THROUGHOUT THE REAGANITE eighties and into the post-Soviet nineties, Richard Rorty has been using pragmatism to praise and defend the virtues of contemporary American democracy and to advocate a political philosophy which he has dubbed "postmodern bourgeois liberalism." At every turn, he invokes John Dewey as its inspirational source and appeals to Deweyan arguments for its justification. Indeed, he explicitly affirms that his liberalism is fully "continuous with Dewey's," locating his differences with Dewey primarily in "the account of the relation of natural science to the rest of culture, and in stating the problem of representationalism vs. anti-representationalism in terms of words and sentences rather than in terms of ideas and experiences" (ORT, 16). More bluntly put, Rorty rejects what he sees as Dewey's privileging of natural science over literary culture, just as he refuses to countenance philosophical discourse that traffics, as Dewey's does, with nonlinguistic entities like experiences or ideas. Apart from such differences, Rorty claims to be advocating the same sort of "democratic, progressive, pluralist community . . . of which Dewey dreamt" (ORT, 13).

Rorty's liberalism, with its celebration of American bourgeois democracy and its critique of the useless "subversion" of the radical intellectual Left, has offended Marxist and post-Marxist radicals all over the world. But it has also shocked many American Deweyan liberals. Long-term friends and pragmatist fellow travelers like Richard Bernstein are dismayed at how Dewey's

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The first version of this article was presented at the University of Chile in December 1992. I am grateful to Carlos Ruiz-Schneider and to Jacques Poulain of the Collège International de Philosophie for arranging the invitation. I also wish to thank Chuck Dyke, James Miller, Seyla Benhabib, Tracy Strong, and an anonymous reviewer for helpful suggestions on subsequent drafts.
radical and clearly anticapitalist liberalism is being distorted and assimilated into "an apologia for the status quo—the very type of liberalism that Dewey judged to be 'irrelevant and doomed.' "2 Opposing Rorty's complacent view that bourgeois liberalism requires only small-scale, piecemeal improvement, some minor "Dewey-style reformist tinkering" (ORT, 16), Bernstein invokes Dewey's Liberalism and Social Action (originally published in 1935), which ardently insists that "Liberalism must now become radical, meaning by 'radical' perception of the necessity of thoroughgoing changes in the set-up of institutions and corresponding activity to bring the changes to pass. For the gulf between what the actual situation makes possible and the actual state itself is so great that it cannot be bridged by piecemeal policies undertaken ad hoc."3

Rorty responds by dismissing such contemporary attempts to maintain Deweyan radicalism as empty "exercises in nostalgia," given the fact that today there are no real alternatives to capitalist economies (SH, 22). He scorns the way radical intellectuals portray themselves as socially concerned champions of the oppressed, when their global theories of radical reform have no touch with concrete political realities and practical proposals, but serve only to flatter their own self-image as avant-garde revolutionaries whose special, esoteric knowledge could save the world.

In this essay I want to compare Rortian and Deweyan liberalism. My aim is not to grade Rorty's fidelity and police the purity of Dewey scholarship for its own sake. Such historical purism is false to the forward-looking spirit of pragmatism. The aim is rather to understand why Dewey's radical liberalism has evolved into Rorty's conservatism and to see whether we can arrive at a more adequate pragmatist liberalism by playing their views off against each other. In sketching the similarities and differences between Deweyan and Rortian liberalism, I will probe some of the deeper philosophical roots of those differences in such issues as the nature of liberty, contingency, and philosophical justification, the value of aesthetic unity, the social construction of the self, and the relation of means to ends. But because pragmatism is historicist and recognizes that philosophical differences are often the product of social change, I will also explore to what extent the differences between Rorty and Dewey may be understood in terms of the different worlds they inhabit. Finally, I will suggest how we liberal pragmatists might go beyond the Dewey-Rorty standoff by splitting their differences, keeping the Deweyan hope for philosophically inspired social reform and more participatory democracy along with the Rortian sense of the limits and abuses of philosophy in treating our current social predicament, including our "private" social predicament as intellectuals.
FOUNDATIONS AND JUSTIFICATION

Dewey and Rorty share the aim of freeing liberalism from its traditional philosophical foundations in enlightenment metaphysics. The standard liberal strategy, established by Locke and Kant, was to ground human freedom ontologically through some doctrine of natural rights, ultimately derivable from our God- or nature-given gift of reason, which requires freedom to realize itself in rational choice and action. Individual liberty is thus guaranteed as what people should have and what societies must protect, because it is built into the very nature of things as part of the rational essence of human nature. Dewey refused to ground liberalism in such a metaphysical doctrine of inalienable rights and necessary human essences. As pragmatist, he rejected metaphysics' fixed world of essences, insisting instead on the plasticity, change, and contingency of our universe. Rorty thus praises Dewey for making liberalism look good to contemporary antiessentialist philosophers by giving it "philosophical articulation" without "philosophical backup," by "debunking the very idea of 'human nature' and of 'philosophical foundations'" that political theories like liberalism were supposed to require (ORT, 211). For Rorty, because there are no ontologically fixed essences or inalienable truths to appeal to as philosophical foundations, there is no place for philosophical justification of politics or of any practice, and any attempt to provide one will only serve to discredit the relevant practice by calling attention to the fact that it is weak enough to require false philosophical support.

