

## The Insignificant Other<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Knowing the Other

Over the course of our seminar, I have come to two conclusions, both of which seem to me undeniably true (I use the word intentionally, although perhaps not imprudently). The first conclusion is that [Religion professor] Bill Darrow's Muslims, [Classics professor] Meredith Hoppin's Greeks, [History professor] Bill Wagner's nineteenth-century Russians, [Religion professor] Judith Wegner's Jews, [Religion professor] David Habeman's Hindus, [Political Science professor] Raymond Baker's Egyptians, and [Political Science professor] Michael MacDonald's "natives" and "settlers" in Northern Ireland, Israel, and South Africa, are all "others" to me; the second is that Bill, Meredith, etc. know much more about their respective others than I do. These two conclusions, if warranted, provide decisive support for a suspicion I have long held, namely, that knowledge of the other is possible. That, I take it, puts me on one side of this seminar's great divide.

What I have concluded, adopting Michael's idiom, is that I—as well as, I suspect, many others among us—am an Aristotelian native dweller on the turf of social science, "Aristotelian" in that, first, I acknowledge that, because of the nature of its subject matter, *episteme politike* (social-political knowledge) can never exhibit the certainty or precision

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<sup>1</sup> I hereby invoke whatever protection may be provided by the usual disclaimers, qualifications, and incantations.

of mathematical knowledge, but, second, I deny that that means that it is not knowledge at all.<sup>2</sup>

At present, we Aristotelian native dwellers on the turf of social science find ourselves beleaguered on the one hand by positivistic settlers who are trying to claim our land as their own, and on the other by neo-Nietzschean terrorists who want to convince us to join with them in attacking all knowledge claims, thereby regaining our land from the positivists, but only having given up our reason for wanting to dwell there in the first place.

Or, forsaking Michael's idiom: the positivists object that only mathematical (or quasi-mathematical) knowledge is knowledge, and that if we Aristotelians do not have that we have nothing more than opinion. Our neo-Nietzschean would-be allies insist that even mathematical (and quasi-mathematical) "knowledge" is not knowledge, but rather mere opinion. Thus, whereas we Aristotelians deny the positivists epistemic monopoly on the basis of the claim that we too can become knowledgeable concerning our subject matter, the neo-Nietzscheans deny the positivists epistemic monopoly on the basis of the claim that no one can become knowledgeable about anything.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See *Nicomachean Ethics* I. iii. 1-4, II. ii. 3-5.

<sup>3</sup> As should be clear, my initial adoption of Michael's vocabulary is not intended to serve a significant argumentative function: I do not claim an "originary" right for the Aristotelian, based on prior possession. Nor, incidentally, do I object in principle to statistical analyses or to deconstructive readings. The Aristotelian can coexist with those who seek mathematical knowledge and with those who seek no knowledge; problems arise when

These distinctions may seem to lead to a question I should now try to answer, i.e., what makes what Bill, Meredith, etc., say about the groups they discuss “knowledge” rather than mere “opinion” or “interpretation”? The reason some of us (including neo-Nietzscheans) would want to deny that it is knowledge, I take it, is that it can be difficult—to say the least—to determine what distinguishes knowledge from belief, truth from opinion. I would overcome that objection by telling you exactly what distinguishes them; I am not going to do that. Trying to secure knowledge by supplying a criterion is like trying to secure milk by—in something like Kant’s phrase—fondling a he-goat while holding a sieve underneath.<sup>4</sup>

Lacking both he-goat and sieve, I proceed in a different fashion. Rather than seeking some characteristic that decisively distinguishes social-scientific knowledge from mere opinion, I will indicate three interrelated characteristics champions of opinion (especially, I think, various neo-Nietzscheans) have taken knowledge to have to exhibit. I will acknowledge that Aristotelian social-scientific accounts do not exhibit these characteristics, but I will deny that this purported deficiency undermines all knowledge-claims that can be made on their behalf. I present the three as terroristic objections to the possibility of social-scientific knowledge, considering them initially, for purposes of our discussion, as objections to the possibility of knowledge of the other, and responding to

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these others refuse coexistence to the Aristotelian. Only then do they become, respectively, “settlers” and “terrorists.”

<sup>4</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason*, A58/B83.

them, for purposes of convenience, in terms of knowledge-claims made for Michael's essay on natives and settlers.<sup>5</sup>

The first terroristic objection is that knowledge of the other requires the full, transparent self-presence of the other. This seems at times to be required by Derrida, more often by some of his disciples. I agree in general with the contention of Charles Taylor that the "main weight" of this argument

is carried [...] by an utterly caricatural view of [claims to knowledge] as involving a belief in a kind of total self-transparent clarity, which would make even Hegel blush. The rhetoric deployed around this has the effect of obscuring the possibility that there might be a third alternative to the two rather dotty ones on offer; and as long as you go along with this, the Derridean one seems to win as the least mad, albeit by a hair.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In referring specifically to Michael's essay I do not mean to accord it epistemic superiority over other presentations to this seminar; I "privilege" it only because the opening section of this essay is adapted from my comments on Michael's presentation.

