if, however, it goes unheeded and rejected, it must remain the “Word of God”! The “others,” therefore, must not be entitled to understand it, evidently because God himself wants them to remain in ignorance as they are already destined to be condemned. Thus, once again their faith receives positive feedback.

This mechanism, which renders faith impervious to refutation, is also at work in the Gospel of John, where it finds expression in terms and tone that are clearer and more polemical against the Jews:

Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, [...] for there is no truth in him. ... If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.” (John 8:43–47)

Now let us consider the Synoptic explanation of the parable of the sower. The seed on the road dies because it is eaten by the birds—it represents those who “do not understand” the Word of God. The seed among the rocks dies because it cannot withstand the persecutions and the tribulations suffered in the name of faith. The seed among the thorns dies because it cannot endure the preoccupations and the burdens of life. Finally the seed in the good soil represents one who is “from God” and accepts the “Word.” In other words, if the “Word of God” is not heeded, it is not the fault of God, but of those who should have received it.

We must understand that we are facing a form of obstinacy that prevents people of a particular religious group from experiencing their own failures. Shared faith prevents the members of a given group from questioning themselves, from opening themselves to the world, to the “others”—to those who are not part of their group, even to the “heretics,” as the Samaritans were considered by the Jews, a crucial fact in our understanding of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37).

In those first communities of Christian believers, this mechanism was invisible to their eyes because:

- its logic is implicit in every form of religion based on faith in holy scriptures, which are thought to be infallible;

- it was rooted in a very specific and innate characteristic of the human mind: egocentrism;
- it projected onto the parable the hostile conditions in which they were living, thereby preventing them from perceiving Jesus's parables through any lens but that of their own faith.

The theory of the parable as the “Mysterium”

Furthermore, the Synoptic theory of the parable is interwoven with the vision of Jesus as the “Messiah” held by those communities of believers for whom the Synoptic Gospels were intended:

The subject of this particular teaching is the “secret of the kingdom of God,” which, in direct speech, is set forth to the disciples, or the Twelve, as God-given. The surprising Semitic coloration of the language, especially the concept of *Mysterium*, recalls the apocalyptic Jewish spiritual environment. The kingdom of God has indeed arrived with the coming of Jesus, but it is hidden and accessible only to a few. It has been supposed that the sentence also refers to the *Mysterium* of the Jesus's person: the Messiah now is hidden, but he will reveal himself in the future... (Ernst 1991, 204)

The explanation of the parable proposed in Mark 4.11–12—that they function as riddles intended to conceal the mystery of the kingdom of God from “those who are outside”, thereby causing the hardening of their hearts as opposed to their conversion, has been associated, beginning with W. Wrede, with the messianic secret. (Ernst 1991, 208)

The messianic secret refers to the bewildering fact that Jesus, in the canonical Gospels, is depicted as one who would prefer his messiahship be kept a secret. It is important to note that Wrede, in his groundbreaking book *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien: Zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markusevangeliums* (Wrede, 1901) specifically points to Jesus's speaking in parables, among other things, as a fundamental element of the messianic secret.

Thus, in the Synoptic Gospels, we have a superimposition of interpretations, which explains:

- the theory of the parable (the reason Jesus spoke in parables)
- the meaning of his parables,
- and the secrecy of Jesus's messianic identity

We call this superimposition, following the work of the scholar J. Ernst: the “Mysterium.”

The theory of the parable as hiding a “dangerous idea”

According to the “atheist Jesus” paradigm, Jesus’s search for the divine was a different response to the apocalyptic expectations of the Jewish culture he lived in, nor does it relate to the apocalyptic expectations of the first Christian communities of believers; above all, Jesus spoke in parables because:

- it was part of his maieutic method,
- it was meant to prevent the Word from becoming an idol...
- and it hid a “dangerous” idea.

Please note the paradox at the heart of this particular theory of the parable: Jesus hides something in order to show something. Let us also consider the incipit of the Gospel of Thomas and Sayings numbers 1 and 2, which state that the words of Jesus hide a meaning that will trouble those who find it. Why is that?

The solution can be reached if the three points are taken together: Jesus, in the Gospel of Thomas, often speaks of the “kingdom of the Father” as something that, while it exists here on earth, cannot be perceived (saying 113), or found (saying 3). The truth lies before us, but it passes unseen because we become habituated to it, as we do to the air we breathe. Jesus hides this truth within his cryptic teachings in order to create the possibility for its revelation! At the moment when the meaning of his words is revealed, human beings will also be able to see what they are not able, generally, to perceive (and herein lies the trouble and the danger): there is no God coming from “above” and the Holy Scriptures are useless in our search for the divine, therefore you cannot idolize them.

Moreover, it is at this moment that the successful interpreter will be able to see Jesus himself (and herein lies the wonder of Saying 2):

His disciples said, “When will you become revealed to us and when shall we see you?” Jesus said, “When you disrobe without being ashamed and take up your garments and place them under your feet like little children and tread on them, then [will you see] the Son of the Living One, and you will not be afraid.” (Thomas, saying 37)

Jesus said, “He who will drink from my mouth will become like Me. I myself shall become he, and the things that are hidden will become revealed to him.”
(Thomas, saying 108)

In other words: the theory of the parable, from the perspective of the “atheist Jesus,” also fulfills this last task:

- it reveals the real image of Jesus the “Living,” because it is in the moment in which we become like Jesus that we understand who he was; this is also the moment in which he is “the living one” (because *we* become like him, and he like us). The Gospel of Thomas is a “portrait/self-portrait” of Jesus (and of his twins).

Let us consider two points. Firstly, for both the Jews and the Romans, atheism was a crime that could be punished with the death penalty.

In western Classical Antiquity, theism was the fundamental belief that supported the divine right of the state (Polis, later the Roman Empire). Historically, any person who did not believe in any deity supported by the state was fair game to accusations of atheism, a capital crime. For political reasons, Socrates in Athens (399 BCE) was accused of being “atheos” (“refusing to acknowledge the gods recognized by the state”). Despite the charges, he claimed inspiration from a divine voice (Daimon). Christians in Rome were also considered subversive to the state religion and persecuted as atheists. Thus, charges of atheism, meaning the subversion of religion, were often used similarly to charges of heresy and impiety.¹⁰

Secondly, the theory of the parable according to the “atheist Jesus” paradigm resembles the messianic secret, but its inner working is the opposite: the maieutic approach holds that the truth can be reached only through the asking of questions, therefore truth comes from “within.” In other words: Jesus is cryptic because his words must be interpreted. In canonical Gospels (especially in John’s Gospel), conversely, “Truth” descends from “above,” invisible to those not entitled to see it; in other words: Jesus veils his messiahship, and his “*Mysterium*” is accessible only through faith.

Jesus’s dangerous idea, an example: The road

Now that we have introduced the theory of the parable according to the “atheist Jesus” paradigm, let us pause for a moment to consider an example that will help us, among other things, to better frame our conclusions.

Let us return to the parable of the sower, and in particular to the first case: what message does it hide?

The term “road,” or “way,” or “path,” can only refer to faith (roads, like faith, are meant to guide and direct the masses)

Some examples, taken from the culture in which Jesus lived, that make use of the “road” as a symbol of faith include Proverbs 8:32 and Isaiah 30:21, and 35:8. We must also, however, consider the etymology of the word “Halack-

10. Wikipedia, “History of atheism.”

hah” which means “the path,” or “the way of walking,” and which is a fundamental element of the religious Jewish tradition.

According to “atheist Jesus,” those who gather along the way of the faith (in YHWH) will see their own seeds die!

The fundamental premise of faith breaks down!

We must also note the perfect consistency with the Gospel of Thomas: the one who breaks away from the faith (the road) will not “taste death” and therefore will “Live” like Jesus! A twin of Jesus!

How can all this be historically correct? If we analyze the canonical Gospels we can conclude, as noted by Professor Odifreddi, that: “on his part, in the most crucial circumstances, Jesus himself speaks by citing the words from the Bible” (Odifreddi 2007, 110), therefore Jesus must have held the Holy Scriptures to be an important reference for his life.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets;¹¹ I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

(Matthew 5:17–18)

Nevertheless, the theory of “atheist Jesus” sees the Gospel of Thomas as the surviving document that most faithfully represents the original sayings of Jesus. According to this same theory, the Synoptic Gospels represent an attempt to reconcile Jesus’s words and character with a cultural framework deeply rooted in faith (in the Holy Scriptures and in God, YHWH).

In support of this point, we can refer to a article by Vernon K. Robbins, Professor of New Testament and Comparative Sacred Texts at Emory University, on “Rhetorical Composition and Sources in the Gospel of Thomas”:

An amazing fact about the Gospel of Thomas is its complete lack of appeal to written text.

In contrast to the canonical gospels, the narrator never says, “As it is written in Isaiah the prophet” (Mark 1:1), “For so it is written by the prophet” (Matt 2:5), “As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet” (Luke 3:4), or “For these things took place that the writing might be fulfilled.”

(John 19:36)

In addition, the narrator of the Gospel of Thomas never attributes to Jesus a statement like “Have you never read what David did...” (Mark 2:25), “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone’” (Luke 4:4/Matthew 4:4), “This is he of whom it is written ...” (Matthew 11:10), “What is written in the law?

11. “The Law” = la Torah; “The Prophets” = “Nevi’im”; they are, respectively, the first and the second part of the “Tanakh,” the Jewish Bible.

How do you read?” (Luke 10:26), or “It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God’.” (John 6:45)

All the canonical gospels contain an orientation toward “what is written” both at the level of the narration of the story and in speech attributed to Jesus.

(Robbin 1997, 88)

Our interpretation of the parable of the sower has brought to light a hidden meaning that perfectly corresponds to a visible trait of the text of the Gospel of Thomas, a fundamental trait that distinguishes this Gospel from all other canonical Gospels and one that will necessarily “trouble” every believer (because faith, generally, is oriented towards the reverence of the Holy Scriptures).

“To make the outside like the inside”

In Saying 22 of the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus says that to become like a little child is to acquire the ability to “make the inside like the outside, and the outside like the inside.” This is exactly what this article seeks to accomplish as it connects hidden features of the Gospel of Thomas (the “inside”) to elements of its external form (the “outside,” that which is “visible”). This process also trains our minds to “strip” the religious phenomena of their “sacred appearance” and allows us to see them for what they really are, much as the child in Hans Christian Andersen’s famous tale sees the emperor for what he really is: a naked man.

In the same way, when we become like little children, “breaking the spell of religion” we will see in Sayings 7 and 87 an attack against the Torah that Jewish believers venerate (and “dress”) as a king.¹² This, however, is the subject of another article.

Instead, in this article, we will consider the question from a particular perspective, one that makes the “present like the past, and the past like the present”: faith prevents not only the faithful but also historians from fully accessing the revolutionary character of Jesus.

In fact, if we accept the hypothesis that the Gospel of Thomas is closer to the source than the canonical Gospels, the words of professor Odifreddi

12. *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* was published in 2006 by the American philosopher and cognitive scientist, Daniel Dennett; in it, he argues for a scientific analysis of religion in order to predict the future of this phenomenon. Dennett implies that the spell he hopes to break is not religious belief itself, but the conviction that religion is off-limits to scientific inquiry. [Wikipedia, entry: “Breaking the spell”]. By exhorting people to become like little children, Jesus is more audacious than Dennett because he identifies and breaks down the assumptions that cause the believer to see himself as the “first” in the knowledge of the divine.

must be rejected because they contradict both the style and the content of the source itself. Although this conclusion is based on cogent logic, it creates, nonetheless, a problem for historians, especially for those who believe in the “Jewish Jesus.”¹³

The problem with the believer in the “Jewish Jesus”

One of the fundamental principles of historical research holds that, when one studies historical characters, one must locate their thought within the cultural environment in which they lived, and in which they participated.

Now, the fundamental characteristic of Jewish culture was (and still is) faith—faith in God “from above” (YHWH) and faith in the Torah. Therefore, the idea that Jesus sought to attack YHWH and the Torah could appear to a historian to be a mistake, for it distances Jesus from the “way” of the faith, and hence from the “way” of the Jewish culture to which he belonged.

If, however, we seek to reintegrate a historical genius with the “*doxa*” (greek: “opinion of the masses”) of the culture in which that genius lived, we risk a grave mistake: the flattening of that historical figure.

In what sense? A genius has the ability to challenge the limits of his or her own culture, and in some cases, even to transcend, to overcome them; Jesus’s thought is not “*doxa*,” but “*para-doxa*,” that is “against to the opinion of the masses.”

If humanity were not able to produce brilliant minds, geniuses, it would also be unable to express cultural revolutions. Given that our cultural heritage and our civilizations are built on cultural revolutions, it follows that not all historical figures can be reconciled with the cultural contexts in which they were living. In other words, the most brilliant and creative minds shaped, at least partially, the cultures in which they were living, rather than only being shaped by them. Closely related to this point is the key problem with the “mythological Jesus,” as we shall see in the following section.

The problem with the believer in the “mythological Jesus”

Religious myths are born and develop by means of processes involving groups of people; but the concept of God fed to the masses runs the risk of becoming like “pearls before swine” (Saying 93). Those who delight in challenging the

13. A believer in the “mythological Jesus” might suggest that the “atheist Jesus” theory also maintains that the Synoptic authors have “invented” the character of Jesus; this is not case, however, for the “atheist Jesus” theory conceives of the Synoptic Gospels as an attempt to absorb and elaborate the historical figure of Jesus in terms they could comprehend within the only cultural framework available to them: faith.

conventions and prejudices of the masses know that...

If reasoning about a difficult problem (if reasoning about the problem of God and that of Man) **were like hauling** (were like having to walk along the “way”), **then several horses** (then a flock of sheep) **could haul more sacks of grain than one could** (would be more successful than the solitary sheep that has strayed from the “road”), **in this case I should agree that several reasoners would be worth more than one** (in this case, I should agree that several sheep would do better than the solitary one). **But reasoning** (But reasoning about these problems) **is like racing** (is like the solitary sheep that breaks away from the herd, Saying 107), **and not like hauling** (and it is not like the group of sheep that follow the way) **and a single steed** (and a “solitary” sheep, Sayings 16, 40 and 75) **can outrun a hundred plowhorses** (will get closer to the Father than a hundred sheep that have followed the “way,” and for this reason alone believe themselves to be “first”, Saying 4, Matthew 20:1–16).¹⁴

(Galileo Galilei, *Il Saggiatore* [*The Assayer*], 1623)

Revolutionary ideas can only be born from brilliant minds, and as it is impossible to imitate the mind of a genius, the atheist revolution that Jesus sought to sow among men is the best historical evidence we possess regarding his real existence.

The following example demonstrates the way in which the Synoptic Gospels rationalize an idea of Jesus’s, transforming it into something “normal.” Saying 107 (the parable of the “solitary sheep”) was edited in order to invert its meaning: “there will be more rejoicing for the sheep that will have come back to the flock, than for the one that has gone away,” Matthew 18:12–14 and Luke 15:4–7. In other words, if we want to bring the “solitary sheep” back to the “way,” we must follow the “way” traced by the Canonical authors, who “rationalize” the words and the historical figure of Jesus with respect to the only cultural/mental paradigm available to them: faith in YHWH.

This is also the “way” followed by believers in the “mythological Jesus” who, when they read the canonical Gospels, perceive only those elements created *ad hoc* by the Evangelists in order to shape the figure of Jesus in the “way” of the Torah.

Thus, faith prevents adherents of both theories – the Jewish and the mythological Jesus—from accessing his revolutionary ideas.

14. The text in bold are Galileo’s words, the text in parentheses attributed to Jesus. Here I suggest that they sound like “twins” (don’t they?). Although these two voices are separated in space and time, they sound alike because both men were able to challenge common thinking in the times they lived, the “doxa.” I stress diversity by using bold for Galileo and normal text for Jesus and, at the same time, I stress similarity by putting each part of the two discourses side by side!