Rorty, however, is wrong in thinking that Dewey’s attack on the metaphysics of traditional liberalism was primarily aimed at making liberalism safe for philosophers. It was aimed at making liberalism safe for the masses by curbing its rapacious individualism. If individual liberty rested on ontological and inalienable given of human nature, that would imply that it is always already present in us. There would thus be nothing to do but to leave it and individuals alone; the worst thing to do would be to impose external constraints on it. Liberty here is identified as negative liberty, as freedom from interference; and liberalism is equated with a laissez-faire that refuses to constrain the freedom of the few to take advantage of the many, denying the many a positive sense of freedom as empowerment to lead a better life. Dewey rejected the idea of natural rights because it saw liberty as an abstract metaphysical given, not as a concrete good that depended on contingent societies and required their improvement. For Dewey, "freedom is something to be achieved" rather than "something that individuals have as a ready-made possession"; and its achievement is "conditioned by the institu-
tional medium in which an individual lives.” Hence “organized society must use its powers to establish the conditions under which the mass of individuals can possess actual as distinct from merely legal liberty” (LSA, 21).

Rorty ignores this motive in Dewey’s rejection of liberalism’s philosophical foundations because he simply does not share it. He insists instead on the value of negative liberty, defending it against its communitarian critics and other ideologues who would subordinate it to “telic conceptions of human perfection” (CIS, 45). Dewey himself, as we shall see, can be taken for such a critic and ideologue.

To return to the issue of justification: Rorty also ignores the fact that Dewey’s rejection of the old metaphysical foundations of liberalism is not a rejection of philosophical justification tout court. For Dewey himself worked hard to provide his vision of liberal democracy with a convincing philosophical backup. He elaborated this in terms of basic human desires for consummatory experience, growth, self-realization, and community, and in terms of the need for collaborative effort to achieve greater frequency and security for these desired ends in a changing contingent world whose future can in some measure be influenced and improved by human action and experimental intelligence. Although he repudiated any transcendental deduction of democracy from necessary essences, he did worry about whether “nature itself, as that is uncovered and understood by our best contemporaneous knowledge, [could] sustain and support our democratic hopes,” giving them a convincing “intellectual warrant.”

Rorty’s neglect of this nonfoundational option of philosophical justification is not surprising, because he wants to deny such justification any logical space. Revealing what Bernstein rightly diagnoses as a residual “positivist strain,” Rorty sharply dichotomizes the universe of justificatory discourse into “real” philosophical justification (hard-edged, technically argued deductions from unassailable first principles) and mere rhetorical urging through polemics and story-telling. While historicism and contingency make the former vulnerable and question-begging, the latter is simply not philosophy and so cannot carry the claim to establish what it urges through the supporting evidence of philosophical truth. Given this crippling dichotomy, it is easy to see why Rorty reads Dewey as offering a story rather than philosophical backup. But it is harder to understand why Rorty maintains this positivist dichotomy while rejecting positivism.

One answer may be the extreme professionalism of Rorty’s philosophical world in contrast to Dewey’s, a contrast that lurks behind many of the differences in their pragmatist liberalisms. Rorty’s philosophical institution, professionalized under the aegis of positivism and increasingly isolated from
the mainstream of American cultural life, prides itself on the technical rigor and logical precision of its deductive arguments, on its quest for certain knowledge that is part of its logic of legitimation through assimilation to science. By such scientistic professionalist standards, justificatory arguments in the murky (and dangerously practical) domain of political theory, arguments that were moreover articulated in nontechnical language and clearly motivated by political ideals, could hardly count as professional philosophical proof, and if not professional philosophy, they were simply not philosophy at all, but only ideological polemics and culture criticism.

**FREEDOM AND SELF-REALIZATION**

Both Deweyan and Rortian liberalism privilege not just the individual but what we might call one's individuality: one's particular freedom and self-realization. Although Dewey differs from Rorty in affirming the necessity of active communal life for self-realization, he stresses that the democratic ideal of equality is not a leveling uniformity of societal function or status, but can only "be measured in terms of the intrinsic life and growth of each individual" (*E*, 346). For Dewey no less than Rorty, "democracy means that personality is the first and final reality," and its satisfaction through self-fulfillment should be the aim of the society as well as the individual. While society establishes the environing conditions for its realization, "personality cannot be procured for any one, however degraded and feeble, by any one else, however wise and strong"; and "only . . . the man who is realizing his individuality is free in the positive sense of the word."

Dewey goes on to urge that a liberal democracy must strive to insure that its members achieve this positive freedom of empowerment. Rorty demurs, fearing that any public preoccupation with how individuals realize themselves will painfully intrude on their personal negative liberty. For him, the prime value of liberalism is its privileging of negative liberty over any positive conception of self-realization or empowerment, its "ability to leave people alone, to let them try out their private visions of perfection in peace" (*ORT*, 194). This different valorization of positive and negative liberty underlies the most salient differences between Dewey's and Rorty's versions of liberalism.

It explains why Dewey will risk radical reform of the politico-economic system so that the mass of individuals will have adequate conditions (i.e., the positive freedom) to realize themselves; while Rorty, afraid to damage the negative liberties that already exist, instead urges the ideal "of Tolerance
rather than that of Emancipation" (ORT, 213). It explains why Rorty defines liberalism’s ideal negatively as the “desire to avoid cruelty and pain,” and sees its society as “a band of eccentrics collaborating for purposes of mutual protection” (CIS, 59, 65), while Dewey defines it positively in terms of the creation of a real community devoted to the positive joys of self-fulfillment in associated living and committed to collective action so that each member can realize herself while (and through) contributing to the common good.