<sup>6</sup> "Overcoming Epistemology," in McCarthy et.al. (eds.), *After Philosophy*, Cambridge: MIT, 1987, p. 484. It might be objected that Taylor and I rely on an "utterly caricatural" view of Derridean deconstruction, but the objection would require elaboration. In general support of Taylor's reading, Vincent Descombes has argued that Derridean deconstruction "operates, not as it claims, upon 'Western metaphysics' (with phenomenology as one variant, not to say a faithful reproduction), but upon Husserlian descriptions" (*Objects of All Sorts: A Philosophical Grammar*, trans. Scott-Fox and

Michael did not claim to know or to tell us everything about his chosen groups, but he did claim to know and to tell us something, and I believe that, at least in my case, he succeeded.

The second terroristic objection is that knowledge of the other must be “innocent” or egalitarian in the sense that no aspects of the “other” are suppressed. I do not claim, and I do not think Michael would claim, that there is nothing potentially relevant that his account “suppresses” (or, less pejoratively, fails to consider); to be sure, there are more factions within the groups he discusses than he explicitly notes. Age, gender, and economic differences within the groups might well be important in various contexts, and even, at some point, in Michael’s context. The question is, does the absence of treatment of these differences disqualify any knowledge claims we might make for Michael’s account? I am not convinced that it does.

The third terroristic objection is that knowledge of the other must be “neutral” in that it must contain no political shadings. I do not claim that Michael’s account is (or should be) free from such shadings. Michael considers his various groups, it seems to me, from the perspective of liberal democracy, which is understood (pre-understood, if you

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Harding, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1986, p. 62, cf. pp. 62-67). I have argued elsewhere that that the deconstruction even of Husserlian phenomenology is more problematic than Derrida acknowledges (“Reconstructing Husserl: A Critical Response to Derrida’s Speech and Phenomena,” *Husserl Studies* 4:45-62, 1987).

like) as a political order preferable to the orders present in the societies he considers.<sup>7</sup> A different account would be generated by someone whose political orientation were, for example, Marxist or radical-feminist. The question, again, is whether the political perspective undermines all knowledge claims that might be made on behalf of Michael's account.

These three terroristic objections to the possibility of social-scientific knowledge share a common form: in each case, we are presented with what are supposed to be mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive alternatives: either transparent presence or opaque absence; either we know everything or we know nothing; either power has no influence on the account, or power determines the account. The Aristotelian response must be to deny the premise: in terms of clarity and comprehensiveness, social-scientific knowledge is not all-or-nothing, but rather more or less;<sup>8</sup> concerning power, social-

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<sup>7</sup> I detect—without objecting to—a liberal perspective in Michael's assertion that where "open and liberal political systems [...] provide institutional alternatives," violence is not "an authentic political expression" (5-6), and in his discussion of "the restriction of effective political rights" (35).

<sup>8</sup> If "knowing" is a matter not simply of knowing or not knowing (as Plato's *Meno* already suggests), but rather of knowing more or less, then we must relinquish the notion that we can rely on such binary oppositions as knowledge vs. opinion and truth vs. interpretation. On the problems inherent in such oppositions see pp. 8-11, 24-25, and notes 10 and 29, below.

scientific discourse may be unable to avoid being conditioned by political interests, but that does not mean that it must be determined by such interests.

A second feature shared by the three terroristic objections is that they all apply as well to knowledge of the self or the same as to knowledge of the other: I am not wholly transparent to myself (nor is “my” culture to me), accounts I give of myself no doubt “privilege” certain features or aspects over others, and any such accounts may be in the service of some attempted self- discipline, self-development, self-constraint, or self-deception. This extension of the objections reveals that they are effective not directly against purported knowledge of the other, specifically, but rather but rather against knowledge itself, generically. If I cannot know the other, that is not because the other is other, but rather because I cannot know. In other words, the other is insignificant in the eyes of the epistemic terrorist, as well as in those of the political terrorist. The other is insignificant to the political terrorist in that the other is the oppressor with whom discussion and agreement are considered impossible; this presumed impossibility is what leads to terroristic action. The other is insignificant to the epistemic terrorist in that the considerations that seem to make the other epistemically inaccessible apply equally to the self; this apparent inaccessibility is what leads to terroristic epistemology.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In juxtaposing epistemic and political terrorism, I mean to suggest that epistemology is not politically neutral. The suggestion is developed implicitly in my remarks on Rorty, below; for explicit elaboration, see Alasdair MacIntyre, “Relativism, Power, and Philosophy” (in *After Philosophy*, ed. McCarthy et. al., Cambridge: MIT U. P., 1987, pp.

## 2. The Other What?

Gesturing to his left, Jacques exclaims to his companion Maurice, “There’s a red-winged blackbird!” Startled by the exclamation, the bird takes to wing; Maurice glimpses nothing more than a flash of color. Shortly thereafter, his disappointment is gone, for he is the one to point and to exclaim—less explosively, so as not to disturb his referent—”Look, Jacques, there’s another.” At this juncture, several intelligible responses are open to Jacques, including, no doubt among others, “Yes, and it’s a beauty, isn’t it”; “No, that’s the same one”; “No, you dolt, that’s a bobolink”; and “No, it’s not, but I’m not quite sure what it is.” Two responses that are not open, even to Jacques (or are open only as jests, and only then in conversation with an intellectual intimate like Maurice), are “No, it isn’t, it’s a bird”; and “You’re right, but what is it?”