The second question: why was the leaven put in the dough?

Having clarified the terms by which the theory of “atheist Jesus” defines the theory of the parable (which is a part of the second question posed in this article), and also the ways in which the “Jewish” and the “mythological Jesus” theories fall short in explaining the “historical Jesus,” we will now complete the analysis of the second question by examining the interpretation of the parable of the leaven according to the “atheist Jesus” perspective.

Let us begin with a very simple question: “where does the term ‘leaven’ occur in the Torah”? Thanks to modern technology, the answer is immediately accessible, and our attention is quickly drawn to the following passage (N.B. the words and phrases in bold).

Please read the extract from the book of Exodus (Exodus 12:1–30), before continuing to read this article. You can also read it in Appendix 2.

According to “the way” of the Torah, the Jews are to honor their pact of faith with God by abiding by two rites: the immolation of the lamb and the eating of unleavened bread.

- “No yeast is to be found in your houses” (Exodus 12:19), says YHWH (speaking with the voice of a dad).
- “Why is that?” we ask as if we were little children¹⁵ who, while listening to their own fathers, also watch their mothers prepare the dough without leaven, as prescribed by the tradition of the most important holiday of the Jewish calendar (the Jewish Passover).
- “Because he that shall eat leavened bread”—YHWH carries on in the voice of the father—“must be cut off from the community of Israel” (Exodus, 12:19).

The previous dialogue gives us to understand that we are dealing with a religious tradition which is articulated in the voices of elders, a tradition that is passed down from father to son over generations—note the frequency with which the expression “generation after generation,” and similar phrases, are repeated obsessively in the Torah.

The dialogue explains why Jesus speaks the way he does in Saying 16, among others, and why the Synoptic Gospels rationalize this bewildering attitude of Jesus in passages like Matthew 10:32–39, or Luke 12:49–53; he “who has ears” will also read Saying 65 by inverting its interpretation in the Synoptic Gospels (as in Mark 12:1–12).

15. Why did I write “as little children”? Because I am a disciple of Jesus, according to the definition offered by Thomas; However, *nota bene*, whereas in religious traditions it is children who question adults (as in Exodus 12:26), according to the teachings of Jesus we must invert this tradition by questioning a new born baby (as in Saying 4).

In conclusion: “if we put leaven in the flour in order to prepare the bread” (decrypted: “if we break down the pact of faith with YHWH”), then we will see the “kingdom of the Father” (and not that of “Heaven,” as suggested by the Synoptic Gospels. Please note that the expression “kingdom of Heaven” rarely occurs in the Gospel of Thomas). Therefore, whoever has ears will hear that when Jesus spoke about the “Father,” he was not referring to God, YHWH. In fact, as Saying 47 states, you cannot serve two masters.

The messianic secret: Contextualizing Jesus inside a faith-oriented mindset

Let us pause for a moment. Considering the huge potential for theological inconvenience posed by the parable of the leaven, let us ask ourselves: “why did the Synoptic authors decide to include it in their Gospels?”

The question is not trivial and the answer lies in the hypothesis that the Synoptic Gospels rationalize Jesus’ words.

It is important to note that around half of the sayings from the Gospel of Thomas have no parallel in the Synoptic Gospels. The “atheist Jesus” theory explains this feature easily on the ground that these sayings are particularly cryptic, or particularly disconcerting if seen through the lens of a faith-oriented mindset, think, for example, of Sayings 4, 7, 14, 42, 87, 98 or 105;¹⁶ therefore it is also particularly difficult to reconcile them with the Synoptic Gospels, which are based upon faith.

In fact, Saying 96 (the parable of the leaven) appears to be as cryptic as the abovementioned Sayings, which have no parallel in the Synoptic Gospels. Let us return to our question: “Why did they not ignore it, as they did with other cryptic or disconcerting sayings from the source?”

I propose not only that the Saying’s hidden message went unseen; but that they identified in the parable a suitable analogy to represent the growth of the “kingdom of God” from small beginnings. Once more, we are reminded of the *Mysterium* and the messianic secret in particular: the bewildering passages in the canonical Gospels that describe how Jesus wanted to keep his messiahship a secret.

The German theologian William Wrede proposed an outrageous theory in order to explain the messianic secret, suggesting that it should be regarded as a literary device created by the faith of the early church in order to explain the inconvenient feature “that Jesus did not give himself out as messiah” (Wrede 1901, 230).

16. These sayings are all explained in my book (Scalzo 2015); the video (Scalzo 2013) offers the interpretation of Saying 87.

As later criticism has shown, Wrede's theory is problematic, and other theories have been developed that demonstrate, with a certain degree of effectiveness, that the messianic secret could be historical.

This is a vexed question, in which the "Jesus of the faith" is so deeply intertwined with the "historical Jesus" that distinguishing historical evidence from the embellishments of a tradition of faith in the life of Jesus is not easy. In fact, one could say that more than a century of research has not resulted in a satisfactory solution.

The "atheist Jesus" theory sheds new light on the messianic secret; for example, it demonstrates that while Wrede's principal conclusion could be correct, his hypothesis that Jesus spoke in parables as an invention of the early church is definitively untrue.

Bearing all this in mind, it is clear that the messianic secret is the ideal problem on which to test the explanatory power of the "atheist Jesus" theory. In my next article,¹⁷ I will demonstrate that my theory is able to explain this matter more effectively than any other proposed to date. As for the present article we must now draw to a close, but first we must return to the first question.

The first question: Why become like a little child?

According to the culture in which Jesus lived, the doctrine of "*yetzer hara*" means that every newborn baby is born in a miserable state of separation from God; therefore, to become like a little child is to return to a state of separation from YHWH. The Gospel of Thomas is more specific about this point: Saying 4 clearly refers to circumcision when it states that "the adult must question a seven-day old baby about the place of life" (compare this with Genesis 17.12).¹⁸ The exegesis of Saying 4 is a crucial element of the "atheist Jesus" model and the fundamental theme of my books (Scalzo 2014, 2015).

There is, however, another fundamental aspect of this first question that must be understood. To explain it I turn, once again, to anthropology.

The book *The American Ways, an introduction to American culture* (Kearny *et al.* 1997) begins with that most fundamental question for all students of human nature: What is "culture"?

17. The subject is also developed in Scalzo 2014.

18. Genesis 17.1–14 offers us an incredible parallel with the concepts expressed in Exodus 12:1–30, allowing us to relate Saying 4 with certainty to the parable of the leaven. So here we have an element—absent from the synoptic Gospels—that, once decrypted, immediately relates to a parable present in them, forming a coherent mental picture. This is a recurrent pattern in these Gospels, as shown in my book (Scalzo 2014).

There are many definitions. Some would define it as the art, literature, and music of a people, their architecture, history, religion, their traditions. Others might focus more on the customs and specific behavior of the people. We choose to use a sociological definition of *culture as the way of life of a group of people, developed over time and passed down from generation to generation*. This broad definition includes every aspect of human life and interaction. (Kearny *et al.* 1997, vi, *emphasis theirs!*)

This definition certainly includes the way a certain cultural group conceives of God and the problem of Man. The first chapter of the book begins, appropriately enough, with the following quotation from Edward T. Hall, an American anthropologist:

Culture hides much more than it reveals, and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants. Years of study have convinced me that the real job is not understanding foreign culture, but to understand our own.

This passage suggests that only when you are able to separate yourself from the culture you live in, to look at it as if from a distance, as if you were a foreigner, only then will you be able to recognize in your own culture those elements that are invisible to its participants. Only then, for example, will you be able to see that the emperor is naked, or that the well (the “Torah”) is empty (Saying 74).

When you become like a little child you must strip yourself of all your adult certainties. Your culture and even your own natural language (through which you express your most intimate thoughts) will become foreign to you.

When you become like a little child, you can no longer use the “ipse dixit” to investigate and understand the problem of Man and that of God. As you lose the ability to speak words, let alone read them, Holy Scriptures will also become useless in your search for the divinity inside yourself, and outside yourself (Saying 3).

Furthermore, as it is the search for divinity that prevents a human being from “tasting death,” it is better for you to search for the “Father” before it is too late; in fact you cannot serve two masters at the same time (the two masters being the “Father” and “God, YHWH”).

Becoming like a little child!

I would argue this idea has been staring us in the face for almost 2000 years, but its radical modernity prevented us from grasping its profound meaning. Jesus was a man of the future who lived 2000 years ago; this is why his contemporaries were so puzzled by him, and also why modern people (and even athe-

ists) have been unable to fully recognize the revolutionary nature of his thought.

Jesus said, “Recognize what is in your sight, and that which is hidden from you will become plain to you. For there is nothing hidden which will not become manifest.” (Thomas, Saying 5)

With Jesus’s sayings before us—sayings which form a portrait of Jesus—his image will become manifest. The Gospel of Thomas offers us this tremendous opportunity! Translated literally from Greek, the term “Apocalypse” indicates a disclosure of knowledge, that is, a lifting of the veil or revelation, clearly relating to “secret things” that becomes manifest. The Gospel of Thomas is about the revelation of the kingdom of the Father, which is intertwined with the portrait of Jesus.

One could argue that it is anachronistic to attribute to Jesus such a modern attitude. It is impossible—one might say—that Jesus looked at religious phenomena as modern anthropologists would. It is impossible that Jesus had the capacity to break away from his Jewish culture and its faith in YHWH. Nonetheless, think of what happened the moment we tried to parse Jesus’s words within the Jewish culture in which he lived.

Jesus said, “The Kingdom is like a shepherd who had a hundred sheep. One of them, the largest, went astray. He left the ninety-nine sheep and looked for that one until he found it. When he had gone to such trouble, he said to the sheep, ‘I care for you more than the ninety-nine.’” (Thomas, Saying 107)

I speak from my own experience: I have searched for the “real” Jesus for many years, following his words even when the path was difficult (especially from an emotional perspective), and after having gone to such trouble I can say that I love Jesus more than the “way” that leads to YHWH (please note the peculiar inversion: the one who interprets is the shepherd, whereas Jesus/the twin/Thomas is the solitary sheep). I too broke away from the “way” of my faith, and experienced great trouble and great wonder, simultaneously.

Breaking down the pact of faith with YHWH

Let us briefly recall the key indications of Jesus’s desire to break down the pact of faith with YHWH (it is important to note that there are many other passages pointing in the same direction hidden both in the Gospel of Thomas and in the Synoptic Gospels).¹⁹

- Becoming like a little child.
- Going away from the herd.

19. My book (Scalzo 2015) deals with this topic in greater depth.

- The seed, which falls on the road, dies.
- The parable of the leaven.
- Jesus's method of teaching in parables (theory of the parable).
- Circumcision, as implicit in Saying 4.

As this article has hopefully shown, these topics, when seen through the lens of the “atheist Jesus” theory, possess a cogent logic. This robust theory is also able to elucidate quite clearly the points where the Synoptic gospels try to “rationalize” Jesus’s original words. Of course, some will reject the theory of “atheist Jesus”—as a matter of fact, in my books (Scalzo 2014, 2015) I have articulated the theory in such a way that it can be falsified. A word to those who believe in the “Jesus of the Faith”: I am not in possession of the “Truth.” As a disciple of Jesus, according to Thomas’s definition, I believe that the possession of absolute “Truth” lies outside the realm of human possibility. Moreover I cannot be an “emissary of God,” for the divinity is widespread in all humanity. Last, but not least, I cannot proselytize in the name of Jesus (Saying 23, that is, you cannot create a “religio” on the basis of Jesus’s words!). To those who are willing to meet the historical Jesus, however, please note the description in Saying 2 of the feeling of “the one who has found”: “When he becomes troubled, he will be astonished, and he will rule over the All.” Trouble and wonder, what a modern combination! These are the sentiments associated with Science and with Art: the two human activities that endow humanity with truth and beauty. Jesus was a genius who brought us both.

Conclusions

The “atheist Jesus” theory explains:

- the theory of the parable;
- the most important of Jesus’s teaching: “Become like a little child, if you want to see the kingdom of the Father”
- why Jesus’s parables deal with the key elements and symbols of Jewish culture (the vineyard, the leaven, the road, the circumcision, the lion, the salt—this last element is present only in the Synoptic Gospels—and so on) often adding the phrase “he who has ears, hear!”: these are not intended as meditations on God according to the Jewish tradition, on the contrary, they aim to “kill” God (Saying 98);
- the peculiar literary qualities of the Synoptic Gospels in which two opposing attitudes towards the divinity are blended together;

- the weak points of the two theories about the historical Jesus that are dominant today;
- the peculiar interaction between the “historical Jesus” and the “Jesus of the faith.”
- the defining trait of the Christian religion, which is engaged in a never-ending search for an impossible equilibrium between two opposite forces, on the one hand: the centrifugal and telluric thrust of the atheist Jesus who conceives of a divinity springing directly from humanity (making Christianity a religion of the individual); and on the other hand: the centripetal and dualistic pressure of the Jesus of the faith, who holds that divinity descends “from above” (and that Christianity is therefore a religion based on the concept of obedience and the herd).

This article also raises a fundamental question: what did Jesus really mean when he used the word “Father?” It is important to say that the concept itself of the “Father” is the ultimate image of Jesus’s humanistic thought, but this important and revolutionary concept is fully developed in my books (Scalzo 2014, 2015), although it will be the subject of another article.

As for the Christian religion, let me say one thing more. According to the “atheist Jesus” theory, the Christian faith transformed Jesus into the “son of YHWH” in order to counter his attack against religion. This incredibly daring feat brought divinity into humanity; not, however, as something which is embodied in it, but as an entity which descends on humanity “from above” (and therefore declining the humanistic original Jesus’s intention) and takes the shape of a single human being: Jesus of Nazareth. Two long citations from the Bible are provided.

Appendix 1

The exposition of the parable of the sower:

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew

up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, here it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear.” Matthew 13:1–9

The theory of the parable according to the Synoptic Gospels:

The disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?” He replied, “Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. This is why I speak to them in parables: “Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.” (13:14) In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.” But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. (Matthew 13:10–17)

The part in italics (Matthew 13:14-15) is a citation from the Old Testament (and in particular from the books of the Prophets, “Nevi’im” in Hebrew, referred to in the article.

The Synoptic explanation of the parable of the sower

Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. (Matthew 13:18–23)

Appendix 2

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, “This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his

family, one for each household. If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbor, having taken into account the number of people there are. You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat. The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the members of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the door-frames of the houses where they eat the lambs. That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast. Do not eat the meat raw or boiled in water, but roast it over a fire—with the head, legs and internal organs. Do not leave any of it till morning; if some is left till morning, you must burn it. This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the LORD's Passover.

"On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every first-born of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt.

[Note that YHWH, the powerful groom of Israel, was a jealous God. See also Deuteronomy 13:12–19].

I am the LORD.

The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.

"This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD—a lasting ordinance. For seven days you are to eat bread made without yeast. On the first day remove the yeast from your houses, for whoever eats anything with yeast in it from the first day through the seventh must be cut off from Israel. On the first day hold a sacred assembly, and another one on the seventh day. Do no work at all on these days, except to prepare food for everyone to eat; that is all you may do. "Celebrate the Festival of Unleavened Bread, because it was on this very day that I brought your divisions out of Egypt. Celebrate this day as a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. In the first month you are to eat bread made without yeast, from the evening of the fourteenth day until the evening of the twenty-first day. (12:19) For seven days no yeast is to be found in your houses. And anyone, whether foreigner or native-born, who eats anything with yeast in it must be cut off from the community of Israel. Eat nothing made with yeast. Wherever you live, you must eat unleavened bread."

Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the passover lamb. Take

a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe. None of you shall go out of the door of your house until morning. When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down.

“Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. (12:26) And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.’” Then the people bowed down and worshiped. The Israelites did just what the LORD commanded Moses and Aaron.