Finally, it explains why Dewey’s liberalism seeks to bridge the private and public, whereas Rorty’s resolutely refuses to. If Dewey’s utopia aims “to harmonize the development of each individual with the maintenance of a social state in which the activities of one will contribute to the good of all the others” so that very different individual self-fulfillments can contribute to “a fund of shared values” (E, 349), Rorty more modestly and negatively wants to leave individuals to their own devices, whatever (and however meager) they be. He sees “the aim of a just and free society as letting its citizens be as privatistic, ‘irrationalist,’ and aestheticist as they please so long as they do it on their own time—causing no harm to others,” and as trying “to equalize opportunities for self-creation and then leave people alone to use or neglect their opportunities” (CIS, xiv, 85). Dewey would respond that for such opportunities to really be equal (i.e., equality of positive empowerment rather than of freedom from interference) society cannot simply leave people alone to neglect them but must create the conditions that assure their use.

Such differences, I believe, are more than a mere function of personal preference. They reflect the historically different societies that Rorty and Dewey respectively inhabit and the role these societies accord the professional philosopher. In Dewey’s time, people still believed that radical reconstruction of society was possible and that philosophers could play a major role in mapping it out. This faith is almost totally eroded. Philosophers in America no longer play the prominent public role that Dewey did. The structure of society (including that of their own profession) does not empower them to do so; they are free to theorize, but foolish if they think they can positively implement their theories in concrete political action. In such conditions, it is natural to privilege negative and private liberty because it seems to be the only liberty we still have to exercise. Viewed in this way, Rorty seems not so false to Dewey as he is true to his own social reality.

Although they differ on the valency of the individual freedom they privilege, Dewey and Rorty agree that self-realization is the highest value for liberal democracy and that such self-fulfillment is distinctively individual and aesthetic. Realizing oneself is not a matter of fulfilling any fixed general essence of human or citizen, conforming to a predetermined moral or social formula legislated by nature or society. It is rather a particularized creative
project of individual growth, a Nietzschean project of becoming what you are, by using one’s particular conditions, talents, inclinations, and opportunities to mold oneself into a richer, more attractive person who will enjoy more satisfying and rewarding experiences with greater frequency and stability. Rorty’s advocacy of “the aesthetic life” of constant “self-enlargement,” “self-enrichment,” and “self-creation” aimed at realizing one’s “distinctive individuality” may seem the more outspoken (EHO, 154, 158; CIS, 41). But Dewey was just as ardently explicit on these aesthetic themes. He recognized “self-realization as the ethical ideal” and insisted that it “demands the full development of individuals in their distinctive individuality,” which can only be achieved through continuous “growth, learning and modification of character” (E, 302, 305, 348).

The primacy of aesthetic self-realization is sometimes occluded by Dewey’s valorization of science and political concerns. But these, for Dewey, are simply means (though valued means) for the satisfying consummatory phases of experience that Dewey identified with aesthetic experience and prized as the joy that makes life worth living. He thus affirmed that “art, the mode of activity that is charged with meanings capable of immediately enjoyed possession, is the complete culmination of nature, and that science is properly a handmaiden that conducts natural events to this happy issue” (EN, 290); just as he claimed that “art is more moral than moralities” because its imagination discovers and realizes new goods and ideals rather than trying to enforce outworn conventional ones (AE, 349).9

However, although both advocate the ideal of aesthetic, distinctive self-realization, they differ as to how this ideal is embodied, and this results in their strikingly different political views, especially on liberalism’s need for participatory democracy and the division between the public and private sphere. For Dewey, self-realization requires active participation in the public sphere and in the business of government. The individual can fully realize her freedom, distinctive selfhood, and talents only in “fixing the social conditions of their exercise,” only in “direct and active participation in the regulation of the terms upon which associated life shall be sustained and the pursuit of the good carried on” (E, 424). Self-government is thus essential to self-realization. Since the individual is always affected by her environing conditions, she must take an active interest in the managing of her community and in the common good of her fellow citizens who interact with and impact on her. Hence “any liberalism that takes its profession of the importance of the individuality with sincerity must be deeply concerned about the structure of human association,” and the canny liberal concerned with her own self-realization should recognize that its success and richness depends also on that of others (LSA, 31, E, 302).
Dewey thus aims at harmonizing liberty and equality with fraternity; Rorty instead seeks “to dissociate liberty and equality from fraternity” (ORT, 211) and self-realization from self-government. Drawing a “firm distinction between the private and the public” (CIS, 83), Rorty insists that self-realization is an essentially private affair, a question of “what should I do with my aloneness?” (ORT, 13). The public, political functioning of liberal democracy is merely an external protective framework—although the best we know—for individual self-creation, not an intrinsic, formative element of it.

We can better assess these different visions of liberalism and self-realization by examining how they reflect more basic and subtle differences regarding the nature of the self, its social construction, and the aesthetic that should guide its reconstruction.

**CONTINGENCY AND UNITY**

Dewey and Rorty both view the self as an individual, contingent, and changing creation, not the necessary expression of an ontologically predetermined and universally shared human essence. For Dewey, “there is no such thing as a fixed, ready-made, finished self” (E, 306), since every self not only produces actions, but is largely the product of its acts and choices. Such choices depend not only on the changing contingencies of its environment (natural and social), which limit the range of choices, but also on the contingencies of the consequences of action that influence future choices. For Rorty, however, “the contingency of selfhood” becomes still more radical. Since there is no ahistorical essence of human nature or “permanent ahistorical context of human life” which dictates what the self must be, it is entirely “a matter of chance, a mere contingency,” a “random,” “accidental coincidence” (CIS, 26, 37; EHO, 155, 157).