Maurice’s “other” is an “other,” by ordinary-language convention (if not necessarily by Jacques’s intentional innovation), only if it is a redwinged blackbird that is numerically- existentially distinct from the redwinged blackbird originally sighted (and subsequently cited) by Jacques.<sup>10</sup> As Jacques might put it, it is other only if it is same, it is

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385-411, esp. p. 398) and Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics*, New York / Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1987.

<sup>10</sup> My analysis of the conversation between Jacques and Maurice requires consideration of linguistic conventions (how “other” is ordinarily used), the speakers’ intentions (Jacques’s possible innovation, which remains parasitic on the conventional use), and actual referents (the supposed bird or birds in question). For an argument against various attempts to reduce one or more of these features to one or more of the others, see Karl-

different only if it is identical—a paradox, if not an outright contradiction. A plodding logician might prefer the clarification, it's another (individual) blackbird only if it's a member of the same (particular) species, within the same (universal) genus. "Otherness" or "difference" of one kind, the logician would acknowledge, presupposes "sameness" or "identity" of another ("of another kind," we all read automatically and reliably), but, because of the difference in kind, this is neither paradoxical nor contradictory.<sup>11</sup>

Considered semantically, "other," like every concept, is determined only through what it is not: to be "other from" is to be "not the same as," just as to be "different from" is to be "not identical to." Yet "other" is also, in ordinary language, an incomplete predicate: in isolation, utterances like "I'll have another" and "There goes another" are perplexing

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Otto Apel, "Intentions, Conventions, and Reference to Things: Dimensions of Understanding Meaning in Hermeneutics and in Analytic Philosophy of Language," in Parret and Bouveresse (eds.), *Meaning and Understanding* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1981).

<sup>11</sup> The most complete available account of how and why paradox and contradiction are unavoidable as long as one relies on dyadically-determined predicates (identity-difference, same-other, etc.) is Book II of Hegel's *Science of Logic*. To reduce a long and complicated story to a sentence: Hegel argues that reliance on such dyads is what made Western metaphysics dogmatic; the first requirement for overcoming the dogmatism is that we turn from dyads to triads (e.g., universal- particular-individual). Hegel would be amused and/or appalled by the number of objections to his logic that, in accusing him of "reducing other to same" or "privileging identity over difference," rely precisely on the dyadic determinations he so exhaustively criticized.

rather than informative; one responds intelligibly and appropriately to either with, “another what?,” asking, with the “what,” for the species of which the “other” referred to is an additional member.

To know the referent of the determination “other” is, then, both to know what features the “other” shares with that to which it is “other,” and what features distinguish it from the latter, its other. To identify the former features is not to reduce “other” to “same,” or to privilege “identity” over “difference”; it is, instead, to know a part of what one must know in order to know the other as other. Conversely, to describe the purported “other” without identifying features common to the other and its other is not to know the other as other, but rather as something else—or, better, not to know it at all. Concretely: to know an other human being as other, I must seek to acknowledge whatever it is that makes both me and this other human in the first place. Failing that, I recognize the other not as an other human being, but rather, perhaps, as an other animal, or merely as an other thing. Even the “absolutely other” that, like the Parmenidean altogether-not (*medamos on*), can be neither thought nor spoken, is an other concept, precisely in that it is conceptually determined as unthinkable. If this is so, then every “other” is, unavoidably, an “other what,” and to seek to know the other’s “whatness” is to respect rather than to subvert its otherness.

### 3. The Other Human Being

The recently notorious “problem of the other” is a problem, primarily, within either the “humanities”—the disciplines concerned with specifically human being—or the “social sciences”—the disciplines that systematically study beings that are “social” in

Aristotle's sense, i.e., human beings. The "other" in question, then, is the "other" human being or human group (culture, race, sex, etc.). The "other's" "whatness" is the other's humanity.

The position of those who attempt to view other human beings primarily as other human beings is often termed "humanism," as opposed to the likes of racism, sexism, and chauvinism. Of late, humanism has fallen into ill repute for various reasons, some good and some bad. The best of the good reasons is that many who have claimed to speak as humanists have in fact spoken as racists, sexists, or chauvinists; some "humanists" of this sort have argued that white European males exhibit "human" characteristics more fully than do non-white non-European non-males, and that the former should therefore rule the latter. Another good reason for resistance to humanism is that some have taken humanism to entail egalitarianism, and the latter to entail a nihilistic relativism: since all human beings are the same, what any one human being does or believes is as good as what any other human being does or believes, so there are no good reasons for preferring any specific acts or beliefs to any others.

These (and no doubt others) are good arguments against much of what has passed as "humanism"; perhaps we should accept them as adequate—perhaps we should relinquish the attempt to regard Arabs, Greeks, and each other as other human beings. To indicate how we might then regard them (and, perhaps, each other), I turn now to the ethnocentrism advocated by Richard Rorty.