At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh, who sat on the throne, to the firstborn of the prisoner, who was in the dungeon, and the firstborn of all the livestock as well. Pharaoh and all his officials and all the Egyptians got up during the night, and there was loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead.

Exodus 12:1–30

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Santayana and His “Hero”

DANIEL SPIRO

Washington Spinoza Society

creedroom@danielspiro.com

ABSTRACT

Abstract text

Keywords

Keywords

Introduction

When George Santayana left us in 1952, it was easy to see where he ranked among philosophers in at least two respects. In the domain of eloquence, Santayana is clearly among his profession’s pantheon. Together with such predecessors as Plato, Rousseau, and Nietzsche, Santayana is one of philosophy’s greatest prose stylists. Virtually all of his books have a number of quotable passages, most famously his comment that “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (Santayana 1905, 284). Santayana also has to his name a best-selling philosophical novel, *The Last Puritan*, as well as his massive autobiography, *Persons and Places*, an enjoyable read known as much for its literary flair as for the profundity of its ideas.

Unfortunately, in another domain, Santayana’s legacy hasn’t fared nearly as well. I’m referring to his originality ... or should I say, his lack thereof. Near the end of *Persons and Places*, Santayana couldn’t resist the chance to mock his own reputation. Referring to a British thinker who was asked why Santayana was “overlooked among contemporary philosophers,” Santayana quotes this man as saying “Because he has no originality. Everything in him is drawn from Plato and Leibniz.” (Santayana 1987, 541)

Now that's a little harsh, and hopefully Santayana recognized as much. But there is some truth to what that Brit was talking about, especially if you're allowed to replace one of the names he mentioned. There is no doubt that Santayana was influenced deeply by Plato, steeped as he was in looking at reality in terms of ideals and essences. But Santayana's other greatest influence was the man he would acknowledge to be his favorite philosopher of the last millennium. I am referring to Leibniz's contemporary, Baruch Spinoza.

Over and over again, Santayana reveals his debt to Spinoza. In "several respects," Santayana said, Spinoza "laid the foundation of my philosophy" (Santayana 1987, 234). Santayana elsewhere referred to Spinoza as his "hero" (Santayana 1987, 522). But even more meaningful than such tributes was Santayana's statement that of all the modern philosophers, only Spinoza was a philosopher "in the vital sense" (Santayana 1922, 120). By that, Santayana meant that Spinoza, unlike the other moderns in his field, "substitute[d] the society of ideas for that of things[,]...survey[ed] the world of existence in its truth and beauty rather than in its personal perspectives[,]...practiced...spiritual discipline, suffered [a] change of heart,...and [did not] live on exactly like other professors" (Santayana 1922, 120–121). For Santayana, to live "like other professors" was tantamount to being a bore.

In this article, I will argue that Santayana's philosophy is best appreciated as a complement to Spinoza's. In some respects, Santayana disagreed with the sage of Amsterdam, but much more often, especially as he grew older, his ideas came to resemble those of his hero. To the student of Spinoza like me, perhaps what is most exciting about reading Santayana is locating instances where he does not merely parrot Spinoza, but attempts to further develop and improve upon his mentor's teachings. If Hegel is correct that to be a philosopher, "one must first be a Spinozist" (Yovel 1989, 29), rest assured that Santayana took that admonition to heart. But he also appreciated that to be a philosopher, one must not *only* be a Spinozist. After all, who was Spinoza but a mortal who lived precisely half as long as Santayana and unfortunately had to leave many of the great questions unexamined? We are privileged that Santayana walked the earth for 88 years and dedicated his most mature decades to addressing some of those very questions in his characteristically eloquent manner.

Santayana the man

In order truly to be original, perhaps a thinker must first be rooted in a particular culture—something which the genius either gulps down with gusto, like a Maimonides, or comes passionately to question, like a Spinoza. And

from these roots, the thinker can shoot up like a sequoia to heights that have never yet been attained.

If that is true, perhaps Santayana's lack of originality is a function of the rootless life in which he lived, not merely in his youth but as an adult as well. George Santayana was born in December 1863 in Madrid, the child of two Spanish parents. As a young boy, he resided for years with his father in the Spanish town of Avila, while his mother lived across the pond in Boston, raising the children of her first marriage to an American of English descent. At the age of nine, Santayana joined his mother and half-siblings and spent the next 40 years of his life based in America. Most of those years were centered around Harvard, where he attended college and then served as a professor of philosophy. Santayana never became an American citizen, however, and as a Harvard professor, he considered himself to be an outsider, preferring, in his own words, the company of "undergraduates and fashionable ladies" (Santayana 1987, 395), and spending his holidays abroad. In 1912, he resigned his Harvard professorship and freed himself to live full-time in his continent of birth. His homes included London, Oxford, Cambridge, Paris, Madrid, Avila, the Riviera, Florence and, ultimately, Rome, where he spent the final years of his life.

While he wrote so masterfully in English, Santayana never felt a sense of belonging in the United States, or in any other English-speaking country. Then again, he never felt at home in France, Spain, or Italy either. While technically a citizen of Spain throughout his life, he saw himself primarily not as a citizen, but as a habitual traveler. Indeed, in language that provides a glimpse of his universalistic philosophy, the older Santayana compared himself to a temporary guest in a "busy and animated establishment" otherwise known as the World (Santayana 1987, 539). He claimed that the guest "has no right to demand what is not provided. He must be thankful for any little concessions that may be made to his personal tastes, if he is tactful and moderate in his requirements, pays his bills promptly and gives decent tips" (Santayana 1987, 540). In the idea of a cosmic host, you'll find perhaps the closest metaphor for the way he approached his great beloved, Nature.

As to the way he treated those natural creatures otherwise known as human beings, Santayana is often referred to as aloof and elitist. If you read his autobiography, you can tell that he loved numerous individuals, but he clearly coveted the company of luminaries, and seemed to observe human society the way a scientist might observe an ant hill. For his friends, the mature Santayana preferred brilliant malleable young minds, accomplished intellectuals, public benefactors...and, last but not least, dead poets and philosophers.

God...or nature

Any discussion of Santayana as a disciple of Spinoza must begin with God, *or Nature*, a term that Spinoza sometimes utilized to refer to the deity. For Spinoza, God is the Omnificent One. Everything that is done, said, or thought—be it now or at some other time—is done, said, or thought by God. Muslims adopt that idea to refer to Allah, claiming that Allah alone is responsible for all that occurs. But in their case, they speak of Allah as being metaphysically separate from nature, whereas in Spinoza’s case, he posits no such separation. All the animals, vegetables, particles and thoughts in the world are *in* Spinoza’s God, rather than being the fruits of a separate “creation.”

Spinoza’s God is also the great beloved. To be sure, such love was unrequited, for to truly love Spinoza’s God is to not endeavor for Him to love you in return (Spinoza 1955, 256, Prop. V.33). Still, this is the one type of unrequited love that brings joy, and not depression. Spinoza centered his ethical philosophy on the goal of blessedness, and centered his concept of blessedness on the “*intellectual love of God*.” Spinoza would surely have adopted Einstein’s maxim that the most incomprehensible thing about the world is its comprehensibility, which is another way of saying that we can come to know Spinoza’s God much more intricately than at first it may appear. To be sure, Spinoza recognized that there is much about God that is transcendent; he expressed this by saying that God has infinite attributes, of which we know only two: extension and thought. Still, to admit that we are far from omniscient when it comes to God is not to say that we need to be essentially ignorant about Him. After all, to Spinoza, the eternal God is compelled by His nature to express Himself just as He has done in this world, and the results of this self-expression are on display in the form of natural laws. As these laws are the windows on God, the study of science, math, and philosophy can enable God to come into deeper and deeper focus. Armed with this powerful vision, we can come to encounter natural forms—be they people, animals, or rocks—with an intuitive sense of their relationship with both other natural forms and with the infinite, eternal, and yes, transcendent *Unity* that grounds all that exists. That is what Spinoza meant by the intellectual love of God. That is what he understood as the path to blessedness.

But enough with the mentor. Now, let’s look at the protégé. He emulated his predecessor by refusing to accept any God steeped in mythology or revelation. In fact, when he wrote *Reason in Religion*, one of his earliest works on the topic, Santayana revealed the atheism of his youth. In referring to Spinozism, he said that this philosophy “passed very justly for atheism, for

that divine governance and policy had been denied by which alone God was made manifest to the Hebrews" (Santayana 1982, 145). In other words, the young Santayana was willing to accept that the word "God" was best used to refer to the mythical judge and legislator who mankind created from our ideals and for our own utilitarian purposes; brilliant poetry, perhaps, but literally nothing more than a phantom.

The older Santayana, from his perch in Rome, remained bemused by the teachings of theology. Yet he also came to appreciate Spinoza's wisdom in attempting to reclaim the name of God, rather than ceding its meaning to ancient peoples and modern theologians. This is especially evident from a scene in Santayana's autobiography, where he describes an event that transpired while he was touring the historical Italian town of Paestum.¹

At the railroad station at Paestum, Santayana heard a little girl ask her daddy if the amazing train that they were witnessing was made by God. To that question, Santayana explained, the father replied, "No, God didn't make it. It was made by the hand of man. *Le braccia dell'uomo l'hanno fatto.*" And then Santayana went on to describe the man as "puff[ing on] his cigar with a defiant resentful self-satisfaction as if he were addressing a meeting of conspirators."

Santayana himself recognized that for most people, or most *professors*, this scene would have been innocuous enough. But Santayana fancied himself a philosopher in the vital sense of the term. As such, he was horrified by this "vulgar" atheist.

"I saw the claw of Satan strike that child's soul and try to kill the idea of God in it. Why should I mind that? Was the idea of God alive at all in me? No: if you mean the traditional idea. But that was a symbol, vague, variable, mythical, anthropomorphic; the symbol for an overwhelming reality, a symbol that named and unified in human speech the incalculable powers on which our destiny depends. To observe, record, and measure the method by which these powers operate is not to banish the idea of God; it is what the Hebrews called meditating on his ways. The modern hatred of religion is not, like that of the Greek philosophers, a hatred of poetry, for which they wished to substitute cosmology, mathematics, or dialectic, still maintaining the reverence of man for what is super-human. The modern hatred of religion is hatred of the truth, hatred of all sublimity, hatred of the laughter of the gods. It is puerile human vanity trying to justify itself by a lie. Here, then, most opportunely, at the railway station returning from Paestum, where I had been admiring the courage

1. Santayana's philosophical reflections of his trip to Paestum can be found in Santayana 1987, 451–454. While Santayana does not specify the precise date of the visit, it appears to have taken place in 1903.

and the dignity with which the Dorians recognized their place in nature, and filled it to perfection, I found the brutal expression of the opposite mood, the mood of impatience, conceit, low-minded ambition, mechanical inflation, and the worship of material comforts.”

If you read that passage closely, you will notice that Santayana shared with the vulgar atheist the distaste for conventional theology. But there is a sense of spirituality that he retained, and it wounded him to see an adult snuff out that sense in an impressionable child. The older Santayana, like his mentor, appreciated how dependent we are on nature and her “incalculable powers.” No less than Spinoza, Santayana also grasped the notion of transcendence, for which he substituted the word “sublimity.” And he appreciated that by engaging in science, we are hardly banishing the idea of the Divine Being, but actually “meditating on His ways.” Indeed, it is clear that the mature Santayana shares Spinoza’s “reverence for what is super-human.” In all these respects, the pupil took on the mantle of the teacher.

In 1932, when he was asked to come to the Hague to speak in celebration of the 300th anniversary of Spinoza’s birth, Santayana delivered a paper entitled *Ultimate Religion*, in which he grappled squarely with the question of his own belief in God. His paper revealed not merely his debt to Spinozism, but some of the ways in which the two philosophers diverged.

One glaring difference between these two thinkers involves their respective styles. Santayana, far from emulating his mentor’s “geometrical method,” believed that philosophy shouldn’t be about proofs, but *vision*. “I detest disputation and distrust proofs and disproofs,” he wrote (Woodward 1988, 66). Instead, he thought of his task as revealing intellectual vistas, or to use the term that he invoked at the Hague, “expressing an impression.”

As to the impression he expressed, it was not nearly as mystical as that of Spinoza. To be sure, Santayana claimed that we are all dependent on a single “*omnifcent*” natural power. Yet, he refused to speculate on whether that power is “simple or compound, continuous or spasmodic, intentional or blind” (Santayana 1996, 320). Santayana would only say that he stands before it, “simply receptive, somewhat as, in Rome, I might stand before the great fountain of Trevi” (Santayana 1996, 320). For Spinoza, the sense of unity was imbedded in the concept of a limitless deity that both underlies and contains all that exists, now and forever. For Santayana, the sense of unity was wrapped up in how he viewed his own humanity. Santayana described the human condition—or at least his own—as that of a “suffering spirit” overtaken by the natural power on which it depends, and “tragically single,

no matter how multifarious may be the causes of [its] destiny” (Santayana 1996, 320). You see, just as Spinoza’s heresy was a response to his native Judaism, Santayana’s was a response to his native Christianity.

At the Hague, Santayana began by praising Spinoza’s courage. Then, he proceeded to model that attribute by explaining certain respects in which he found Spinoza’s philosophy to be misguided. It couldn’t possibly have been the kind of *tribute* his audience had expected, but to the student of either philosopher, it’s a gold mine.

Santayana’s primary criticism of Spinoza concerns the extent to which Spinoza viewed God as intelligible to the human mind. Quite clearly, Santayana viewed himself as doing to Spinoza what Spinoza did to all the theologians before him—namely, debunking anthropocentric myths. For Spinoza, it was enough to point out that his God does NOT love us. God is NOT merciful, just, patient, vengeful, or willful. God did NOT communicate directly to Moses from a burning bush, or part the sea, or torture the Egyptians. But what God HAS done is reveal Himself in great detail to those who study logic, science, and math, and who have learned to nurture virtuous emotions. In particular, Spinoza’s God has revealed regularities in nature, and it is our blessed privilege as rational entities to learn about and love these regularities, and all the unique forms that similarly manifest the divine nature. For just as the truths of math or logic are eternal—meaning that they necessarily exist as part of the very fabric of being—so can this be said about *ALL* things and ideas that occur in nature. To Spinoza, everything that exists represents the unfolding through space, time and infinite other dimensions of a God whose nature is simply to express Himself. And we are blessed by the fact that it is in our nature, if we develop our rational faculty, to discern much of what God has expressed.

So said the mentor. But to Santayana, that perspective didn’t go far enough. We mustn’t stop with the truth that God is not a man. We mustn’t stop with the Spinozist claim that to compare God’s mind with ours is like comparing the constellation of the dog with the animal that barks (Spinoza 1955, 61, Prop. I.17.N). We must recognize that this intelligibility Spinozists speak of—this *comprehensibility*, to use Einstein’s word—is a myth. We must recognize that God, if there is such a thing, is truly infinite, and that we are but tiny creatures by comparison. To quote Santayana, “there may be dark abysses before which intelligence must be silent, for fear of going mad” (Santayana 1996, 322). There may also be different universes. For surely, Santayana thought, the laws of this universe are *arbitrary*.

In Part I of his *Ethics*, Spinoza claimed that “things could not have been

brought into being in any other manner” (Spinoza 1955, 70, Prop. I.33). In response, Santayana referred to a human being as an “accident in an accident” (Santayana 1987, 411). Rather than viewing existence as did Spinoza as the unfolding of perfect, and ultimately immutable Being, he saw it as irrational, absurd and constantly changing. For the Spinozist idea that everything is necessary, Santayana substituted the idea that because we cannot know anything about what is necessary, we are best off viewing everything as contingent. To be sure, everything might ultimately be unified by a single, great power, but we flatter ourselves to think that we humans can speak about such a power, let alone comprehend it.