Rorty’s argument conflates contingency as what is “not logically or ontologically necessary” with contingency as what is “entirely random and idiosyncratic”; it reflects the false presumption that we have either absolute necessity or random chaos. Dewey refused to make this leap from denying ontological necessities based on metaphysical essences to affirming that selfhood is a random matter of chance. He instead recognized historicized essences (e.g., in the form of powerfully effective biological and social norms) and contingent necessities—regularities or needs that are virtually necessary given the contingent evolution and current structures of human biology and history. Thus, in contrast to Rorty, he could not only speak of “the intrinsic nature of man” (E, 308) based on current knowledge of
biological and social sciences, but could argue from this historicized nature to justify the kind of life and government that would be most conducive to human flourishing.

Moreover, while both affirm a “moving, dynamic self” (E, 308) aiming at continual growth, Dewey insists far more than Rorty on the unity and coherence of self-development. In advocating growth as the highest moral ideal, Dewey recommends change so as to “fight against induration and fixity, and thereby realize the possibilities of recreation of our selves.” But he also urges that the self’s changes be structured through “sincere, enduring interests” and held together through some unifying strand. For our very sense of self, “our personal identity is found in the thread of continuous development which binds together these changes” (E, 302, 306). Rorty’s program of “radical change” for “self-enlargement” refuses to let self-coherence and unity constrain “the desire to embrace more and more possibilities” by constantly redefining the self in terms of new, often conflicting vocabularies. We should not worry about the self’s losing its unity, because it never had any. We are “random assemblages of contingent and idiosyncratic needs,” and what we take as the single self is in fact a composite of conflicting “quasi selves,” “a plurality of persons with incompatible beliefs and desires” (EHO, 147, 162).

Since Rorty’s fragmentation of the self is based on a Davidsonian reading of Freud and resonates well with postmodernism’s deconstruction of the subject, one might argue that his liberalism is sounder than Dewey’s because it rests on a more sophisticated and psychologically updated view of the self. But Rorty himself repudiates the very idea of basing ethics on some underlying theory of human nature. He even maintains that such theories of self instead derive their power from conforming with our preferred ethical views, with the ideals and institutions we find most attractive (ORT, 192-3; TT, 577-8). Where, then, is the attraction of self-enlarging self-realization without a self unified enough to hold it all together? It admirably conforms to contemporary society’s (well-advertised) ideal of maximal, multitrack consumption, the ingestion of an overabundance of commodities, images, bits of information—far more than can be digested and brought together in a coherent whole. Rorty’s view of the self as a random composite of incompatible quasi selves constantly seeking new possibilities and multiple changing vocabularies seems indeed the ideal self for postmodern consumer society: a fragmented, confused self, hungrily enjoying as many new commodities as it can, but lacking the firm integrity to challenge either its habits of consumption or the system that manipulates and profits from them.

To sum up, Rorty’s radicalization of contingency engenders a far more narrowly individualistic idea of self-realization than Dewey’s. While both
deny that self-realization can be conformity to a universal, ahistoric human essence (since there is none), Rorty alone concludes that self-realization must therefore lie in maximizing one’s distinctive idiosyncrasy by highlighting the particular contingent differences that distinguish us from other members of our community and by confining our efforts of self-creation to the private sphere, to the question of “what to do with our aloneness” (CIS, 24-5; TT, 13). Working on oneself by oneself for one’s self-distinction is Rorty’s answer to this question. Dewey, instead, would urge us to find a friend, a community. For in order to create ourselves, even our private selves, we need to work with others on our environing society, since its fairly stable contingencies are far more formative of self than the random vagaries of chance that Rorty emphasizes; indeed they significantly limit the range of the latter.

**SOCIETY AND PHILOSOPHY**

Although Dewey gives teleological privilege to the individual, society precedes and shapes its constitution. “Individuals will always be the center and consummation of experience, but what the individual actually is in his life experience depends on the nature and movement of associated life.”14 This social construction of the self is central to Dewey’s argument that personal self-realization demands an active public life: If “the mental and moral structure of individuals, the pattern of their desires and purposes” (I, 81) depend largely on the habits, thoughts, and values that society encourages, then improving our society seems essential to improving the quality of the selves we realize. Moreover, as humans are intrinsically social animals, both needing and enjoying social life, an individual can only fully realize herself by going outside herself and taking an active part in associated life. Dewey therefore concludes: “Only by participating in the common intelligence and sharing in the common purpose as it works for the common good can individual human beings realize their true individualities and become truly free” (LSA, 20).

This argument to fuse “self-creation and justice, private perfection and human solidarity, in a single vision” is precisely the sort of philosophical thinking that Rorty repudiates as hopelessly misguided (CIS, xiv). But in doing so, he neither denies that the self is significantly shaped by society nor that individuals, to achieve the end of self-realization, should work to assure the sort of democratic society that provides the best framework or necessary means for this end. What Rorty denies is that the project of personal self-
realization must involve active participation in public life as part of the end. Yet this is exactly the sort of integration of public and private that Dewey demands: "to get rid of the habit of thinking of democracy as something institutional and external and to acquire the habit of treating it as a way of personal life." 15

Why does Rorty reject Dewey's democratic ideal, which ultimately identifies personal self-realization with public action for the public good, which binds the ethics of self with the politics of the other? Why does he insist that individuals in liberal society need no other social glue to bind them together than the desire for a social organization which will "leave them alone to try out their private visions of perfection in peace?" Why is he especially suspicious of philosophical claims to unite the quest for private perfection and public democracy?