### 3.1. Rortian antihumanism

In the essay "Solidarity or Objectivity?," Richard Rorty presents us with a choice:

There are two principal ways in which reflective human beings try, by placing their lives in a larger context, to give sense to those lives. The first is by telling the story of their contribution to a community. [...] The second way is to describe themselves as standing in immediate relation to a nonhuman reality. [...] I shall say that stories of the former kind exemplify the desire for solidarity, and that stories of the latter kind exemplify the desire for objectivity.<sup>12</sup>

The quest for objectivity—the attempt to ground solidarity in objectivity—runs, according to Rorty, from the “Greek philosophers,” through the Enlightenment, into positivism. The “central theme of this tradition” is “the idea of Truth as something to be pursued for its own sake, not because it will be good for oneself, or for one’s real or imaginary community” (p. 4).<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, one part of this Truth—i.e., “objective

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity?,” in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Rajchman and West, New York: Columbia U.P., 1985, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Given Rorty’s description, Aristotle does not qualify as a “Greek philosopher”: his concern both in the *Ethics* and in the *Politics* is with happiness (*eudaimonia*), the highest human good; he seeks knowledge of this good not merely “for its own sake,” but rather, explicitly, because we are more likely to attain it if we know what we are aiming for (*Nicomachean Ethics*, I. ii. 1-3, iv. 1). Similarly, Rorty’s assertion that the “objectivist” seeks “objective knowledge of what human beings are like—not knowledge of what Greeks or Frenchmen or Chinese are like, but of humanity as such” (p. 4) is misleading at best if applied to Aristotle, whose ethical investigations begin with considerations not of “humanity as such,” but rather with the speeches and deeds of specific human beings, i.e.,

knowledge of what human beings are like”—is central to “liberal social thought,” which seeks an “ultimate community [...] which will exhibit a solidarity which is not parochial because it is the expression of an ahistorical human nature” (p. 4).

Rorty views “objectivism” as the only possible humanism, but the basis for this view is not apparent: as the passages quoted above indicate, he moves glibly from talk of an “immediate relation to a nonhuman reality” to reliance on “an ahistorical human nature.” It is not clear to me how the two are related. Be that as it may, even assuming that each entails the other, Rorty acknowledges that he cannot refute the “objectivist” position that relies upon them. His strongest argument is, appropriately, pragmatic: “The best argument we partisans of solidarity have against the realistic partisans of objectivity is Nietzsche’s argument that the traditional Western metaphysico-epistemological way of firming up our habits simply isn’t working anymore” (p. 15).

Differently stated, Rorty’s strongest argument is that our actions (social-scientific or otherwise) are not effectively enlightened by anything like a human perspective, as opposed to our historico-culturally determined perspectives. Rorty therefore advocates the abandonment of the objectivist-“humanist” project, but he acknowledges that this leaves us confronted with a dilemma: “Either we attach a special privilege to our own  

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with what various actual human beings have believed concerning the good life (I. iii. 4), and with the ways human beings have actually led their lives (I. v. 1). Finally, the conclusions Aristotle draws in his *Ethics* “carry some conviction” thanks to the arguments on which they are based, “but it is by the practical experience of life and conduct that the truth is really tested, since it is there that the final decision lies” (X. viii. 12).

community,” becoming ethnocentrists, “or we pretend an impossible tolerance for every other group,” becoming relativists (p. 12). Rorty advocates that we “grasp the ethnocentric horn of this dilemma”:

We should say that we must, in practice, privilege our own group, even though there can be no noncircular justification for doing so. We must insist that the fact that nothing is immune from criticism does not mean that we have a duty to justify everything. We Western liberal intellectuals should accept the fact that we have to start from where we are, and that this means that there are lots of views which we simply cannot take seriously. To use Neurath’s familiar analogy, we can *understand* the revolutionary’s suggestion that a sailable boat can’t be made out of the planks which make up ours, and that we must simply abandon ship. But we cannot take his suggestion seriously. We cannot take it as a rule for actions, so it is not a live option. For some people, to be sure, the option is live. These are the people who have always hoped to become a New Being, who have hoped to be converted rather than persuaded. But we--the liberal Rawlsian searchers for consensus, the heirs of Socrates, the people who wish to link their days dialectically each to each—cannot do so. [...] This preference is not built into us by human nature. It is just the way *we* live now.<sup>14</sup>

The position Rorty here advocates is peculiar both in itself and—perhaps more so—in comparison with the “edifying” position championed in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. “We” edifiers, “we” opponents of Philosophy, Reality, and Truth, prefer edifying discourse precisely because it is “*supposed* to be abnormal, to take us out of our old selves

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<sup>14</sup> “Solidarity or Objectivity?,” p. 12.

by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings.”<sup>15</sup> At the same time, “we” Western liberal intellectuals are people who do not want to become “a New Being,” indeed, people who “cannot” want to do so.

“We” Western liberal intellectuals cannot want to be revolutionaries because “we have to start from where we are.” Because “we have to start from where we are,” “we must, in practice privilege our own group.” But (to parrot Derrida), “who, we”? The “we” who must “start from where we are” are, it seems, “we human beings,” presumably in our “ahistorical human nature.”<sup>16</sup> Yet the “we” who “must, in practice, privilege our own group” are “we Western liberal intellectuals,” who “must” privilege our own group only because that happens to be “the way we live now.” Those who seek to become “a New Being” must also start from where they are, but they need not, it seems—and, in fact, do not—privilege their “own” group, if their “own” group is the group within which they start. Perhaps, then, ethnocentrism—in the sense of “privileging one’s own group”—is inevitable only for the ethnocentrist.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1979, p. 360.

<sup>16</sup> See “Solidarity or Objectivity?,” p. 14: “This inevitable ethnocentrism to which we are all condemned [...]”