How did Santayana come to see human intelligence in such an uncharitable light? Perhaps it comes from his view that minds are mere byproducts of matter, not as Spinoza said, a co-extensive attribute of God. For Spinoza, God, as a unity, is the sole causative agent in the world, and both mind and matter are truly the same thing (attributes of the divine substance) perceived in two different ways (Spinoza 1955, 86–87, Prop. II.7, N). To Santayana, however, matter—in other words, *Nature*—is supreme, and minds are clearly subordinate. It is the material realm only that moves and shakes reality. Our minds are left to witness the world, but they can ultimately do nothing about changing it.

I’ve often wondered why Santayana came to elevate matter so much. My own vision is more like that of Spinoza, who placed mind and matter on the same pedestal. But that is not to say that Santayana hasn’t scored points with me in this dispute with his mentor. While Santayana may aptly be faulted for turning matter into an idol, Spinoza may also be taken to task for the humility he lacked in exaggerating the potency of the human mind.

Spinoza, remember, was the product of seventeenth century Europe, a time when incessant religious wars were threatening the foundations of our emotional security. Stepping into this breach, a heretic like Spinoza must have felt obliged to offer his own brand of security—his own Rock of Gibraltar. Hence, the constant use of the word “God” for Being itself, the elevation of the concept of “blessedness,” and the assurance that we the people can largely comprehend the ways of God, despite God’s eternal and infinite nature.

Santayana revered Spinoza for courageously challenging so much of the conventional wisdom of the seventeenth century. But now, centuries later, we are able to challenge still more. If we join Spinoza in promoting the idea of God as truly infinite, absolute, and limitless, are we not obliged to laugh at the notion that this God is so profoundly intelligible to the human mind? Are we not obliged to at least question any claim that *the* universe, as we call it, is

the *only* universe? Are we not compelled to ask whether the order we observe isn't a mere blip in a larger realm of chaos? Or whether what transpires here is nothing more than an accident of irrational matter?

Ultimately, if you compare the two perspectives of these philosophers when it comes to God, or nature, you are left with a contrast between what they perceive as the great Unity. As I have noted, Spinoza located that Unity in Being itself, which he alternatively referred to as Nature, Substance, and God. And we the people find ourselves *in* God, together with all other animals, vegetables, minerals, particles, thoughts, and an infinity of other things that we are too primitive to perceive. But at least what we can perceive we can encounter with reason and love, and that is the key to our happiness. By contrast, to Santayana, we know little about the unity that grounds all of life, or even *if* life is grounded by a single, simple power. What we do know is the unity that stems from being human. A unity born of solitude. Of mortality. Of the knowledge that what is most meaningful to us, our spirit, is completely impotent in the face of the natural forces we constantly encounter.

Recall Santayana's precise words in referring to his conception of unity: it is found “in my own solitude, in the unity of this suffering spirit.... My destiny is single, tragically single, no matter how multifarious may be the causes of my destiny” (Santayana 1996, 320). It is precisely this sense of singularity, this sense of oneness, that determined Santayana's perspective on ethics—just as Spinoza's sense of ethics was determined by basking in the oneness of an all-encompassing, transcendent, and yet largely-knowable God.

Living the good life

In the realm of ethics, Santayana's autobiography included both a statement of his debt to Spinoza and a description of his mentor's shortcomings. Let's begin with the former: “I regard Spinoza as the only modern philosopher in the line of orthodox physics...Orthodox physics should inspire and support orthodox ethics; and perhaps the chief source of my enthusiasm for him has been the magnificent clearness of his orthodoxy on this point. Morality is something natural. It arises and varies...with the nature of the creature whose morality it is. Morality is something relative: not that its precepts in any case are optional or arbitrary; for each man they are defined by his innate character and possible forms of happiness and action. His momentary passions or judgments are partial expressions of his nature, but not adequate or infallible; and ignorance of the circumstances may mislead in practice, as ignorance of self may mislead in desire. But this fixed good is relative to each species and each individual; so that in considering the moral ideal of any philosopher,

two questions arise. First, does he, like Spinoza, understand the natural basis of morality, or is he confused and superstitious on the subject? Second, how humane and representative is his sense for the good, and how far, by his disposition or sympathetic intelligence, does he appreciate all the types of excellence toward which life may be directed?" (Santayana 1987, 234–235).

Before we get to Santayana's criticism of Spinoza's status as a moralist, let's first understand his tribute, for it is both massive and insightful. To begin, Santayana praises Spinoza for once again basing his philosophy on natural wisdom, and not revelation...or, if you prefer, mythology. Spinoza is said to have accurately located the source of morality in "the nature of the creature whose morality it is." Spinoza is what is known among philosophers as both a psychological and ethical egoist. He believes that we do in fact act in a way that we believe is most conducive to our own greatest good, and that we *ought* in fact do so. To Spinoza, as for Santayana, there is simply no alternative.

And what is that good? Here are Spinoza's words, which Santayana would surely adopt: "[W]e in no case desire a thing because we deem it good, but contrariwise, we deem a thing good because we desire it; consequently, we deem a thing evil that which we shrink from; everyone, therefore, according to his own particular emotions, judges or estimates what is good, what is bad, what is better, what is worse" (Spinoza 1955, 156, Prop. III, 39, N). So, in an attempt to lead the good life, we do, and in fact *must*, follow our own unique desires and other emotions.

Santayana uses these ideas to embrace moral relativism...but only up to a point. The good, he argues, is different for each person and for each species, but that is not to say that the precepts of morality are "optional or arbitrary." Thus, there are some moral issues on which all members of our species are obliged to take a single position—such as living in accordance with the Golden Rule. And there are other moral issues on which different people can appropriately take different positions in accordance with their unique natures. But even with respect to these latter issues, for any given person, the choice may be clear enough that he or she should feel *compelled* to follow a particular path. If, on the one hand, I'm able to play ball like Michael Jordan or, on the other hand, practice law like Dan Spiro, I'd better choose that first path. After all, for Santayana, as for Spinoza, our goal in life should be to best cultivate our unique powers as an individual and therefore live in harmony with our nature.

In all those respects, Santayana said, Spinoza was his "master and model" (Santayana 1987, 235). And yet, when push came to shove, Santayana proclaimed that Spinoza's judgment *lacked* authority on moral matters. The reason for this assessment stems from Spinoza's allegedly narrow sense of focus

on what it means to live the good life. According to Santayana, a moral authority must be a “complete humanist,” and Spinoza was not (Santayana 1987, 235). “He had no idea of human greatness and no sympathy with human sorrow. His notion of the soul was too plebian and too quietistic. He was a Jew not of *Exodus* or *Kings* but of Amsterdam. He was too Dutch, too much the merchant and artisan, with nothing of the soldier, the poet, the prince, or the lover” (Santayana 1987, 235).

Famously, when Napoleon set his eyes on the multi-dimensional Goethe, he proclaimed, “Voilà un homme.” Santayana would have concurred in that assessment, but would not have said the same about Spinoza. Behold an *intellect*, he would have said. Perhaps even, he would have added, behold a *saint*. But Spinoza’s life was too imbalanced—too cerebral—for him to have been viewed by Santayana as a true *sage* when it comes to making moral judgments.

Santayana’s critique impacts profoundly on his view of blessedness. To Santayana, the wise followers of Spinoza’s fundamental ethical insights should not satisfy themselves with the so-called *intellectual* love of God. “The intellect,” Santayana argued, “is not the whole of human nature, nor even the whole of pure spirit in man. Reason may be the differentia of man; it is surely not his essence. His essence, at best, is animality qualified by reason” (Santayana 1996, 322). Hence, when we attempt to lead the good life, we are well advised to cultivate not only our ability to comprehend the world, but, for example, also our ability to appreciate all forms of beauty and to use our powers so as to satisfy the needs of other people. “That the intellect might be perfectly happy in contemplating the truth of the universe,” Santayana said, “does not render the universe good to every other faculty; good to the heart, good to the flesh, good to the eye, good to the conscience or [good to] the sense of justice. Of all systems an optimistic system is the most oppressive” (Santayana 1996, 323).

If you had trouble understanding that last sentence, consider another way in which Santayana borrowed from Spinoza: he grounded his metaphysical philosophy on the idea that human conduct was completely dependent on the larger forces of nature or God, and yet nevertheless focused his ethical philosophy on finding a path to human freedom. As a result, whatever is most oppressive is obviously to be avoided at all costs. To Santayana, Leibniz’s idea that this is the “best of all possible worlds,” despite all the pain and suffering within it, is not only intolerable, it’s oppressive. As I’ll explain momentarily, it wasn’t Leibniz that Santayana used to supplement his Spinozism so much as Plato.

Returning now to the issue of blessedness, recall that Santayana perceived the human condition in the world as, at best, a simple guest in a grand establish-

ment who dares not ask for much, lest he lose what little he has. Recall that he also viewed the human spirit as isolated, characterized by suffering, and ultimately dependent on the ostensibly-arbitrary whirlwind known as the realm of matter, or nature. How then does such a solitary soul find blessedness?

Santayana's answer is given in a simple sentence, one that combines both his Spinozism *and* his Platonism. The answer, is by *living in the eternal*.

Google that phrase and the word "Spinoza" and you'll immediately see one Santayana reference after another. It was Santayana who used the phrase to describe his own philosophy, even though Spinoza was its primary inspiration. "Living in the Eternal" became the title of a nice little book by Anthony Woodward, which was subtitled "A Study of George Santayana." Woodward began the book by referring to a *Life* magazine story about Santayana published in 1944, soon after the Allied soldiers arrived in Rome. Santayana was discussed by the *Life* journalist as follows: "Of communism and fascism," he said, 'doubtless there are good things in both.' Of war he knew nothing. Said he, "I live in the Eternal" (Woodward 1988, 1).

That is, of course, a Spinozist ideal. In the final part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza stated that even though a person's consciousness does not continue after his body dies, "the human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the body, but there remains something of it which is eternal." (Spinoza 1955, 259, V.33). Many have been puzzled by that statement, but not Santayana. His explanation, provided in an Introduction to a 1910 publication about Spinoza's *Ethics*, reveals much about Spinoza's notion of immortality, and perhaps even more about Santayana's conception of the good life.

"To see things under the form of eternity is to see them in their historic and moral truth, not as they seemed as they passed, but as they remain when they are over.... A man who understands himself under the form of eternity knows the quality that eternally belongs to him, and knows that he cannot wholly die, even if he would; for when the movement of his life is over, the truth of his life remains. The fact of him is a part forever of the infinite context of facts. This sort of immortality belongs passively to everything; but to the intellectual part of man it belongs actively also, because, in so far as it knows the eternity of truth, and is absorbed in it, the mind *lives* in that eternity. In caring only for the eternal, it has ceased to care for that part of itself which can die....[Of all the animals, man] alone knows that he must die; but that very knowledge raises him, in a sense, above mortality, by making him a sharer in the vision of eternal truth. The truth is cruel, but it can be loved, and it makes free those who have loved it." (Santayana 1910, xviii–xix)

At the end of his philosophical novel, Santayana pointed out the clearest example of what is eternal for human beings: namely, the stories of our own lives. Those story lines are timeless, just as the greatest ideas of humankind are timeless. What is not timeless are most of the worldly concerns of petty functionaries, which Plato compared to shadows on a cave wall.

Note also the way Santayana ended his statement about eternity—by reminding us of both the cruelty of truth, and of the liberating quality of love. It is precisely in that liberating ideal that Santayana’s *Platonism*, as opposed to his Spinozism, comes to the fore.

Spinoza’s beloved, you see, isn’t the God that his ancestors described in the form of myths and legends. His God is what is *real*. Spinoza preached an intellectual love. Not a love of some distant, mythical heaven, but a love of what we find here on Earth with our minds. A love of what is apparent to our senses, but also knowable through our intuition. Ultimately, he preached a love of the One who, in the words of the Qur’an, is closer to us than our jugular vein.²

Santayana’s beloved isn’t so much the real, as the *ideal*. For him, what is most real is matter. And we all can concur about how imposing and devastating the realm of matter can be. But we also are privileged to possess what he called spirit, or consciousness, and that spirit allows us to construct in our mind a realm of ideal essences. To Santayana, an essence refers to any unit of rational meaning. Taken collectively, the realm of essences are the determinate forms we construct to find meaning out of the flux and chaos of nature. It is in this realm that we can find our salvation, our blessedness, on Earth—in other words, we are able not only to live in the eternal, but to live *happily* in the eternal, at least for periods of time.

You can see already why Santayana so valued the arts, for they provided temporary respites where the “suffering soul” can glimpse some idealized reality. But more than finding those glimpses in art, he found them in society. Santayana’s goal was to look at any particular person and recognize that person’s ideal state. When Santayana constructed his own “ultimate religion” during his speech at the Hague, he said that “to love things spiritually” means to “see them all prophetically in their possible beauty. To love things as they are would be a mockery of things: a true lover must love them as they would wish to be” (Santayana 1996, 323).

When we see a klutzy golfer who looks like George Costanza, does that mean we should envision him as the golfer he would wish to be, say Tiger

2. Surah 50, verse 16.

Woods? No. But when we see that klutzy Costanza, Santayana would argue, we are still obliged to imagine him at his best—and not just as a golfer, but as a person. If we wish to live a blessed life, we must find in every soul “that desired perfection, that eternal beauty, which lies sealed in the heart of each living thing” (Santayana 1996, 326).

Imagine encountering a brilliant, but troubled man, who was recently caught engaging in violent criminal activity. Would Santayana suggest envisioning that this man has instead lived an exemplary life? Of course not. Santayana was an authentic philosopher, and as such, he was too devoted to the *truth* to adopt such a perspective. But we need not become a Pollyanna to heed Santayana’s advice. For example, we could choose to isolate the brilliance in this criminal’s soul, and conceive of a future stage of his development in which he’s turned into a creative artist who can channel his violent impulses constructively through literature or music.

In short, at the time this brilliant criminal was locked up for his horrible deeds, his eternal beauty truly was surely “sealed” in his heart. But to quote Spinoza, “all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare” (Spinoza 1955, 271, V.42, N). And perhaps the job of he who wishes truly to live in the eternal requires the difficult task of identifying even in the most depraved among us, that which is beautiful.

Thinking dialectically

In his book, *George Santayana, Literary Philosopher*, Irving Singer contends that Santayana viewed the life of reason as the harmonizing of opposing poles. Singer provided several examples of these poles, most notably, “Platonism vs. naturalism, classicism vs. romanticism, idealization vs. realism, and poetry vs. prose” (Singer 2000, 131). Truly, a whole chapter could be written on how Santayana addressed *any* pair of these poles, including his attempt to synthesize them into a more nuanced and insightful approach than what has come before him.

Undoubtedly, Singer is correct that Santayana was a devotee of synthesis who entertained a variety of viewpoints—in ethics, metaphysics, even politics. I’ve said little about that last domain only because it seemed to be relatively less important to Santayana. But I can assure you that he entertained political ideas, for there was plenty of real estate in his head for intellectual play, and a there were few playing fields in which he refused to join in the action. To summarize the voyage of his political thoughts, the young Santayana flirted with ideologies like socialism and fascism because he was turned off by the busyness and petty concerns of liberals, and was attracted to what

he called a "consecrated" life—meaning one firmly devoted to exalted aims. By the 1940s, though, as you might imagine, Santayana came more deeply to appreciate the virtues of liberalism when compared to its alternatives.

If asked to identify one dichotomy that best defines Santayana's philosophy, I would point to the contrast between the "spiritual" and the "pious." Santayana defined these two concepts in opposition to each other, and yet it is clear that he viewed harmonizing them as among his greatest tasks. It is also clear that between these two poles, Santayana preferred one intellectually and the other viscerally.

Piety and spirituality were the main focal points of *Reason in Religion*. Santayana defined piety as "man's reverent attachment to the sources of his being and the steadying of his life by that attachment." He stated that "pious men discern God in the excellent of things" (Santayana 1982, 142), and that his own atheism, "like that of Spinoza, is true piety toward the universe and denies only gods fashioned by men in their own image, to be servants of their human interests" (Santayana 1922, 246).