First, Rorty wants to protect our cherished negative liberties from philosophical tyranny. No philosopher, no matter how sure of his or her ideal of self-perfection, should be able to prescribe how individuals must live their own private lives, beyond what is necessary for letting others live theirs. Moreover, no such ideal should be advocated and imposed on the pretext that adopting it is necessary for the public welfare. Theories that identify self-perfection and the public good tend to provide precisely that pretext. Even to insist that self-perfection requires active participation in public democratic process is, for Rorty, to violate democracy by imposing on our negative liberty a specific ideal of private self-fulfillment.

For Dewey, negative liberty is not liberty enough to guarantee true democracy. Democratic public concerns must be incorporated into the ideal of self-realization. He would further claim, against Rorty, that self-realization cannot be adequately full and successful if narrowly self-seeking and focused on the private:

The kind of self which is formed through action which is faithful to relations with others will be a fuller and broader self than one which is cultivated in isolation from or in opposition to the purposes and needs of others. In contrast, the kind of self which results from generous breadth of interest may be said alone to constitute a development and fulfillment of self, while the other way of life stunts and starves selfhood by cutting it off from the connections necessary to its growth. But to make self-realization a conscious aim might prevent full attention to those very relationships which bring about wider development of self. (E, 302)

Here we seem to reach an argumentative standoff where choice of theory seems to depend on a more or less aesthetic judgment: is self-realization without involvement in public life really rich enough to truly satisfy or realize the self? 16 At this point, Rorty brings a second argument against making
participation in public life an essential part of personal self-perfection: its futility. It seems futile to formulate our quest for self-realization in terms of the public’s quest for greater democracy and other common goods, because the public seems something so abstract, remote, and unfathomable that it can hardly give rich, concrete content to our personal lives. The substance of community and public life, Rorty argues, is just too thin, bland, and generalized to afford the individual adequate material for distinctive growth. Dewey may believe that public politics feeds a wider, broader self, but, for Rorty, it supplies only unexciting commonalities, standardized procedures, and bureaucratic institutions which, though necessary for governance, are not the thick interesting particularities through which the self can develop and articulate its distinctive voice.

Again, it is helpful to look behind the conflicting views and arguments to the different social conditions that structure them. Dewey wrote in an age when community life was more substantial and coherent for the individual and when philosophers like himself played a more active and visible role in public life. Perhaps, in such a context, the idea that full self-realization required participation in social life made sense. By contrast, Rorty’s contemporary American society makes no public demands on its philosophers. Rather than being urged to develop ourselves through service to society, we American philosophers are clustered in the universities and impelled to adopt (through societal and peer pressure as well as through the structuring pressures of tenure and differential salaries) a narrowly professional model of self-realization, the trajectory of which involves little more than writing articles for professional journals and books for university presses. In such a context, it is natural to think that professional distinction and private pleasures are, in pragmatic terms, all there is to self-realization. So if Dewey is a philosopher of the polis, Rorty is a “campus” philosopher, which may be the only kind of philosopher that contemporary American society is interested in having.

The responsibility for the public desuetude of American philosophy does not lie only with the global (and perhaps democratizing) societal forces that have been undermining the authority of humanist intellectuals. American philosophy’s domination, since the 1940s, by the ideology of logico-linguistic analysis, a domination against which Dewey cautioned and struggled, has also played a major role in isolating philosophy from social praxis. This formalist approach not only intensified compartmentalizing professionalization by reconstructing philosophy in terms of technical discourse and metaproblems far removed from the actual language and problems of society. It further privileged the areas of “pure” philosophy (those closer or more adequately reducible to strict logico-linguistic analysis), while marginalizing
others as "applied," thus pushing political and social thinking toward the margins (though not as far out as medical or business ethics). Finally, it emphasized that philosophical problems that seemed to be deeply about human life were instead simply problems of language that could be resolved or dissolved by logico-linguistic treatment. Given this fundamental premise, philosophy can do very little for concrete social and political problems, which typically embody empirical and normative rather than merely linguistic complexities. This is precisely the conclusion that Rorty urges and where his liberalism differs sharply from Dewey's.

Dewey thought that philosophy should be central to sociopolitical reform, not by deducing ontological foundations for such reform, but by imagining the best ends and means for it. Chiding contemporary philosophers for "lack of imagination in generating leading ideas," Dewey claimed that philosophy could prove its value only "with the formation of directive hypotheses," instead of "with a sweeping pretension to knowledge of universal Being" (PC, 11, QC, 248). In proposing concrete means and ends, philosophy should be "thinking which is operative—which frames and defines ideas in terms of what may be done, and which uses the conclusions of science as instrumentalities" (QC, 227). By contrast, Rorty insists on philosophy's utter lack of sociopolitical utility. His pragmatism shares the Deweyan refusal to empower by appeal to ontological essences and natural rights, but it abandons the idea that philosophy can compensate by proposing effective means for social empowerment. Rorty "cannot find much use for philosophy in formulating means to the ends which we social democrats share" but rather sees "its main use" in thinking through our personal utopian visions, in supplying vocabularies that we can appropriate, transform, and transcend in our quest for self-realization. So, "philosophy has become more important for the pursuit of private perfection rather than any social task" (TT, 569; CIS, 94).