<sup>17</sup> Rorty does not acknowledge the degree to which it is becoming difficult for “us” to be ethnocentric: we citizens of modern democratic states (at least) have little in the way of *ethnos* on which we could center. Our consequent lack of solidarity (in Rorty’s sense) is viewed by Alasdair MacIntyre as so severe a problem that our most prudent political option, at present, is a new monasticism that may preserve some of our learning and

Humanists seek to transcend—although not necessarily to escape—the limits of the communities within which they start by coming to see what other kinds of communities are possible; pragmatic ethnocentrists, on the other hand, make of the desire for objectivity “not the desire to escape the limitations of one’s community, but simply the desire for as much intersubjective agreement as possible, the desire to extend the reference to ‘us’ as far as we can.”<sup>18</sup> This desire is based in the recognition that “there is always room for improved belief, since new evidence, new hypotheses, or a whole new vocabulary,<sup>19</sup> may come along” (p. 5).

We Western intellectual liberals, then, want to retain the possibility of learning from others, but also the limitations of our own community. But how do these wants come together in the “desire to extend the reference to ‘us’ as far as we can”? Why should we desire “as much intersubjective agreement as possible” (i.e., presumably, as much human agreement as possible), especially given that in some cases agreement can be attained only by converting, not by convincing? As Rorty notes, “it is not that we live in culture through the “new dark ages that are already upon us” (*After Virtue*, Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame Press, 1984, p. ). Bernard Williams also recognizes the threat posed by our fragmentation, but offers a somewhat more optimistic prognosis (*Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Cambridge: Harvard U. P., 1985).

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<sup>18</sup> “Solidarity or Objectivity?,” p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Given Rorty’s general agreement with Donald Davidson that the notion of alternative conceptual schemes is incoherent (pp. 7, 9), it is not clear what “a whole new vocabulary” could mean.

different worlds than the Nazis or the Amazonians, but that conversion from or to their point of view, though possible, will not be a matter of inference from previously shared premises” (p. 19, n13). Rortian solidarity seeks expansion, and its expansion is imperialistic.

“Solidarity or Objectivity?” is “a revised version of a Howison Lecture given at the University of California at Berkeley in January 1983” (p. 3). Among the revisions is one of central relevance to the question of agreement and ethnocentrism. In a paragraph omitted from the published version of the essay, Rorty describes the pragmatist’s picture of the human condition in clearly antihumanistic terms; his picture is one

of people, and for that matter animals, as having overlapping sets of beliefs. These beliefs are all on a par—not divided up into the structural ones and the accidental ones, much less the factual ones and the non-factual ones. We have agreement, social harmony, and peace, when these beliefs overlap to a considerable extent. We have disagreement, or social change, or war, when they do not. On this picture, it is silly to suggest that if we can find no common ground on which to debate and convince Eichmann or Andropov then we must concede that their views are “as good as ours.” This is like suggesting that if we can find no common ground with wolves or rattlesnakes or rabbits--no set of overlapping beliefs sufficient to provide a basis for a modus vivendi--then we should not criticize them, much less kill them. [...] On the pragmatist view, by contrast, the difference between us and people like Eichmann and Andropov is the same sort of difference as between us and the

wolves (and rabbits). On the topics which concern us both, we share too few of the same beliefs to make serious conversation possible.<sup>20</sup>

In cases where “serious conversation” is impossible, we relate to other human beings not as human beings, but rather as other animals: if they are as dangerous as wolves or rattlesnakes, we seek to exterminate them, whereas if they are as harmless as rabbits, we suffer their coexistence, at least as long as they do not propagate overzealously, and as long as we do not desire their flesh as food, their fur as clothing, or their feet as talismans.

What is wrong with Rorty’s picture? First, whereas I know that I cannot converse with rattlesnakes,<sup>21</sup> I must discover that I cannot converse with Andropovs and Eichmanns. Second, whereas I know (or have every reason to suspect) that I will never be able to converse with rattlesnakes, I must acknowledge that either I or the other with whom I cannot now converse may change in such a way that conversation becomes possible. Third, whereas Eichmann and Andropov may be rattlesnakes as far as I am concerned, they may not be seen as rattlesnakes by other human beings I myself do not view as rattlesnakes. Finally, whereas rattlesnakes are nonhuman, Eichmanns are inhuman: “when devoid of [human] excellence the human being is the most corrupt [*anosiotaton*] and savage of animals,” for we are “born possessing weapons for the use of

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<sup>20</sup> “Relativism,” Howison lecture at UC-Berkeley, 1/31/83; typescript (courtesy Sam Assefa), pp. 26- 27.

<sup>21</sup> Because I cannot converse with rattlesnakes, I—unlike Rorty, it seems—see no point in criticizing them.

practical wisdom and excellence, which it is possible to employ entirely for the opposite ends.”<sup>22</sup>

Because human beings can be inhuman (indeed, only human beings can be inhuman; whatever is not human is non-human), to say that even those human beings with whom I find ethical discussion impossible are not rattlesnakes is not, despite Rorty, to say that I should never criticize or kill them. As Aristotle notes, discourses concerning ethics are “powerless to stimulate the mass of humanity to moral nobility (*kalokagathian*),” for “to dislodge by discourses habits long rooted in character is difficult if not impossible.”<sup>23</sup> If discourses cannot change the human being whose greatest pleasure comes from child molestation, physical restraint is the obvious alternative.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, I. i. 12.