Santayana wrote eloquently about classical architecture and virtues, and had a healthy respect for institutions that have stood the test of time, including his native Catholicism. But in terms of piety, I seriously doubt Santayana had a better model than Spinoza himself. He spoke of Spinozism as adopting the view that man should be a pious Levite, with the stars shining above him. In such a realm, there is no room for human passion. And as you should know by now, Santayana needed to make room for such passion.

Or at least, so he wrote. In *Religion in Religion*, after discussing piety, Santayana went on to say that "religion has a second and *higher* side, which looks to the end toward which we move.... This aspiring side of religion may be called Spirituality. Spirituality is nobler than piety, because what would fulfill our being and make it worth having is what alone lends value to that being's source" (Santayana 1982, 193). Man, Santayana continued, "is spiritual when he lives in the presence of the ideal" (Santayana 1982, 193). To Santayana, spirituality refers to our passion to make a difference in the world. Note that he is talking about the spirit in the classical, not the Christian sense of the term—when he says "spirit," he means it in the most robust way possible.

So where is the synthesis? In the heroism of the Greeks and Romans, to which Santayana so often returned in his writing. He spoke of the spiritual virility that manifested itself at times as romancing a woman, and at other times as conquering a nation. This virility, though, can be found in abundance in classical literature, architecture, and yes, religion—all of which we associate with piety. To use Plato's terminology, Santayana discussed with reverence that

human capacity known as the thymos—the spirited faculty—which is so pronounced among the great warriors. He clearly admired those who appreciated the classical forms and teachings, but who were not content simply to watch. He admired those who aspire to change the world, rationally identifying their goals, and then courageously doing whatever it takes to bring these goals to fruition. Similarly, he hated mysticism in all its forms, contending that it is “the most primitive of feelings and only visits formed minds in moments of intellectual arrest and dissolution” (Santayana 1982, 277).

That was the teaching of Santayana the philosopher, or at least the young Santayana. But if you read his autobiography, you will see that Santayana *the man* was no Pericles, and not even a Goethe. This was a man who confined his life to reading, writing, talking, watching, and sleeping. That’s pretty much it. Lacking as he did any sign of a thymos, Santayana in his later years developed doctrines in which *the good* involved little more than understanding the world and appreciating its beauty. For all that his pen lionized the feats of soldiers and lovers, we see little evidence that he fought, and if he did make love it was surely a closeted one, hardly suitable for a great romantic soul. In short, his spirit never reached the level of his piety, which is sad, given how unwilling he was to achieve the same level of mystical pleasure that allowed his mentor to rest in peace.

Conclusion

“Piety to mankind must be three-fourths pity” (Santayana 1982, 189), wrote Santayana in *Reason in Religion*, before going on to wax eloquent about the human condition as one of misery and vice, filth and blood. But this was the same man who in *Ultimate Religion* wrote about the value of finding the eternal beauty in everything and every one. How are we possibly to put all this together?

I would start by reflecting on a passage in *The Last Puritan* when the title character ruminates about himself. “Hadn’t he always felt that the human side of the universe was its evil side,” asked the so-called Last Puritan, “that only the great non-human world—the stars, the sea, and the woods—could be truly self-justified and friendly to the mind? Ah, if he could only learn to look at human things inhumanly, mightn’t they, too, become intelligible and inoffensive?” (Santayana 1936, 268).

For Santayana, people were anything but inoffensive. He wrote with palpable disdain about the worldliness of his fellow professors and businessmen, and the fanaticism of those who were obsessed with political ideologies. He clearly wanted to live in the eternal, and found that eternal in nature, in art,

and especially in those select men and women who were capable of great ideas and actions. But even Santayana did not have the luxury of invariably surrounding himself with such notables. And as a disciple of Spinoza, Santayana recognized that it is neither an option to escape from human society nor allow it to sap us of our happiness and our strength.

So what do we do? We turn back to the idea of piety and focus on the objects of our piety—all the beloveds that we have come to admire, or at least to cherish. If we are fortunate enough like Spinoza to find meaning in the word God, or like Santayana to revere the concept of nature, we allow our feelings of piety to extend to those concepts. We nurture that love. And then we devote ourselves to how best to *honor* that to which we are attached, whether it goes by the name God, nature or whatever. I suspect that we will soon realize that it is impossible to bestow this honor in any authentic sense without extending our arms to our fellow human beings, and I’m not just talking about the kind of people Santayana spoke about knowing in his autobiography—luminaries like John D. Rockefeller, William James, Isabella Stuart Gardner, and Bertrand Russell. I’m talking about the people who couldn’t even recognize some of those names, or care less about the ones they recognize.

Santayana might have been asking for too much when he wrote in *Ultimate Religion* about the goal of loving all things as they would wish themselves to be. But perhaps, what we can accomplish is to honor all things for what they really are and what they have the potential to become, and in spite of the fact that they may not live up to our ideals, let alone their own. That is a goal much more befitting Spinoza than Santayana, and yet perhaps this is as it should be. As Santayana himself recognized, “I cannot be mentioned without a smile in the same breath with Spinoza for greatness of intellect” (Santayana 1987, 11). Then again, as he went on to say, nor can Spinoza (as a Jew of Spanish extraction) “be compared with me for Spanish blood” (Santayana 1987, 11). Right on both counts, as Santayana so often was.

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Converging on Culture: Rorty, Rawls, and Dewey on Culture's Role in Justice

ERIC THOMAS WEBER

The University of Mississippi

etweber@olemiss.edu

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I review the writings of three philosophers whose work converges on the insight that we must attend to and reconstruct culture for the sake of justice. John Rawls, John Dewey, and Richard Rorty help show some of the ways in which culture can enable or undermine the pursuit of justice. They also offer resources for identifying tools for addressing the cultural impediments to justice. I reveal insights and challenges in Rawls's philosophy as well as tools and solutions for building on and addressing them in Dewey's and Rorty's philosophy.

Keywords

Culture, John Dewey, justice, pragmatism, John Rawls, Richard Rorty

"Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

(Shelley 1909–1914, 377)

John Rawls's theory of justice is often associated with Kantian or rationalist philosophy. Given his "ideal theory" approach to justice and his association with Kant, philosophers who identify with the empiricist tradition are typically thought to be at odds with Rawls's work. Rawls made an effort, though, to sidestep disagreements between camps or traditions in philosophy, a point which Richard Rorty admired (Rorty 2008). Rawls's contributions are many and have influenced a variety of philosophers because in general he sought common ground across philosophical difference (Rawls 1955).¹

1. For example, we can see an early version of this tendency in Rawls's "Two Concepts of Rules"

He drew on or conversed with thinkers from the traditions of analytic, Continental, and American philosophy to varying degrees. Among Rawls's important contributions was his recognition of the crucial role of psychological and cultural conditions and forces in shaping the potential for justice. Critics from the libertarian tradition, whom I address in a separate essay, argue that the level of patterns, such as culture, is not a sphere in which one should look for justice or injustice, instead pointing to the level of individual, free transactions (Nozick 1974, 160–164). Others dismiss claims about culture, such as about political correctness or about offensive mascots, as petty, unreasonable, or even dangerous.²

In this essay, I review writings from three philosophers whose work overlaps in a way that reveals the cultural roots of justice. These thinkers help me to illustrate at least initially the reasons why we must attend to culture as a force for justice, not focusing only on the level of individuals. I look to Rawls, John Dewey, and Rorty for beginning an inquiry into the cultural conditions necessary for justice. I aim to show that in the convergence of their philosophies, we see how culture can enable or undermine the pursuit of justice, and that we can identify tools in the Pragmatists' writings for addressing some of the challenges in theorizing about justice. Through sometimes unintended conditions but more often by intentional means, culture can either support or undermine: 1) the tolerance versus intolerance of a society; 2) the dehumanization of people; 3) people's ability to see from others' perspectives, or empathy; 4) appreciation for the equality and freedom of other people; 5) the environment in which each person can develop a sense of his or her own self-respect, positive power, and worth; 6) efforts to shame unjust societies and regimes; 7) the recognition of areas of overlapping consensus, valuable for cooperative action; and 8) the democratic way of life necessary for genuinely democratic societies to flourish.

The present article is an important early step in my overarching project of arguing for the establishment and maintenance of the cultural conditions necessary for justice. The central challengers to this theory claim that the manipulation of culture is inevitably and unacceptably coercive. I will focus on the affirmative argument for a culture of justice, setting aside for now the defense against such challenges. Difficulties for what I call a cultural theory of justice stem from tensions inherent in liberalism. I will show how influential philoso-

essay, which has inspired the view we call "rule utilitarianism"—an outlook that aims to reconcile the importance of utilitarianism and of deontological ethics as different elements in the justification of rules and of practices followed within such rules (Rawls 1955).

2. One prominent example is Ben Carson, who has called political correctness "dangerous." See Dana Milbank, "Doctor of Divisiveness," *The Washington Post*, May 29, 2014, A2.

phers of culture helped to clarify its role in the pursuit of justice. In advancing the present project, we can also see the usefulness of drawing on insights both from Rawls and from the Pragmatists, the latter of which attended extensively to the mechanisms for reconstructing culture in the democratic era, such as education, cultural criticism, and other forms of public philosophical engagement.

Bucking the rationalist interpretation of Rawls, Rorty explained his great appreciation for Rawls's agreement with pragmatism. For example, in *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls's most Pragmatic position might be his idea of "reflective equilibrium." He writes,

Once the whole framework [for the principles of justice] is worked out, definitions have no distinct status and stand or fall with the theory itself. In any case, it is obviously impossible to develop a substantive theory of justice founded solely on truths of logic and definition. The analysis of moral concepts and the a priori, however traditionally understood, is too slender a basis. Moral theory must be free to use contingent assumptions and general facts as it pleases. There is no other way to give an account of our considered judgments in reflective equilibrium. (Rawls 1999b, 44)

Rawls was unafraid of making use of contingent claims, much like Peter Singer's argument that widespread yet unnecessary famines and suffering are morally unacceptable (Singer 1972). This means that we cannot do otherwise than to draw on the values and assumptions of our culture, at least as a revisable starting point. While there may be philosophically interesting questions to talk about for some who enjoy abstraction, we may not arrive at a universally accepted argument against slavery, simply due to the facts of lingering prejudice or to demands for an infinite list of justifications of our premises. This does not mean that we must take proposals to return to past, inhumane practices seriously.³ Rorty was on the same page with Rawls on this point. He rejected the idea of immutable foundations upon which one might seek universal agreement. Rorty followed Dewey in thinking that it is a mistake to believe that we must justify our moral intuitions to some invented sense of a psychopathic self, which cares only for itself. Rorty cites Dewey, who he says instructed that "it is easy to detect the fallacy which Dewey described as 'transforming the (truistic) fact of acting *as* a self into the fiction of acting always *for* self.'" (Rorty 1999, 77)

Rawls's concept of reflective equilibrium is based on certain ideas about the nature of human inquiry and justification. Presenting a highly coherentist view, Rawls writes,

3. I am indebted to David Hildebrand (2006).

A conception of justice cannot be deduced from self-evident premises or conditions on principles; instead, its justification is a matter of the mutual support of many considerations, of everything fitting together into one coherent view... Thus what we shall do is to collect together into one conception a number of conditions on principles that we are ready upon due consideration to recognize as reasonable. (Rawls 1999b, 19)

Rawls's reflective equilibrium was reminiscent of Dewey's pragmatic and empirical theory of inquiry.⁴ Rawls paid some attention to the facts of his surrounding culture, at least as a motivation for altering his direction leading to *Political Liberalism* (1996).⁵ This is not to call Rawls's cultural awareness sufficient or rich.⁶ He certainly was more concerned about it than some approaches to philosophy are, such as those that aim to avoid "application" of philosophy to the real world (Gaus 2005). As his thought progresses, Rawls seems to come closer to his Kantian roots, at least in a number of ways,⁷ though some see contrary trends depending on the area of emphasis in his work.⁸ With Rorty, I set aside for now the debates about the early versus the later Rawls to focus instead on whatever resources his work has to offer for considering culture's role in justice.

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4. Rawls noted explicitly his debt to Nelson Goodman for the theory underlying reflective equilibrium (Rawls 1999b, 18). He cited Nelson Goodman (1955, 65-68). Attending to the philosophy of culture, Morton White has recently clarified Goodman's role in the tradition of a pragmatic philosophy of culture, in which Dewey was a great inspiration (White 2002, chapter 8).
 5. On page 36 and elsewhere, Rawls talks about what he calls the "fact of reasonable pluralism," which presented a challenge for the assumed social homogeneity of outlooks in his earlier opus, *A Theory of Justice*.
 6. A number of critics have made this point clear, such as Charles W. Mills, "Retrieving Rawls for Racial Justice? A Critique of Tommie Shelby," (2013). Mills notes Elizabeth Anderson's (2010) abandonment of "ideal theory," a label capturing Rawls's theory of justice. Both Mills and Anderson see in Rawls and in most scholarship which draws on Rawls a troubling dearth of consideration about issues of race in justice.
 7. Here I would refer readers to essays like "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory" (1980). This is one of many possible examples to offer. Of course, in that essay, as I will show in what follows, Rawls does note Dewey's "genius," (1980, 516).
 8. While I show ways to see Rawls's increasing attention to Kant in my book, *Rawls, Dewey, and Constructivism: On the Epistemology of Justice* (2010), Robert Taylor presents a contrary outlook. Taylor's point is that Rawls moves away from Kantian universalism. Insofar as Rawls presents a theory of universal human rights, I would disagree with him, but I understand Taylor since Rawls avoids establishing a universal standard of morality that is the same for all societies. See Robert S. Taylor, *Reconstructing Rawls: The Kantian Foundations of Justice as Fairness* (2011).

Rawls had a great deal to say about culture and therefore appreciated the importance of contingency and social change more than many Kantian moral philosophers before or after him.⁹ Rorty shows how Rawls's efforts of this kind followed the spirit of Jefferson's separation of Church and state (2008, 175), which Rorty sees as Pragmatic and right. Rawls was more attentive to culture and to Pragmatist ways of thinking than is typically recognized, furthermore. He was inspired by the writings of Nelson Goodman and other philosophers who were influenced by Pragmatism.¹⁰ Plus, Rawls explicitly claimed in his essay, "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory," that he hoped to do justice to Dewey's philosophical intentions. In that essay, Rawls writes,

I would like to think that John Dewey, in whose honor these lectures are given, would find their topic hospitable to his concerns. We tend to think of him as the founder of a characteristically American and instrumental naturalism and, thus, to lose sight of the fact that Dewey started his philosophical life, as many did in the late nineteenth century, greatly influenced by Hegel; and his genius was to adapt much that is valuable in Hegel's idealism to a form of naturalism congenial to our culture. It was one of Hegel's aims to overcome the many dualisms which he thought disfigured Kant's transcendental idealism, and Dewey shared this emphasis throughout his work, often stressing the continuity between things that Kant had sharply separated. This theme is present particularly in Dewey's early writings, where the historical origins of his thought are more in evidence. In elaborating his moral theory along somewhat Hegelian lines, Dewey opposes Kant, sometimes quite explicitly, and often at the same places at which justice as fairness departs from Kant. Thus there are a number of affinities between justice as fairness and Dewey's moral theory which are explained by the common aim of overcoming the dualism in Kant's doctrine. (Rawls 1980, 516)

Rawls is explicit here both in his respect for Dewey and in his recognition of the relationship between overcoming and attending to culture. It is worth considering how it is Dewey came to emphasize culture.