PUBLIC/Private and MEANS/ENDS

Rorty's privatization of philosophy is most often explained as uncaring moral complacency trying to justify our selfish preoccupation with private gain and narcissistic self-fulfillment. But such charges are unhelpfully simplistic, especially given Rorty's frequent critique of our society's selfishness and greed. A more useful critique would be to argue that Rorty denies philosophy's contribution to politics because he harbors an exaggerated expectation of what this contribution should be. He must know that philosophers are sometimes consulted on public issues and that they educate genera-
tions of public servants. But this is evidently not enough for Rorty's project of distinctive self-realization, which seems to demand, on the political front, either new visions of social ends or at least new methods of implementing those ends that our society already shares. Such innovative contributions he quite reasonably does not expect to issue from professional philosophers. But it is far less reasonable to assume that meaningful politics must take this grand form of radical invention. Similarly, Rorty's view that the possibilities of contributing to public life are just too bland to supply significant content for self-realization seems to suffer from the same sort of exaggerated expectation, which identifies meaningful self-realization with radical innovation and distinction.

The best way to defend Rorty's privatization of philosophy is to argue that by directing philosophy from public problems to private perfection, we are more effectively redirecting it from means to ends. For Rorty, as for Dewey, the ends or consummations that make life worth living are realized only in individual experience. Liberal democracy and its public institutions are thus not ends in themselves, but means to provide individuals the freedom and wherewithal to enjoy their chosen ends and realize themselves as ends in their own preferred ways. If philosophy can serve these ends directly by providing vocabularies and exemplars of self-creation, Rorty argues, why should it have to serve them indirectly by worrying about the public means?

Dewey's reply, we recall, is that the public means of democratic life is an intrinsic part of the end of full self-realization. Part of this reply rests on aesthetic grounds of fullness and unity. Private pleasures are not rich enough to satisfy. "Shared experience is the greatest of human goods" (EN, 167); and civic life contributes indispensable satisfactions and dimensions of self-perfection. Moreover, because the self is largely shaped by its environing society, the Deweyan goal of self-unity or "fullness of integrated personality" demands the integration, not the Rortian schizoid division, of public and private life.

But beyond these aesthetic considerations, Dewey's refusal to separate the end of private perfection from the means of public participation involves his distinctively holist view of the means/end distinction. True means are not simply necessary, external conditions for the end, but rather integral parts of it—as the colors and lines which are the means of a painting also form part of its end. Dewey saw the traditional sharp distinction between ends and means as correlative with the division between theory and practice, both of them born from Athenian class-hierarchy, which identified means and practice with the lower laboring classes, whereas ends and theory were given to the leisured elite who had the conditions to enjoy them. Opposing the privileging separation of theory from practice, pragmatism should also
oppose such a separation of ends from means, and consequently of private from public. Rorty's advocacy of philosophy only for private ends seems precisely such a privileging strategy of division, although it is disarmingly disguised by debunking philosophy's old metaphysical claims. If we really care about ends, Dewey urged, we must equally care for the means to produce them; hence "ends separated from means," private perfection divorced from public action, are the "sentimental indulgences" of the leisured elite (QC, 223).

Rorty can answer this charge of sentimental indulgence with that of sentimental nostalgia. It is not that public means are less important than private ends. It is rather that, realistically speaking, philosophy today can do very little to improve those means, while it can do much to realize private ends; so, pragmatically speaking, it makes better sense to use philosophy where it can be profitably used. As public philosophers in the postmodern, post-Soviet world, "we have little sense of how to make ourselves useful," since we can neither ground bourgeois liberal democracy on philosophical foundations nor concretely imagine any superior alternatives (SH, 13). As marginalized intellectuals in a bafflingly enormous and complex society, we philosophers simply lack the practical means to transform public life and improve solidarity, so to theorize vaguely about such transformations would be a far greater sin of separating theory from practice, means from ends. Perhaps Dewey's age was somewhat different. But to think that our multicultural, postmodern, liberal society will heed our philosophical urgings for a public sphere of close-knit community, a good "old timey Gemeinschaft" (ORT, 209) bound together by shared ends and values, is to indulge in nostalgic fantasies of legendary days when philosophers could pretend to orchestrate the harmony of the polis. For Rorty, this "communal and public disenchantment [with its concomitant disenchantment of public philosophy] is the price we pay for individual and private spiritual liberation" (ORT, 194). Not only is it a price worth paying, it has already been paid, and there is no return.

**CONCLUSION: SPLITTING THE DIFFERENCE**

Dewey offers liberal philosophers a vision of democratic life where they can realize themselves as free, distinctive individuals by serving their society's quest for freedom, where private perfection is fused with and enriched by community action, and where philosophical training contributes to public reform as well as to private growth. It is very hard to give up this liberal
Utopia, with its rich integration of the self and the social, freedom and community, grounded on the Deweyan axiom that democracy "is the idea of community life itself" (PP, 148). Abandoning this vision is perhaps particularly hard for leftist intellectuals of my generation. For participation in such communal action for sociopolitical reform (whether campus sit-ins, national protest marches, or socially conscious, sleep-in music festivals) was what gave us our very identities as free individuals capable of distinctive self-creation. Such communal political action was how we transformed ourselves from obedient children to free adults, from solitary readers and TV viewers absorbing parentally assigned texts to group activists keen on creating our own distinctive culture and modes of living, one of which was the commune.