<sup>23</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, X. ix. 3, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Even Plato, known to neo-Nietzscheans as the fiendish originator of the “metaphysics of presence,” stresses the intractability of basic disagreements. Concerning the doctrine that “we ought neither to requite wrong with wrong nor to do evil to anyone, no matter what he may have done to us,” Socrates informs Crito, “those who believe this, and those who do not, have no common intentions (*koine boule*), but they must necessarily, in view of their projects (*bouleumata*), despise (*kataphronein*) one another” (*Crito*, 49d).

As usual, the Platonic issue is far more complicated than this single passage suggests. In the *Republic*, when Polemarchus defines justice as “doing good to friends and harm to enemies” (332d), Socrates finds sufficient common ground to continue the discussion and succeeds, without difficulty, in convincing Polemarchus that the definition is faulty (335d).

My objections to Rorty have centered on the limitation he places on the extent to which we human beings should, for pragmatic reasons, be open to learning from other human beings. This limitation reveals a way of dealing with other human beings and human communities that is mirrored by Rorty's way of dealing with accounts, be they "religious" or "philosophical," concerning "the point of human life." In reading such accounts, Rorty tells us, we are confronted with a version of the choice between objectivity and solidarity: we are either to seek the "authentic interpretation" of the text, its "essence," or "to pull out, from the tangle we find on the pages, some lines of thought that might turn out to be useful for our own purposes." Rorty opts for the latter, assuming that "the works of anybody whose mind was complex enough to make his or her books worth reading will not have an 'essence,'" that, instead, "the author was as mixed-up as the rest of us."<sup>25</sup>

Just as "we" Rortians know in advance that we have nothing to learn from individuals or cultures that have not been converted to Western liberal intellectuality, we know in advance that we should seek in accounts of "the point of human life" only what

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Thus, a safer conclusion to draw from the *Crito* passage would be that just as one with as little sense as Crito does well to obey the laws rather than question them, such a one also does well to despise those who believe that it is right to do evil; if Crito argues he is likely to lose, and himself to be corrupted. Nevertheless, other passages, such as the conclusion of the *Euthyphro*, provide less ambiguous indications of Plato's awareness that discussion often does not result in agreement.

<sup>25</sup> Rorty, "Taking Philosophy Seriously," *The New Republic*, 11 April 1988, p. 34.

“might turn out to be useful” to us, given “our purposes,” whatever they may be. Even if the account’s author is one whose books are worth reading, we know in advance (or “should assume”) that what makes them worth reading cannot be that the author is less “mixed-up” than the rest of us. If the author suggests that we consider adopting “purposes” that have not heretofore been our own, we cling to our Rortian liberality, rejecting all such suggestions on the assumption that they are incidental products of the unavoidable confusion of the mind, and therefore book(s), of the author (who is or was, after all, only human).

Even if we are pragmatists, we might well suspect that, confronted with books we have deemed “worth reading” that are devoted to “the point of human life,” it might make sense to allow them to bring “our purposes” into question, rather than simply to seek what “might turn out to be useful,” presupposing those purposes. At times, Rorty himself seems to harbor such suspicions:

Karl Popper, in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, did a good job of showing how passages in Plato, Hegel, and Marx could be taken to justify Hitlerian or Leninist takeovers, but to make his case he had to leave out 90 percent of each man’s thought. Such attempts to reduce a philosopher’s thought to his possible moral or political influence are as pointless as the attempt to view Socrates as an apologist for Critias, or Jesus as just one more charismatic kook. Jesus was indeed, among other things, a charismatic kook, and Heidegger was, among other things, an egomaniacal, anti-Semitic redneck. But we have gotten a lot out of the Gospels, and I suspect that philosophers for

centuries to come will be getting a lot out of Heidegger's original and powerful narrative of the movement of Western thought from Plato to Nietzsche.<sup>26</sup>

Rorty criticizes Popper, ironically, for being a Rortian: from the "tangle" he found in the works of Plato, Hegel, and Marx, Popper presumably pulled out the ten percent that was "useful for his purposes," i.e., attempting to convince others to abandon philosophy in favor of positivism. Rorty pulls out a different ten percent (well, maybe two percent), but that is because his purposes are different: he wants to convince us to abandon "Philosophy" in favor of his version of pragmatism. If my purposes are different, I will select differently; but what is the alternative? What else could I do, what else might Popper have done, save engage in the "pointless" "quest for 'an authentic reading'" (p. 34)? If the procedure Popper follows is likewise "pointless," that can only be, according to Rorty, because it has not succeeded. If the next Popper succeeds in getting the books of Plato, Hegel, and Marx burned, his attempted reduction will be no more pointless than was the similarly reductive practice of the Nazis, who extracted from the "tangle" of Nietzsche's works "some lines of thought that [they thought] might turn out to be useful for [their] own purposes."

Rorty's pragmatic antihumanism, in both its political and its hermeneutical form, is vulnerable to internal (i.e., pragmatic) critique. Moreover, his failure to distinguish the human from the nonhuman leads to the obliteration of any distinction between either

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<sup>26</sup> "Taking Philosophy Seriously," p. 33.

and the inhuman. To be sure, Rorty's is not the only form of antihumanism,<sup>27</sup> but my suspicion is that consideration of others would lead to an increase rather than a reduction in difficulties. I therefore return to the humanist alternative.