9. A remarkable exception is Christine Korsgaard's account of Kant, one of the most attractive available on this score. Sounding pragmatic, Korsgaard writes "Realism, I argue, is a reactive position that arises in response to almost every attempt to give a substantive explanation of morality. It results from the realist's belief that such explanations inevitably reduce moral phenomena to natural phenomena. I trace this belief and the essence of realism to a view about the nature of concepts—that it is the function of all concepts to describe reality. Constructivism [, which she defends,] may be understood as the alternative view that a normative concept refers schematically to the solution to a practical problem." See Christine M. Korsgaard, "Realism and Constructivism in Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy" (2003).

10. As I have noted, Rawls cites Goodman. Goodman, Nelson. *Fact, Fiction and Forecast*. See especially John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1999b, 18n).

One way of thinking about how and why Dewey came so thoroughly to focus on culture concerns his early writings in the field of psychology. In Dewey's early days, philosophy and psychology were not treated as separately as they are today. They were even considered one area. What we know as *The Journal of Philosophy* today was once *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*.¹¹ The importance of psychology in this context was that Dewey was concerned about the simple "stimulus/response" model in psychology. He studied William James's *The Principles of Psychology* (James 1950) with great admiration, but felt dissatisfied about the prevalent outlook referred to as the "reflex arc" concept. That theory explains learning as a matter of reactions or changes in the brain's pathways that are prompted by the results of reflexes themselves prompted by external stimuli. The example James used involved the young person in front of a candle, who learns quickly not to return his or her finger into the flame. The matter that troubled Dewey about that picture, which shows stimuli to be the primary source of action yielding response, was the fact that it isolated the child theoretically, not considering for a moment the fact that he or she always lives in an environment in which countless things, forces, or noises could be stimuli. Dewey's theory of the selectivity of attention is in his view a better way of thinking about initial impulses, and it helps to explain the origin of personality. People are inclined toward certain stimuli over other kinds. In addition, when we watch a new baby kick and reach, there is cause to say that in the beginning was the response, or, for Dewey, the selectivity of attention. Dewey's influential essay on this matter (1896) is rarely noted today, yet it sparked the revolutionary idea that we should create stimulating environments for learning that would have been deemed distracting in older, traditional models of education. It is also among the early inspirations for connecting educational subject matter to students' interests and unique talents. From Dewey's insight in psychology we see the importance of the social environment—one way of referring to culture—to individual development and education, including in the development of self-respect and of one's powers. Dewey draws and builds on these ideas extensively in his influential philosophy of education, his study of one of the central mechanisms with which we aim to intelligently shape culture for the next generation.

Dewey has rightly been considered one of the great philosophers of culture.¹² Later Rorty takes up the theme of culture in a central way (2007). For

11. This is according to the journal's Web site, URL: <http://www.journalofphilosophy.org/generalinfo.html>.

12. Beyond Rorty, many others have pointed this out. For one example, see Morton White, *A Philosophy of Culture: The Scope of Holistic Pragmatism* (2005).

one of Dewey's influential works, *Experience and Nature*, Dewey began but never completed a revision to the introduction, in which he wrote that in retrospect he would replace the word "experience"—a term he used often—with the word "culture." Among the reasons why "culture" is a better term for Dewey's philosophy is that experience sounds solitary, isolating. I can sit in my living room and experience a movie in a way that creates a dichotomy between the film viewed and the person viewing. The term "culture" may sound like something that can be consumed, as in visiting a museum on one's own, but it also brings with it a sense of community or of presence within an environment, as well as the kind of feeling that implies the inseparability of the self from that wider whole. Culture, furthermore, refers to a set of conditions, pre-cognitive as well as post-, which envelop persons in sets of needs, beliefs, practices, tools, and habits. "Culture" is also a term that is biological. We can "culture" cells. We set cells in a certain kind of environment in which they grow, flourish, interact in other ways, or die, based on the conditions that suit or conflict with the organisms' evolving needs for living. Dewey was fond of biological understandings and metaphors for thinking about human progress as a kind of growth. The separation of experiencer and subject matter of experience seems to break down in the context of culture, furthermore, such as when we think of persons in a room and what makes up the temperature of that room. Spaces can be cold or warm, but it is familiar that large numbers of people can contribute substantially to warming a room. In other words, persons in a culture or in an environment are thereby part of that culture or environment, affecting it even as they are in turn affected as well.

In a 1947 essay, Dewey sums up his view of the relation between philosophy and culture. He writes,

My standpoint is that philosophy deals with cultural problems. The principal task of philosophy is to get below the turmoil that is particularly conspicuous in times of rapid cultural change, to get behind what appears on the surface, to get to the soil in which a given culture has its roots. The business of philosophy is the relation that man has to the world in which he lives, as far as both man and the world are affected by culture, which is very much more than is usually thought. (1990, 467)¹³

Dewey saw the work of philosophy as cultural critique and participation. This way of thinking was part of his motivation for writing and for speaking

13. John Dewey, "The Future of Philosophy," an address delivered to the Graduate Department of Philosophy, Columbia University, New York, N.Y., 13 November 1947, in *The Collected Works of John Dewey, The Later Works, Volume 17* (1990, 467).

often to wide, general audiences. It is reason why Dewey is thought of as one of America's great public philosophers (Weber forthcoming).

Given the importance Rawls placed on or implied about culture for justice and Dewey's insights about philosophy's role in shaping culture, we can look now to Rorty, a follower of both, who wrote often on culture. In particular, Rorty can help us to avoid unnecessary frustrations that arise when dualisms persist in our philosophy, ones which Rawls and Dewey both sought to avoid. To address such challenges, Rorty offers distinctions between different senses of "rationality" and "culture." His focus on these topics arose out of his background in the philosophy of language. Near the end of his career, Rorty writes explicitly about philosophy "as cultural politics,"¹⁴ but his attention to culture arose much earlier in his writings. The connection between Rorty's training in analytic philosophy and his later work is found in the difficult questions raised for the philosophy of language, especially concerning problems of cultural difference. The analytic tradition struggled with questions of translation across cultures, as in the story about the native who yells "Gavagai!" "Gavagai" might refer to the running rabbit he sees, to one of its parts, to the act of running, or some other element of the experience he means to emphasize.¹⁵ In this example drawn from Quine's *Word and Object*, we see how language and culture call for testing out meanings in interaction.

Rorty and Donald Davidson debated some questions regarding cultural differences relevant here, including: How radically different can conceptual schemes be?¹⁶ In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein famously suggested that "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him" (2001, 190e). Consider the idea of family in today's America, contrasted with the families of Native American tribes from long ago. Are there concepts in either tradition that cannot translate across cultural differences? Davidson's answer was famously no. As a fan of Davidson's work, Rorty was fascinated by the role of culture in shaping meaning.

14. Rorty devoted the fourth collection of essays to this theme. See Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (2007).

15. This example, famous in the tradition, comes from W.V.O. Quine. See Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (1960, 29). Quine writes, "The utterances first and most surely translated in such a case are ones keyed to present events that are conspicuous to the linguist and his informant. A rabbit scurries by, the native says 'Gavagai', and the linguist notes down the sentence 'Rabbit' (or 'Lo, a rabbit') as tentative translation, subject to testing in further cases."

16. I am thinking, of course, of Donald Davidson's 1974 essay "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in *The Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, reprinted in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (1984).

Rorty's and Dewey's attention to culture grow out of the latter's insights in psychology and his consequent philosophy of education. Among the crucial developments undertaken in education is the task of enculturation, educating students about the best practices, scientific developments, and social conditions of their communities, broadly defined, for the sake of preparing them for life's various and changing problems. What troubles many critics of Dewey's philosophy today is precisely the extent to which public schools shape young people's culture. The strictest of such critics want their kids to stay away from public schools. They therefore either send them to private schools of their liking or sometimes put them through a customized curriculum by other means.¹⁷ Some do this as a form of cultural protest against public intrusion into their culture and as an affirmation of their own values. Of course, there are many other reasons to consider homeschool, some of which scholars have argued Dewey might well have valued (Ralston 2011). Dewey's advocacy for public education itself can be understood as the recognition of the value of culture and its intelligent presentation and engagement with citizens for the sake of the public good. In political liberalism like Rawls's, one of the roles of culture in justice is found in the development of persons—in the inculcation of cultural beliefs and attitudes foster self-respect and a sense of individuals power to pursue meaningful life plans as equal citizens. If education is among the mechanisms for shaping culture, it remains to consider different conceptions of culture, which Rorty differentiated.

There are many places to look for Rorty's insights on culture. His essay, "Rationality and Cultural Difference" (1998), helps to identify understandings of rationality and culture that are problematic and outdated and those that ought to be preserved and put to use. He presents three notions each of the terms, rationality and culture.¹⁸ He calls rationality₁

the name of an ability that squids have more of than amoebas, that language-using human beings have more of than non-language-using anthropoids, and that human beings armed with modern technology have more of than those not so armed: the ability to cope with the environment by adjusting one's reactions to environmental stimuli in complex and delicate ways. This is sometimes called "technical reason."

17. See Henry T. Edmonson, III, *John Dewey and the Decline of American Education* (2006). For the latter case I have in mind some people's reasons for home schooling—to avoid public schools' cultural influence (Ralston 2011).

18. The piece was originally published in 1992 in Volume 42 of *Philosophy East and West*.

He differentiates this form of reasoning from rationality₂, which is his name for an extra added ingredient that human beings have and brutes do not. The presence of this ingredient within us is a reason to describe ourselves in different terms than those we use to describe nonhuman organisms. This presence cannot be reduced to a difference in degree of our possession of rationality₁. It is distinct because it sets goals other than mere survival.

Finally, he describes rationality₃ as

roughly synonymous with tolerance—with the ability not to be overly disconcerted by differences from oneself, not to respond aggressively to such differences. This ability goes along with a willingness to alter one's own habits... to reshape oneself. (Rorty 1998b, 186–187)

With these three senses of the term rationality, Rorty explains the difference that separates certain groups of thinkers, such as enlightenment Kantians from Deweyan Pragmatists. For, as Rorty rightly interprets him, Dewey would see rationality₂ as a fabrication, something that assumes too much and ignores the origins of differences in rationality. Dewey sees a continuum directly from rationality₁ to rationality₃. Rorty claims that rationality₁ does not necessarily lead to rationality₃, though it has done so and could have done otherwise in circumstances different from our given contingent history.

These three senses of rationality help Rorty to differentiate three senses of the word “culture,” presenting a helpful set of distinctions for avoiding Kantian dualisms. He explains that

Culture₁ is simply a set of shared habits of action, those that enable members of a single human community to get along with one another and with the surrounding environment as well as they do... Many of us belong to a lot of different cultures—to that of our native town, to that of our university, to that of the cosmopolitan intellectuals... In this sense, “culture” is not the name of a virtue, nor is it necessarily the name of something human beings have and other animals do not... culture₁ resembles rationality₁.

Rorty then distinguished culture₁ from culture₂, describing the latter as the name of a virtue. In this sense, “culture” means something like “high culture” ... Good indications of the possession of culture₂ are an ability to manipulate abstract ideas for the sheer fun of it, and an ability to discourse at length about the differing values of widely diverse sorts of painting, music, architecture, and writing... It is often associated with rationality₃.

Finally, Rorty writes,

Culture₃ is a rough synonym for what is produced by the use of rationality₂. It is what supposedly has steadily gained ground, as history has gone along,

over “nature”—over what we share with brutes. It is the overcoming of the base and irrational and animal by something universally human, respect. To say that one culture₁ is more “advanced” than another is to say that it has come closer to realizing “the essentially human” than another culture₁, that it is a better expression of what Hegel called “the self-consciousness of Absolute Spirit,” a better example of culture₃. The universal reign of culture₃ is the goal of history. (Rorty 1998b, 188–189)

These three definitions offer ways of thinking about different philosophical traditions and how they have considered issues of culture and rationality—not all of which Rorty would accept. In particular, he would dismiss certain versions of culture₃ as also kinds of fabrications, like the idea that Marx thought humanity was progressing inevitably to the Communism. Culture₂ is generally a matter of class difference, and for my purposes misses much of the cultural force of culture₁. The pragmatists might see a version of culture₃ as sensible if it is meant only as empirical observation, whether defensible or not, that societies over time are becoming more humane and attentive to suffering, even when it is far away, such as in offers of foreign aid. In fact, in Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, he admits belief in the potential for moral progress, which he sees in the growth of human solidarity against cruelty and suffering (Rorty 1989, 192).

First, it is important to consider that people often make claims about the inherent value of any culture. As Rorty explains, this is in part an argument motivated by the reasonable guilt Westerners feel about brutal colonialism. But, the “exaltation of the non-Western and the oppressed seems to [Rorty] just as dubious as the Western imperialists’ assurance that all other forms of life are ‘childish’ in comparison with that of modern Europe” (Rorty 1998b, 190). So, when we think about different cultures and about evaluating one as better than another, more just than another, it is reasonable to ask Rorty whether there can be genuine comparisons.

On the one hand, Rorty believes that there are cultures that “we would be better off without.” Among these, he includes “for example, those of concentration camps, criminal gangs, and international conspiracies of bankers” (Rorty 1998b, 189). On the other hand, Rorty (1998b, 193) is quick to add his controversial interpretation of Dewey, writing of Dewey that

He did not think it the function of philosophy to provide argumentative backup, firm foundations, for evaluative hierarchies. He simply took the rhetorics and goals of the social democratic movement of the turn of the century for granted and asked what philosophy might do to further them.

At this point, I see partial value and trouble in Rorty's thinking not just about Dewey, but mainly about evaluation. Rorty believes that it is time people recognize that the firm foundations we have long believed in are really inventions of reason. Dewey would agree with elements of Rorty's critique of tradition, but not all. Larry Hickman has explained Dewey's sense of "foundations" as different from the immovable, fixed rock metaphor, choosing instead the idea of a platform, such as we find on an ocean (see Hickman 1990, 72). The idea of a platform is helpful, since we do stand on foundations of a sort as we experience the world, as we create tools to pursue more complex and refined projects. Whereas Enlightenment thinkers felt that they needed foundations in some abstract idea or divine origin, Hickman explains that Dewey "thought that the moderns had missed the point that naturally occurring ends are the 'platforms' from which it is possible to regard other things" (Hickman 1990, 72).

In some passages of his work, Rorty seems to agree with the point of the "platform" metaphor, yet he is unwilling to call it a foundation, perhaps given the baggage of the term's history. The second trouble I have with Rorty's point is that he denies evaluative foundations, yet uses one as an evaluative tool time and again. When we look for a basic motive for evaluating another culture, Rorty suggests that we look at its response to suffering. He does not explain to the insensitive person why he or she should care about suffering in the world. He simply accepts the norm and presents it much in the way that Peter Singer does in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." (Singer 1972).¹⁹ What we find in Rorty's attention to suffering, however, is a way of thinking about moral progress. It is also an instrument for moral evaluation and differentiation of more and less acceptable cultures.

Rorty was right about the need for rationality₃ in culture₁ and culture₂, which concern toleration of difference and control of the knee jerk judgment of others. In my own youth, derogatory remarks about homosexuals were commonplace, yet in the period of one generation, people's attitudes have changed dramatically in favor of tolerance and respect (Avery *et al.* 2007). Addressing Dewey's lessons regarding the need for flexibility in moral thinking, Rorty writes that

The very mixed bag of results produced by this new flexibility—this increased ability to alter the environment rather than simply fending off its blows—meant, in Dewey's eyes, that we typically solve old problems at the cost of

19. In this essay, Singer admits that it may be unfeasible to offer a universally convincing account of why it is terrible for vast numbers of people to starve to death unnecessarily, but he thinks that assuming it to be a bad thing is not at all unreasonable.

creating new problems for ourselves. (For example, we eliminate old forms of cruelty and intolerance only to find that we have invented new, more insidious forms thereof.) He had no wholesale solution to offer to the new problems we had created, only the hope that the same experimental daring which had created the new problems as by-products might, *if combined with a will to decrease suffering*, eventually produce piecemeal solutions to those new problems. (Rorty 1998b, 192–193, emphasis added)

So despite all of Rorty's efforts to avoid presenting foundational values, we find in a number of his writings the importance of decreasing suffering. An acquaintance at a conference once asked me whether in moral theory Pragmatists are basically utilitarians. The answer is no, but the elimination of suffering where possible is surely a good thing in general. After all, the utilitarian moral theorist believes that moral judgments are right when they follow the demands of a calculus about pains and pleasures. Certainly such a calculus can factor into decision-making for a Pragmatist, but Pragmatists can also be constitutionalists (Ralston 2010), who think that greater happiness in shutting up Bob should probably not trump his right to speak freely in the public square.