Although Dewey's liberal ideal is hard for us to abandon, the contemporary reality that Rorty portrays is equally hard to deny. American postmodern society simply does not constitute the sort of closely integrated public or caring-sharing personal community on which Dewey's democratic ideal of private-public self-realization is based. But, if Rorty is right to abandon hope in a philosophically inspired Deweyan Great Community, he is wrong to conclude that private pleasures are all we theorists can hope to derive from philosophy. The error in Rorty's logic is to think that loss of the public as a true community leaves one nothing but the private. However, between the Great Community and the private individual, there is the notion of smaller communities or publics that are small enough to be real communities of meaningful interpersonal relations and yet large and powerful enough to connect the individual to the wider social world and afford him a true arena to enact and enhance his freedom.

The university community constitutes one such public; and it has, not surprisingly, become the focus of concrete political reform with respect to issues like affirmative action and multiculturalism in the curriculum. Moreover, such curricular reform is often philosophically inspired by genealogical critiques of the canon, deconstructive arguments for the centrality of the marginal and the value of difference, and pragmatist critiques of fixed, absolute values and meanings. It is easy to see how the radical student activism of the sixties, after two decades of political frustration and increasing despair for substantive reform in more central political areas, has turned its energy to the politics of culture and education.

Rorty is quick to condemn us "tenured radicals" from the sixties for conflating cultural politics with real politics, for substituting the problems of privileged campus dwellers for the problems of the poor and homeless. He chides us for pretending that cultural transformations in the university "will eventually, somehow, link up with solutions to the problems" of "real leftist politics," which he glosses as "initiatives for reducing misery and overcoming
injustice” or alternatively for “redressing the balance of power between the rich and poor” (IP, 488-9; SH, 7). He blasts our focus on cultural politics for implying and thus promoting a total despair of reformatory action through our extracurricular political system and a rejection of liberal democracy for being irremediably corrupt.

But this implication seems as silly as arguing that allocating one’s efforts to support or coach the local college football team implies that the NFL is a hopelessly evil empire that must be dissolved. Moreover, just as it is weird to deny that college (or high school) play is good enough to be real football, so it is odd to argue that because problems of cultural oppression and racism on the campus are so much less acute than in the ghetto, they cease to be problems important enough to wear the honorific term real. Finally, it seems dangerously simplistic (although democratically American) for Rorty to portray political misery and injustice in narrowly economic terms of rich and poor. Wealthy German Jews could not buy an Aryan manumission.

We cultural activists know as well as Rorty the difference between the problems of lesbian feminists at Barnard and those of homeless crack addicts in Harlem, just as we know that our campus reforms offer no substantial help in solving the more painful, pressing, economic problems that Rorty identifies with real politics. But conceding this, we can still assert what Rorty denies: “that cultural, and especially academic, politics are continuous with real politics” and should be vigorously pursued (SH, 20). For university policies concerning admissions and scholarships for the poor, affirmative action in hiring, and the holding of investments in countries and corporations that foster oppression are not so easily separable from the real politics that Rorty commends.

Why then should he fight to deny this, especially when continuity is so central to pragmatism’s rejection of essentialist dichotomies? Probably fear of cultural politics’ global pretensions and its elitist, sectarian, negative methods. Rorty thinks that such politics “calls for the total transformation of our society” and that it works to achieve this by ideological unmaskings and cultural transgressions effected through literary theory’s specialist tools for deconstructing texts, its mastery of what de Man calls the “linguistics of literariness” (IP, 487). The strategy, as Rorty scornfully sees it, is “that upsetting our students' parents will sooner or later help upset unjust institutions” (SH, 20).

But Rorty’s anxious critique of cultural politics rests on conflating two very different varieties of this species—call them poststructuralist Marxism and postmodernist pragmatism—both of which think that cultural politics is the best thing we humanities professors can currently do for democracy. The Marxists argue that the entire sociopolitical system of liberalism is so
irreparably corruptive that all established means of democratic reform, even the use of ordinary language, are always already contaminated by bourgeois ideology. Hence there is nothing for leftist professors to do but practice academic subversion by writing and teaching against liberal ideology through transgressive analysis of cultural texts in a covert technical language that neither bourgeois oppressors nor the brainwashed oppressed can understand. Subversion should be practiced, not only for its moral refusal of complicity, but in the hope that it will aid historical forces working for liberalism's total disintegration.

Pragmatists, on the other hand, reject such totalizing theories of ideological systems and language, and with it the dream of total revolution. They offer no fancy theoretical foundation for thinking that campus and cultural politics should be used to advance democracy; simply the practical point that that is the area where we humanities professors have the most knowledge and power. (As postmoderns, such pragmatists are as appreciative of the local and piecemeal as they are dubious of totalized critique through utopias of a radical Other.) Cultural politics, for such pragmatists, is not an excuse for abandoning liberal democracy, but simply provides the best domain where we can practice and improve it from within. It offers a more familiar and manageable arena for substantive participation in democratic action and reform, a narrower field of greater control and surveyability where we can experiment with concrete proposals and better gauge their effects. In this arena, our political activity is immediately tangible and often effective, thus offering positive reinforcement to habits of engaged, caring, political action. And these habits, if sufficiently developed and reinforced, can give us the firm political disposition and confident know-how needed to throw ourselves successfully into the wider, more terrifying terrain that Rorty designates as real politics. It would be better if we were already prepared to tackle the world, to help the homeless rather than the culturally slighted. But using this to condemn our attempts to improve our local academic community (and our public selves) is to make the better the enemy of the good and to ignore the continuity of democratic habit.