### 3.2. Aristotelian humanism

The word "speciesism" has been used for an attitude some regard as our ultimate prejudice, that in favor of humanity. It is more revealingly called "humanism," and it is not a prejudice. To see the world from a human point of view is not an absurd thing for

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<sup>27</sup> In an essay appended to the English translation of *Literature and Its Theorists* (Ithaca: Cornell U. P., 1987), Tzvetan Todorov distinguishes two lines of "post-structuralist" literary criticism, i.e., "deconstruction" (exemplified by Paul de Man) and "pragmatism" (represented by Stanley Fish), classifying both as forms of "antihumanism" (pp. 182-91). Todorov's distinction extends, it seems to me, to Derridean deconstruction and Rortian pragmatism, but an important qualification must be extended as well. Noting that the word "antihumanism" "may have unpleasant resonances," Todorov stresses that to classify a doctrine as antihumanistic is not to classify its advocates as inhuman; Todorov bears "personal witness to the fact that Paul de Man was a delightful man, and Stanley Fish still is." I cannot bear personal witness, but it would not surprise me to learn that the same is true of Derrida and Rorty. The important point, for Todorov, is that "it is not possible, without inconsistency, to defend human rights with one hand and deconstruct the idea of humanity with the other" (p. 190). Although I have some reservations concerning Todorov's rights-vocabulary, I agree with the spirit of this assertion.

human beings to do. [...] Our arguments have to be grounded in a human point of view; they cannot be derived from a point of view that is no one's point of view at all.<sup>28</sup>

If, despite the objectivist tradition stretching (at least) from Descartes through Thomas Nagel, I cannot take a “point of view that is no one's point of view at all”—a “view from nowhere” in one idiom, a “God's-eye view” in another—I must take a view from somewhere. In the passage just quoted, Bernard Williams agrees with Aristotle that one perspective it is not absurd for me to take is the human perspective. But is that not just one more “point of view that is no one's point of view at all”? If we must “start from where we are,” as Rorty plausibly asserts, must I not begin not with a human perspective, or even a “modern” or American or male perspective, but rather with my perspective, whatever that may be? Must I not, worse yet, start from my perspective at this moment, unable in principle to determine whether this is even the same as the perspective “I” had two weeks ago? So it might seem; but what could “my” perspective be, if it could not be the perspective of a modern American white male human being? If I am stripped of all the features that could conceivably determine me as me, what could I be left with, save another “point of view that is no one's point of view at all”?<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, pp. 118-19.

<sup>29</sup> The range of possible “views from somewhere” is, it seems to me, limited at both ends by views from nowhere: at one there is the view from which everything is known because it is the view of God (who is no “where”), at the other, the view from which nothing is known because there is nowhere to stand, nothing to see, and no one to see it (no “objects,” no “subjects”).

The question of “my” perspective can arise either in an epistemological or in an ethical context; it arises if I ask “what can I know,” but also if I ask, “what should I do?” If I ask the latter question then, depending on the context within which I ask it, various features of the “I” will be relevant, as three examples will indicate. First, if I am wondering whether to become a parent, my perspective is in part, unavoidably, a male perspective: I cannot (given current technology, anyway) become pregnant. Paraphrasing Williams, a male perspective is not an absurd perspective for a male to take. Second, if I am wondering what to do with my life, my perspective is in part, unavoidably, a modern perspective: I cannot become a samurai retainer under a medieval Japanese warlord, even if I believe that that would make me happy. Third, if I am confronted with the choice between playing basketball or squash, or between drinking beer or sherry, my perspective is perhaps best described simply as my perspective: given the preferences I happen to have, I make my choice.

What or who is this I, who is male and modern and has preferences? In Hegelian terms, I am a universal in that I contain, within myself, various particulars of race, sex, interests, preferences, experiences, etc., but I am also an individual in that the specific particulars I contain distinguish me as unique, set me apart from all others. It may well be the case that few (if any) of the particulars I contain are exclusive to me: I am not alone in being white, in being a transplanted southerner, in being male, in liking basketball, etc.; nevertheless, the aggregate of particulars individuates me, it makes me who I am.<sup>30</sup> “My”

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<sup>30</sup> One consequence of the adoption of what Hegel would call conceptual (baldly, triadically- determined) as opposed to essential (roughly, dyadically-determined)

perspective, then, is mine only insofar as (among others) it is a male, American, human perspective. But what is it that makes me “human” in such a way that the “human perspective” is one that it is not absurd for me to take, or attempt to take?

Aristotle defines human beings in two ways: we are animals that can give accounts (*zoion logon echon*), and we are political animals (*zoion politikon*). The two definitions may appear to be unrelated, but they are not. They are related through what they share, namely, our identification as animals (rather than gods or angels): we are born, we grow, we die. As human beings, we are animals able to give accounts, but we are not born able to do so; we develop the capacity only if we are brought up by others who teach and care for us. Thus, only those of us who grow up politically, that is, within human communities, become animals who are able to give accounts. Conversely, what makes us political in the most serious sense—what distinguishes us from “social” or cooperative animals like ants and bees (*agelaion*: “gregarious,” “living in herds”)—is that, through giving accounts, we

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predication is that various potentially perplexing questions are rejected as categorially inappropriate. Talk of “personal identity,” for example, relies on the dyadic opposition of identity and difference; similarly, the question, “am I the same person I was two years (or months, weeks, days, minutes, or seconds) ago?” presupposes that I am either simply the same or simply other. Granted, I am not simply the same or simply other, but that is not because I am incoherent or unintelligible, but rather because “other” and “same,” taken as simply opposed, are defective categories.