Suffering is the recurring concern in a number of Rorty's works, but especially in his writings on human rights (Rorty 1998a). We can see in his and Dewey's considerations about culture that the diminishment of suffering is central for justice. In addition, we can see the cultural role of rationality₃ in shaping the conditions necessary for the moral benefits of tolerance. In that area, he offers some rich arguments with regard to the forces, aims, and tools for reconstructing justice. Whether at the domestic or international levels, Rorty's respect for people and their suffering is rooted in his and Dewey's democratic values. He explains Dewey's insights about toleration and its benefits, writing that

As we became more and more emancipated from custom,—more and more willing to do things differently than our ancestors for the sake of coping with our environment more efficiently and successfully—we became more and more receptive to the idea that good ideas might come from anywhere, that they are not the prerogative of an elite and not associated with any particular locus of authority. In particular, the rise of technology helped break down the traditional distinction between the “high” wisdom of priests and theorists and the “low” cleverness of artisans—thus contributing to the plausibility of a democratic system of government. (Rorty 1998b, 192.)

Now, Rorty will consider the development at play here to be contingent, not necessary developments. This account of contingent features of human

history nevertheless offers an illustration of reason why democratic values have come to be central to modern outlooks on justice.

The platform I see in this last passage concerns the Pragmatists' ideas about the best ways of seeking knowledge, as well as the origins of coming to value more and more people's well-being. In Dewey's ideas about logic and inquiry and in Charles Sanders Peirce's essay on fixing belief,²⁰ we see clear and strong norms for intelligent inquiry, norms which are firm enough to stand on as we pursue increasing levels of intellectual endeavor. As Peirce noted, we certainly can "fix belief" by authority alone, but when we do so, we often end up with beliefs that are hard to maintain, such as when an allegedly immortal king dies. Peirce and Dewey both saw that science proceeds through communal inquiry. Not only is science better and stronger, but so are economies when more people of varied backgrounds and ways of thinking engage in conversation and commerce.

Why would business, politics, and science do better as a result of increased diversity? The answer to this question shows how I differ from Rorty. I see the answer to this question as revelatory about what forms of inquiry are best at uncovering good ideas and having them win over worse ideas. I feel comfortable calling this a Pragmatic foundational belief, a platform. It may be that the nature of inquiry has been refined through a contingent history and without some fixed or singular facts about human nature. Nevertheless, the limitations of human intelligence suggest that more perspectives weighing in on scientific study are better than fewer. At the same time, Dewey offers an outlook about the nature of human beings that is based on Hegelian ideas about psychology and inquiry, fused with Darwinian understandings of animals in cultures. Thus, in a sense, while we can let go of certain traditions that hypostatize rationality or that singularize human nature, we can nevertheless learn facts empirically about the finitude of human intelligence and the benefits of communal inquiry. In science, as in business, medicine, and politics, greater diversity in the pool of inquirers is better than more homogeneity. The added benefit comes not only from increases in perspectives on ideas, but also from the competition which tests ideas. In these lessons about humanity and about the platforms on which we stand, there are tools available for achieving greater human progress and for evaluating the strengths, weaknesses, virtues, and vices of different cultures. We see that appreciating all people as possible sources of insight, happiness, industry, and commerce makes for a stronger,

20. See Charles S. Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief" (1992). See also John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, in *The Collected Works of John Dewey, The Later Works, Volume 12*. (1986).

smarter, and more humane culture, especially when such democratic values are guided with the aim of enhancing people's well-being and diminishing suffering. Such appreciation may have arisen contingently, but also can be the result of intentional cultural reconstruction, one which aims to promote rationality₃. Thus, again, we see a key role of culture in justice and human flourishing here. Of course, to those who hold to beliefs in rationality₂, these insights are interpreted among natural theorists as evidence of a connection to people's inherent and fixed human nature. Pragmatists need not accept that inference, yet can concede that these at least historically and contingently developed attributes appear certainly to be highly valued and stable, given the right conditions for their maintenance. The conclusion we can draw from appreciating the value of diversity in inquiry, ethics, and politics, then, is that cultures that are democratic and tolerant will fare better. In *The Law of Peoples*, Rawls shies away from the claim that cultures must be democratic in order to be legitimate and just, but ultimately that was among the shortfalls of that work, if indeed culture can impede or enable justice. This does not imply that one is justified to intervene militarily in just any or every undemocratic country, but as Rorty argued in his essay on human rights, it may well be that we ought to intervene culturally, such as in the spread of education and literature—a point which Rawls's strong liberalism would not permit.

In an elegant and metaphorical passage, Rorty offers an insight about the complexity of cultures, which builds on his distinctions and also connects with his own and (indirectly) Rawls's coherentist outlooks. Whereas Willard V. O. Quine referred to a web of belief, from which certain peripheral beliefs or strands could be removed while the whole remains one, Rorty uses the imagery of a tapestry. He writes,

The real work of building a multicultural global utopia, I suspect, will be done by people who, in the course of the next few centuries, unravel each culture₁ into a multiplicity of fine component threads and then weave these threads together with equally fine threads drawn from other cultures₁—thus promoting the sort of variety-in-unity characteristic of rationality₃. The resulting tapestry will, with luck, be something we can now barely imagine—a culture₁ that will find the cultures₁ of contemporary America and contemporary India²¹ as suitable for benign neglect as we find those of Harappa or of Carthage. (Rorty 1998b, 201)

21. Rorty composed this essay for presentation at the Indian Institute for Philosophy at Mount Abu, before it was published in *Philosophy East and West*. This explains his references to America and India here.

Here we see Rorty thinking in broad strokes as he concludes his essay on “Rationality and Cultural Difference.” His point is useful, however, and is akin to a culture-shaping version of Rawls’s concept of reflective equilibrium. Rorty’s metaphor suggests a way of visualizing the process of aiming to design or establish a certain cultural picture, one which can remove unacceptable or clashing strands, substituting others—and all while striving for a maximally respectful and empowering cultural picture. Rorty is effectively calling for an intelligent reconstruction of culture, a Deweyan aim as well, which Rawls does not explain how to envision in such explicit language or metaphor.

Rorty offers his most concrete proposals for reconstructing grossly unjust cultures in his essay on human rights (Rorty 1998a). Of course, he would argue for the need for his proposal at the domestic level in the United States as well. Human rights as a term seem to suggest international matters. They are also commonly associated with something like a norm based on rationality₂ and rationality₃. After all, they call for tolerance and respect for all people, and they focus on human beings, so they might be said to imply that because of what is distinct in human nature, certain rights correspond with obligations which determine right and wrong forms of government and human interaction. So, in the domain of human rights, a Pragmatist who rejects rationality₂ will need to explain on what basis we require rationality₃ for all cultures. This is the struggle that Rawls works to address in *The Law of Peoples*, though he also hoped to avoid some of the Kantian enlightenment thinking that draws on timeless human nature.

In “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality,” Rorty argues that the gross violations of human rights that must be stopped are generally preceded by dehumanization of the oppressed—a decidedly cultural mechanism. When Nazis spoke of Jews as viruses or vermin, they referred to human beings as things that we generally try to kill and exterminate. When Serbs treated Muslims as dogs, they spoke of human beings as animals who could be put down, treated as property and discarded. In this context, one could expect that concern about “dehumanization” must stem from appeals to the static, enlightenment idea of humanity and rationality₂. Rorty avoids that approach. Instead, he again focuses on suffering. Dehumanization is a process whereby people prepare themselves through social conditioning to not feel sympathy for certain other people.²² Drawing another lesson here, we see

22. It is worth noting that concern for animals and criticism of factory farming are gaining support, but even with such growing sympathy for animals, they are treated differently from human beings nonetheless. Whether or not we ought to treat chickens humanely, we do not enter into contracts with them.

the power of language, metaphor, and belief in creating the conditions that dehumanize people and both are and foster injustice.

Rorty sees sentimentality as a contingent development of biology and history. We sympathize with other people and feel sad when they suffer. If there are any exceptions, the select few who do not feel for others are still entitled to live and be let alone, to a degree, so long as they avoid harming others. The vast majority of people who feel for others, as human beings—as animals with rationality₁ and rationality₃—can protect themselves as necessary from the few unlike them when they become dangerous, or let them be when they are not harming anyone (Lachs 2004). But, where possible, Rorty believes that it is the responsibility of society to educate people to have the right sentiments. In this sense, a profound moral need is addressed when students read books like *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *The Diary of Anne Frank*. (Morrison 2007; Frank 1952). What texts like these do is to put the reader in the perspective of the person who is persecuted, who is affected by hatred or lack of sympathy.²³

Rorty explains his point, writing,

one will see it as the moral educator's task not to answer the rational egotist's question "Why should I be moral?" but rather to answer the much more frequently posed question "Why should I care about a stranger, a person who is no kin to me, a person whose habits I find disgusting?" The traditional answer to the latter question is "Because kinship and custom are morally irrelevant, irrelevant to the obligations imposed by the recognition of membership in the same species." This has never been very convincing, since it begs the question at issue: whether mere species membership *is*, in fact, a sufficient surrogate for closer kinship. Furthermore, that answer leaves one wide open to Nietzsche's discomfiting rejoinder: *that* universalistic notion, Nietzsche will sneer, would have crossed the mind of only a slave—or, perhaps, an intellectual, a priest whose self-esteem and livelihood both depend on getting the rest of us to accept a sacred, unarguable, unchallengeable paradox.

A better sort of answer is the sort of long, sad, sentimental story that begins,

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23. Here we have a chance to answer those who ask whether Pragmatist ethics is essentially utilitarian. If utilitarianism in general denies the importance of special relationships, such as in prioritizing a slight increase in my child's happiness over a larger increase to another person's happiness, then we can say that Pragmatists are not utilitarian in that way. In at least many versions of utilitarianism, it is important to fight the force of one's emotional inclinations to prioritize one's loved ones, denying the moral force of sentiments and relationships. Unlike that feature of utilitarianism or related emphasis on reason in the dismissal of emotion in deontology, pragmatism sees emotions as part of who we are, and elements of ourselves which we can condition. Just as we can condition our reason to function better than it does without education, the same can be said of our emotions. Both are important, as both are part of who and what we are as human beings.

“Because this is what it is like to be in her situation—to be far from home, among strangers,” or “Because she might become your daughter-in-law,” or “Because her mother would grieve for her.” Such stories, repeated and varied over the centuries, have induced us, the rich, safe, powerful people, to tolerate and even to cherish powerless people—people whose appearance and habits or beliefs at first seemed an insult to our own moral identity, our sense of the limits of permissible human variation. (Rorty 1998a, 184–185)

Rorty notes the underlying connection between our beliefs about politics and ethics and our sentiments based on stories, histories, and social conditioning. He offers a way of thinking about the possibilities for philosophy to influence culture. First, if he’s right, we should disagree with universalists who think that passions and rationality ought to be firmly separated out in thought about ethics. Second, when we think about making a society more just, part of what is needed is a form of education whereby citizens learn to sympathize with others, to see contingent, superficial differences between themselves and others for what they are: irrelevant to people’s abilities to flourish or suffer. While there will be disagreement about how sentiments ought to be directed, Rorty does point to mechanisms which influence people.

The trouble for Rawls, when he moves to his political conception of justice, is that he has to minimize his demands on culture and to introduce the problematic distinction between what is private and what is public. The initial distinction relevant here is to consider Rawls’s sense of a “public political culture.” It arises in *Political Liberalism*, where he writes that

Since justification is addressed to others, it proceeds from what is, or can be, held in common; and so we begin from shared fundamental ideas implicit in the public political culture in the hope of developing from them a political conception that can gain free and reasoned agreement in judgment.

(Rawls 1996, 100–101)

He clarifies his conception of the public political culture, writing that

The public political culture may be of two minds at a very deep level. Indeed, this must be so with such an enduring controversy as that concerning the most appropriate understanding of liberty and equality. This suggests that if we are to succeed in finding a basis for public agreement, we must find a way of organizing familiar ideas and principles into a conception of political justice that expresses those ideas and principles in a somewhat different way than before. (Rawls 1996, 9)

A worry that arises at this point concerns the freedom of people who hold different religions or comprehensive doctrines. For, their motivations can

well be called private, such as in seeking to live according to what one believes is right due to private religious revelation. It is an overstatement to say that Rawls would not allow religious speech about private reasons in the public domain, but he would argue that any political discussion should include appeals to reasons that are public and not only private. Rawls clarifies this, explaining his view that

reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious or nonreligious, may be introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided that in due course proper political reasons—and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines—are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines introduced are said to support. This injunction to present proper political reasons I refer to as *the proviso*, and it specifies public political culture as distinct from the background culture. (Rawls 1999a, 591–592)

For Rawls, in political settings, proper reasons will rest on matters of overlapping consensus and opinion, which are matters of culture, but not just any element of culture. The practical point to be made here is that agreement about conclusions must start with agreement about their premises, at least for systematic public cooperation to function with stability.

Rawls's aim to separate the public and the private with regard to culture is difficult to accept, such as in cases in which one's private culture sees other people as subhuman. The language we use, our beliefs, and our practices have consequences which permeate other behavior and engagements. When judges must be disinterested, they are expected to pay special attention to their own potential for biasing influence, and even to step down from judgment when for whatever reason they are not in the right circumstances to offer the kind of judgment that they should (Frost 2004). The call to limit one's arguments to public culture, to grounds acceptable to all, requires treating others as worthy of such respect. The implications of Rorty's and Dewey's philosophies, by contrast, suggest that some background cultures themselves run counter to the democratic way of life and need to be resisted where possible, and in some way consistent with our other democratic norms—such as through education.²⁴ For instance, Dewey (1939) once argued that intolerance because of politics, race, or color is “treason to the democratic way of life.”²⁵

Rawls appears at times to take a contextualist approach to his understanding of concepts and how they are shaped by culture. Rorty recognizes and

24. The aim described here is the subject I address elsewhere in the overarching project of which this essay is a part.

25. John Dewey, “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us,” (1939, 12–17). Republished in LW.14, 224–231, 227.

values such moments in Rawls's work, such as where the latter writes,

The constructionist view accepts from the start that a moral conception can establish but a loose framework for deliberation which must rely very considerably on our powers of reflection and judgment. These powers are not fixed once and for all, but are developed by a shared public culture and hence shaped by that culture. . . .the moral conception is to have a wide social role as a part of public culture and is to enable citizens to appreciate and accept the conception of the person as free and equal. (Rawls 1999a, 347)

In each of the passages I have presented so far, the crucial thing I want to highlight is Rawls's frequent references to culture, even if its nature and reconstruction call for further development. In addition, we see in this passage the vital role of the intelligent and purposeful reconstruction of culture aiming to condition people's use of language, concepts, and practices for the sake of developing a sense of each citizen as free and equal. Some of these details he does not spell out in so many words, but he is saying that we must develop people's conceptions about fellow citizens with the help of public cultural forces. With that point, I strongly agree and see demand for further explication.