can come to agreement (*koinonia*) concerning good and bad, just and unjust, and thereby form households and cities.<sup>31</sup>

In the Aristotelian view, we are political animals because, through linguistic communication, we can come to share conceptions of how we are to live our lives. It is worth stressing, however, that this “sharing” exhibits both features identified by [Religion professor] Mark [Taylor] in his discussion of *partager*: it both brings us together and keeps us apart, and in two distinct ways. First, what proves to us that we can come to agreement is that we can also disagree. If all human communities were structured in the same way—as are all communities of bees and ants—then we would not be political animals, in Aristotle’s sense. Second, we are not all “the same” in such a way as to make a single form of life the best life for all human beings, or a single form of constitution the best form for all human communities. To be sure, Aristotle argues that the individual who is capable, thanks to nature and upbringing, of leading a life of intellectual excellence will be happier than the sensual hedonist, but that is not to say that the sensual hedonist would be happier contemplating celestial motions than eating, drinking, and fornicating. Similarly, the aristocratically-governed city the majority of whose citizens exhibit moral and intellectual excellence will be a better city than the democratically-governed city composed of lovers of money, but that is not to say that the latter city would become better by becoming oligarchical.

Every possible humanism requires a guiding conception of what being human entails; without some such conception, we could not recognize others as other human

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<sup>31</sup> *Politics* I. i. 10-11.

beings. The more developed the conception, the greater is the danger that the putative humanism will become a form of racism, sexism, or chauvinism: the more features I include in my definition of the human, the greater is the probability—the danger—that some of those features are not generic to humans, but rather specific to my race, my sex, my culture, or me.<sup>32</sup> The Aristotelian conception is, it seems to me, appropriately minimal: human beings are beings who can, through conversing, come to agree or disagree concerning goodness and justice.

Aristotelian humanism provides the basis for Aristotelian social science. As an Aristotelian social scientist, I study the words and the deeds of other human beings and other human communities, past and present. I study their words because using words is what qualifies them for social-scientific study; if I ignore their words, I ignore something essential. I study their deeds as well because the words that concern me most are words concerning deeds, concerning how lives are lived, and the words alone may (in some cases by design) mislead. I pursue these studies both from theoretical interest—because intellectual activity is itself an aspect of the good life, at least for me—and for practical

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<sup>32</sup> This is a danger Aristotle himself certainly did not wholly avoid. On the basis, presumably, of the different roles played by males and females within Athens (or, perhaps, more broadly), he concludes that the “deliberative faculty” of the soul is “present but ineffective” in women (*Politics* I. v. 6.). Women in whom this faculty is both present and effective might well have much to teach Aristotle about women, but that does not preclude the possibility that Aristotle may have something to teach them (as well as men) about deliberation.

purposes: I seek to learn more about what it means to be a human being, about the range of human possibilities, and to determine which practices of other individuals and communities I may seek to incorporate into my own life or my own community.

My social-scientific study will never lead to what Aristotle calls wisdom (*sophia*) or even to knowledge (*episteme*), in the strictest sense: wisdom and this most secure knowledge are attainable only with respect to what is invariable, not with respect to human affairs. Aristotelian social scientists, whose intellectual activity is focused on the political, aim not at wisdom and not at what the positivist recognizes as the sole form of knowledge, but neither do they join epistemic terrorists in aiming only at destruction; what they seek is prudence (*phronesis*), “a truth-attaining rational quality, concerned with action in relation to what is good and bad for human beings.”<sup>33</sup> For the purposes of this search, the other is insignificant; the other human being is not.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> On *sophia*, *episteme*, and *phronesis*, see *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI. iii, v, and vi. The definition of *phronesis* is given at 1140 b 6-8 and again at b 20-22; I use Rackham’s translation from the *Loeb Classical Library* edition. The devaluation of *phronesis* in modern epistemology is an important theme in Stanley Rosen’s *Hermeneutics as Politics*.

<sup>34</sup> The “Aristotelian humanism” I have sketched is, it seems to me, consistent with Bernard Williams’s position, which he terms a “relativism of distance” (*Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, pp. 162-65, 172-73) (I view it as Hegelian as well, but that is a longer story). As Williams’s opposition to “speciesism” (see above, p. 23) indicates, Williams acknowledges the importance of the human point of view. At the same time, he doubts (as I do, *pace* Kant) that the human perspective is sufficient for ethical purposes: “The

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project of giving to ethical life an objective and determinate grounding in considerations about human nature is not, in my view, very likely to succeed” (p. 153).

Implicit in my presentation of Aristotelian humanism has been the notion that the human perspective is the broadest perspective I ever need take. Kantians might object that the appropriate moral perspective is that of the “finite rational being” rather than, specifically, of the human being, but if the definition of “human” is functional (political beings who can, through conversing, come to agree or disagree concerning goodness and justice) rather than biological, I see no significant difference between the two. Following Davidson, I would argue that we can recognize other beings as rational (in Kant’s sense) only if we recognize them as linguistic, that we can recognize them as linguistic only if we can converse with them, and that we can converse with them only if we share with them a “background of common beliefs.” If this is so, then to recognize a being as “rational” is to recognize it as “human,” no matter what it may look like.