Contrary to what one might call "non-contextualist" views, Rawls was careful to recognize the importance of community agreement based on present sets of beliefs, however conditioned by a past. It was his aim, of course, to consider how diverse societies, like those we find in the United States of America, can exist with stability despite the many differences in cultural beliefs we find. This was among his central tasks as he explained them in *Political Liberalism*.²⁶ His goal was never to find truth about ethics or justice independent of what

26. In the introduction, he asks "How is it possible that deeply opposed though reasonable comprehensive doctrines may live together and all affirm the political conception of a constitutional regime?" (Rawls 1999a, xx). I must point out a dissatisfaction with how Rawls thought of political philosophy and stability. In *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (2001a), he points to the Federalist Papers as an example of political conflict leading to political philosophy, the purpose for which, he says, is political stability. Yet as Rawls points out himself, the tension in the Federalist Papers about the issue of slavery, yielding philosophical debate, failed to generate the constitutional stability that would have avoided a Civil War. The end of the war created stability, of course, though as a citizen of the state of Mississippi, I can attest to the lingering animosities that remain over compulsion to remain in the union. What may be political stability today is accompanied by deeply troubling cultural instabilities and divisions, which, I argue elsewhere, are sources of some of the state's deepest moral difficulties. Most look with reverence on the Federalist Papers, and with much good reason, but the nation's founding might be worth considering as a failure of philosophy to resolve conflicts that were and remain at the heart of the country's cultural sources of injustice.

people think about these ideas, differing with scholars like Russ Shafer-Landau (2003). Instead, he offered ways to think about focusing on the areas of cultural overlap across difference—as grounds on which to motivate cooperative action. While I would not sharply differentiate public and private culture, the idea of overlapping consensus implied in “public culture” is important for fostering unity and sympathy for others who are different.

The lingering problem with Rawls’s distinction between public and background culture is that it does not recognize the power that background beliefs have. When voting on referenda, people are not asked for justifications. Rawls also misses the force that such background cultural ideas exert in attacking the self-worth or self-respect of people. After all, while we often think of the K.K.K. as a “hate group,” they have long thought of themselves as a religious organization (Ashtari 2014). Of course, Rawls does not defend any which “background culture,” as some can be “unreasonable,” according to his technical sense of the term, and thus not deserving of the same legitimacy as reasonable religious beliefs. Nevertheless, a norm calling for people to draw on reasonable public cultural values does nothing to address the insidious effects on culture of people’s hateful beliefs and practices.

Rorty’s solution to such problems is especially long-term, in relation to sentimental education. His understanding of sentimental education bears similarities to Rawls’s idea of what he would classify as “reasonable” and of reflective equilibrium. If people had a certain education, they would appreciate the right things in due course. Rorty believes that the best we can do is to tell the stories of suffering, teaching people to feel sympathy for others. An example of Rorty’s point involves the fight for civil rights in the U.S. In segregated communities, outside reporters were despised along with the African American students who wanted to integrate schools like the University of Mississippi. Those outsider journalists were taking pictures and telling stories of shameful violence and cruelty. It certainly took a great deal of shaming to bring about the slow changes that eventually did come. In such instances, however, the mechanism at work was not to convince people about the biological humanity of others, Rorty would point out, but to shame those in power for not caring or feeling for the oppressed groups in the first place. A version of this argument about the moral force of shame is at work in Kwame Anthony Appiah’s argument about how moral change comes about—and shame is a decidedly cultural mechanism (Appiah 2011).

One concern about Rorty’s and Rawls’s approach to this point regarding the proper sentiments or judgments of what is reasonable parallels Dewey’s insights about democracy. Rather than offering foundational justifications, at

least in some immutable sense of foundations, the three each began by accepting the democratic ideal that every individual matters and is deserving of sympathy, respect, and the chance to develop his or her faculties. Rather than think some universally persuasive argument could be offered to convince even the psychopath to care about others, the burden of justification must be seen as on the shoulders of the deviant, psychopathic invention of reason—the fancy imagined character whom some armchair philosophers think we need to persuade to be moral. Our laws against murder and child abuse are not controversial. Challenges to them would be radically controversial. By a move along these lines, Dewey noted the historical convergence of the many different modern moral theories on the idea that individuals ought to be respected and valued as having worth. In their 1908 *Ethics*, Dewey and Tufts wrote that

[The] worth and dignity of every human being of moral capacity is fundamental in nearly every moral system of modern times. It is implicit in the Christian doctrine of the worth of the soul, in the Kantian doctrine of personality, in the Benthamic dictum, “every man to count as one.” It is embedded in our democratic theory and institutions. With the leveling and equalizing of physical and mental power brought about by modern inventions and the spread of intelligence, no State is permanently safe except on a foundation of justice. And justice cannot be fundamentally in contradiction with the essence of democracy. (Dewey and Tufts 1978, 466)

Those who wish to hold contrary views to these converging moral traditions bear the burden of justification. In the democratic context, burdens of justification presume the worthiness of the persons to whom we justify our actions and decisions. The persons who are unreasonable on Rawls’s account, psychopathic or sentimentally deprived on Rorty’s view, or undemocratic on Dewey’s are those who fail to treat others as full individuals deserving of respect, while nevertheless demanding justification of others’ challenges.

Along similar lines, Rawls differentiated in *The Law of Peoples* between reasonable societies and “outlaw societies.” Rawls writes that,

outlaw societies [discussed earlier in Rawls’s book] were not societies burdened by unfavorable resources, material and technological, or lacking in human capital and know-how; on the contrary, they were among the most politically and socially advanced and economically developed societies of their day. *The fault in those societies lay in their political traditions and the background institutions of law, property, and class structure, with their sustaining beliefs and culture.* These things must be changed before a reasonable law of peoples can be accepted and supported. (2001b, 106, emphasis added)

In many of Rawls's arguments dealing with the "basic structures" of society, it seems that he is talking about principles and the mechanisms by which society operates through the use of government, regulation, and property. In fact, it is clear in this passage and others that cultural beliefs, such as those involved in anti-Semitism, racism, or misogyny, can have a devastating effect on justice, and therefore conversely opposites like tolerance and respect for people who are different can be highly advantageous for bringing about justice.

Rawls's focus in *The Law of Peoples* is on international contexts for thinking about the right of one society or a set of societies to intervene in another. He was attentive also to culture at the domestic level, which can be highly problematic for justice. When contemporary scholars think about human rights, a central subject in Rawls's *The Law of Peoples*, they commonly think about killings, starvations, violations of freedom of speech, incarcerations, and the like. But, all over the United States of America, there are people who suffer the consequences of prejudice, on grounds of race, gender, sexuality, and more, but in sometimes subtler forms, such as in inadequate school funding²⁷ or in poorly conceived school disciplinary procedures (Kim *et al.* 2010).²⁸ To be sure, there are those who have pointed out evidence of overt or direct and deep injustices, such as in the cultural and policy conditions which lead to the massively disproportionate incarceration of African Americans in the United States as compared with white citizens (Alexander 2012). These points highlight the importance of seeing culture as important domestically, rather than as a matter primarily regarding international conflicts.

Whether at the international or domestic levels, it is important to recognize the limits to Rorty's and Rawls's moral arguments. For instance, Rawls writes the following controversial passage,

Of course, fundamentalist religious doctrines and autocratic and dictatorial rulers will reject the ideas of public reason and deliberative democracy. They will say that democracy leads to a culture contrary to their religion, or denies the values that only autocratic or dictatorial rule can secure. They assert that the religiously true, or the philosophically true, overrides the politically reasonable. We simply say that such a doctrine is politically unreasonable. Within political liberalism nothing more need be said. (Rawls 1999a, 613)

There is internal coherence to Rawls's position, but this does not mean that the non-liberal society will be able to accept his positions about what is

27. See for example Losen and Welner (2001), "Disabling Discrimination in Our Public Schools: Comprehensive Legal Challenges to Inappropriate and Inadequate Special Education Services for Minority Children."

28. See especially chapter 6, "Criminalizing School Misconduct."

reasonable. Of course, Rawls would respond saying that those who are unreasonable are not interested in engaging with others in reasonable deliberation, which must treat all individuals with proper respect and as deserving of justification for what is done to them.

Dewey would be disinclined toward military intervention that is not somehow in self-defense or in defense of others. He would have called the idea of “exporting democracy” through military force a fantasy. In his 1937 essay, “Democracy Is Radical,” he argued that “democratic means and the attainment of democratic ends are one and inseparable” (1987, 299). Trying to achieve democracy by force misses this lesson. At the time, he was thinking about claims like those among the Communists of his day, who thought that true democracy was to be achieved through a dictatorship. He argued over and over that such approaches were wrongheaded. Elsewhere, he advocated strongly against making war, even for outlawing it (Dewey 1923).²⁹ His position against war was still consistent with active forms of intervention, but at the cultural and communicative levels. There is cultural force, for example, in making an international heroine out of the young girl who fought for the chance to get an education—Malala Yousafzai.³⁰ Cultural pressures are powerful and can be applied through public and international attention to problems or to heroes fighting against them.

As I have said, it is intuitive to look to Rawls’s international outlook on justice to find his contributions about culture, but in fact he noted at least in a number of instances in his early work that culture matters profoundly at the domestic level as well. A society and a community fails its youths, he thought, when it regularly raises them to discount their own worth. This happens systematically among the poor, among minority groups, racially or ethnically speaking, as well as among groups that are teased or who come from regions called “backwards,” such as Mississippi.³¹ Persons with disabilities are pervasively dismissed or ridiculed in our culture. There is still widespread acceptance at least in private settings of reference to bad ideas as “retarded,” for example. Some initiatives are trying to combat such uses of language in public schools.³² It seems that focusing only on society’s “basic structures”

29. Republished in MW.15.53–65.

30. See John D. Sutter, “Malala Is the New Symbol of Hope,” *CNN.com*, October 13, 2014, URL: <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/10/opinion/sutter-nobel-prize-malala/>.

31. See Meg Laughlin, “Polishing Mississippi,” *St. Petersburg Times (Florida)*, December 17, 2006, 1D. See also Patrik Jonsson, “A Bid to Buff Mississippi’s Image,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 12, 2006, 2.

32. See Brian Willoughby, “Speak Up at School: How to Respond to Everyday Prejudice, Bias

would not be enough for justice, unless we mean also its “culture,” namely the language we use, the beliefs we hold, and the practices and institutions which grow out of these. It is odd to refer to these as “structures,” though in a sense they are. If anything, they are organic and changing structures. Rawls saw the importance especially of self-worth, which is relatable to threats leveled in oppressive conditions. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls wrote that

the value of education should not be assessed solely in terms of economic efficiency and social welfare. Equally if not more important is the role of education in enabling a person to enjoy the culture of his [or her] society and to take part in its affairs, and in this way to provide for each individual a secure sense of his or her own worth. (Rawls 1999b, 87)

Given what he says here, it is easy to appreciate the threat to justice involved in preventing people from pursuing an education or in ensuring support for education will be deeply inadequate for disadvantaged citizens.

In the United States, we have compulsory education for all citizens, provided through public schools for those who do not choose to go to private schools or to participate in homeschooling. In places like Mississippi, however, we have school districts accused of creating a “school-to-prison pipeline,”³³ as well as 44 school districts that in 2007 were labelled “dropout factories,” the vast majority of which were made up of poor and African American students.³⁴ While empiricists like Rorty and other philosophers who would not consider themselves to be “ideal theorists” certainly have cause to criticize Rawls’s “ideal theory” approach, he had useful resources to offer for incorporating and addressing some real-life facts and forces of culture, and certainly more than he tapped. In particular, there was one passage that has served as a central inspiration for me in thinking about Rawls, justice, and culture, especially for future research. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls offered the following extended passage, writing,

On several occasions I have mentioned that perhaps the most important primary good is that of self-respect. We must make sure that the conception of

and Stereotypes—A Guide for Teachers,” [Report] Teaching Tolerance, a Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, Montgomery, Alabama, 2012. URL: http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/Speak_Up_at_School.pdf. See also Robin M. Smith and Mara Sapon-Shevin, “Disability Humor, Insults, and Inclusive Practice,” *Social Advocacy and Systems Change* 1, Issue 2 (2008-2009): 1-18.

33. Terry Frieden, “Mississippi Town Sued over ‘School-to-Prison Pipeline,’” *CNN.com*, October 26, 2012, URL: <http://www.cnn.com/2012/10/24/justice/mississippi-civil-rights-lawsuit/>.

34. Johns Hopkins Researchers, “Dropout Factories: Take a Closer Look at Failing Schools Across the Country,” *Associated Press*, 2007, URL: <http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/wdc/dropout/>.

goodness as rationality explains why this should be so. We may define self-respect (or self-esteem) as having two aspects. First of all, as we noted earlier, it includes a person's sense of his [sic.] own value, his secure conviction that his conception of his good, his plan of life, is worth carrying out. And second, self-respect implies a confidence in one's ability, so far as it is within one's power, to fulfill one's intentions. When we feel that our plans are of little value, we cannot pursue them with pleasure or take delight in their execution. Nor plagued by failure and self-doubt can we continue in our endeavors. It is clear, then, why self-respect is a primary good. Without it nothing may seem worth doing, or if some things have value for us, we lack the will to strive for them. All desire and activity becomes empty and vain, and we sink into apathy and cynicism. ... [*Thus we must*] avoid at almost any cost the social conditions that undermine self-respect. (1999b, 386, emphasis added)

While there is in Rawls's outlook on self-respect a vital issue at the heart of the fight against oppression and anti-democratic social conditions, he falls short of focusing on what his own outlook on this (perhaps) most important primary good implies. As I argue elsewhere, this point turns out to be pivotal in a tension inherent within Rawls's liberalism. For, if liberalism requires a certain kind of equality of citizenship, such as in mutual respect for each other person implicit in what we mean by democracy, then the further liberal norm of needing to minimize intervention into people's lives may protect liberties which create an unjust culture. For, people's lives and culture can include organizations like the Ku Klux Klan and other concerted efforts to subjugate people. The most explicit and overt of these can be targeted for legal reform, to be sure, such as in the rulings against the segregation of public schools and in the present discussions about the football team named the "Redskins" (Vargas 2014), yet culture has subtle ways of creating and cultivating hierarchies of citizenship in our language, beliefs, practices, and institutions. It also has overt and explicit workarounds to surmount policy barriers to how empowered groups seek to maintain themselves, such as in the prevalence of segregated private white academies in the South,³⁵ most of which were created in the 1960's after the *Brown v. Board* decision. Such developments led Derrick Bell (2005) to argue that the *Brown* decision was a failure. Elizabeth Anderson proposes a return to efforts at integration, but recognizes that the general push has been abandoned (Anderson 2010).

35. Sarah Carr, "In Southern Towns, 'Segregation Academies' Are Still Going Strong," *The Atlantic*, December 13, 2012, URL: www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/12/in-southern-towns-segregation-academies-are-still-going-strong/266207/. See also Kenneth T. Andrews, "Movement-Counter Movement Dynamics and the Emergence of New Institutions: The Case of 'White Flight' Schools in Mississippi" (2002).

It is for reasons such as these that John Dewey argued that democracy must not be thought of only as a matter of procedure or of abstract principles. Summing up the central point that Dewey offered, which ought to be heeded today especially in a social and political philosophy attentive to the power of culture, he wrote that

Our original democratic ideas must apply culturally as well as politically... If we cannot produce a democratic culture, one growing natively out of our institutions, our democracy will be a failure. There is no question, not even that of bread and clothing, more important than this question of the possibility of executing our democratic ideals directly in the cultural life of the country.
(Dewey 1932, 238)³⁶

It is worth noting that Dewey made this argument in 1932, while the United States was nearing the height of the Great Depression's 25% unemployment rate and consequent challenges for economic, social, and food security. At bottom, he argued that nothing, not even such concrete considerations, is more important than the need for establishing a truly democratic and mutually respectful culture. Culture enables or inhibits justice, and so the effects on individuals, practices, policies, and institutions are many and varied. The next steps forward must return to the task of cultural reconstruction, sentimental moral education, and the promotion of self-respect and the conditions necessary for each person to feel and believe in his or her own worth and power to pursue a meaningful and flourishing life.

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36. Republished in LW.6.40–48.

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