These themes of habit and local community are, of course, central to Dewey's liberalism, which held that "Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community"; because only such "face-to face communities" provide "the vitality and depth of close and direct intercourse," through which we learn to respect each other as distinctive individuals and to care for our mutual as well as private welfare (PP, 212-3).²⁷ For us humanist academics, compelled by market pressures to be gypsy scholars, the university is our only local community, and culture is where we live. This is a good place to exercise our liberal democratic virtues and the best way to
split the difference between Rorty and Dewey using cultural politics to enhance our private perfection by making us better, more active public selves, enjoying the consummations of caring, communal action inspired by our philosophical hopes and convictions.

NOTES


4. If these themes and his democratic ideal of individual flourishing through participation in public life make Dewey sound just like Aristotle, we should briefly recall a few salient differences. First, Dewey’s embodied pragmatism was inimical to the intellectualist Aristotelian ideal of theoria, not only in ethics but in epistemology. Second, Dewey was an egalitarian liberal who prized individuality and could not tolerate the idea of slavery, class, or acquiescence to a fixed station or function in life. Third, Dewey’s idea of human flourishing has no fixed teleology; new ends and visions of the good are always emerging, and the fundamental “end is growth itself” (E, 306). This last point, with its possibility of radically new ends and the rejection of old ones (rather than merely their “plural” and “local” specification), helps distinguish Dewey from Martha Nussbaum’s interesting neo-Aristotelianism that is sensitively embodied, aware of historical change, and tolerant of difference. See Martha Nussbaum, “Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism,” Political Theory 20 (1992): 202-46. Dewey, of course, is similarly more historicist or antieessaistial about human nature. He is not insisting that a core human essence admits of different local and historical varieties, but rather that any alleged core or “essential” human nature is subject to evolutionary transformation.


6. The former is the realm of strict logical argument based on shared premises and evaluated by formal criteria of logical validity; the latter is the realm of rhetorical persuasion, of which the discourse is assessed by its "aesthetic" appeal, about how attractive it renders the position it advocates and how bad it makes the rivals look (*CIS*, 9, 44). Rorty locates his discourse in this aesthetic realm, where most of Dewey's is. But there is no reason, particularly for a pragmatist, to declass such discourse as unphilosophical simply because it relies on these broadly conceived aesthetic criteria.


8. This point requires two cautionary precisions. I am not claiming that America's professional philosophers (i.e., those academics who dominate our philosophy departments) have no political role or influence whatever. Rawls's work has had some influence on Supreme Court decisions, and other professional philosophers sometimes get a hearing on public issues as diverse as abortion, ecology, euthanasia, and the logic of deterrence. My point is that influential policy initiatives are not coming out of philosophy departments. This brings me to the second qualification. I am not denying that there are other sources for political philosophy, in the university and elsewhere, which may be more empowered and influential. Departments of political science may be one source, and close institutional connection to political science may be one reason why a philosopher like Charles Taylor can be much more upbeat than Rorty about the philosopher's political and communitarian role.


10. The same sort of misleading confusion is often made by philosophers with respect to the arbitrariness of convention, where two different senses of "arbitrary" or "contingent" are conflated: "not logically or ontologically necessary" versus "totally capricious, haphazard, unreasoned, and easily reversible." I elaborate on these confusions and their philosophical consequences in "Convention: Variations on a Theme," *Philosophical Investigations* 9 (1986): 36-55.

11. See Donald Davidson, "Paradoxes of Irrationality," *Philosophical Essays on Freud*, ed. by R. Wollheim and J. Hopkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), and Rorty's use of this article in his "Freud and Moral Reflection" (*EHO*).

12. It speaks of our postmodern society of 57 cable channels with its aesthetic of fragmentation, an aesthetic typified by remote-control channel zapping and refined into MTV's style of rapid-fire disjoint images. Of course, this postmodern aesthetic pervades not only TV culture but intellectual culture with its ever increasing numbers of new books, theories, and mammoth conferences with their mazes of parallel sessions. Critics of late-capitalist consumerism like to doubt whether our variety of possibilities is any less superficial than the difference between a Whopper and a Big Mac, and whether we are really enjoying our alleged bounty of choices. Rorty may well respond that depth is not the highest measure of value, that elitist culture critics cannot determine for others what true enjoyment is, and that most of us would be far less happy if the range of our choices were strictly limited so as to make our choices more convergent and less dependent on the random contingencies of our desires.
13. Similarly, the ideal of privatized self-realization through a randomly contingent, centerless, and divided self is especially apt for a society where the individual’s different social roles (as waitress, mother, and graduate student) do not lend themselves to a coherently unified self-definition, where the individual feels so baffled by the multiple roles she has to play that she can hardly think of trying to harmonize them into what Dewey recommends as “the fullness of integrated personality” (PP, 148). This desired disposition toward harmonized wholeness, one that is open to change and growth but aims at constantly integrating them into a coherent but ever evolving complex unity, is the sort of stable and stabilizing integrity that Dewey can offer without falling back into doctrines of a fixed, essential self that both he and Rorty reject.


16. To try to decide the issue on straightforward empirical grounds by examining the lives of exemplary individuals who fulfilled themselves is not really an alternative to deciding it aesthetically (i.e., by our taste as to what counts as an adequately rich and satisfying self-realization), because taste will emerge in our choice and judgment of exemplars.

17. To make this point, one need not maintain the illusion that community life in Dewey’s day was that of a perfectly integrated polis led by a philosopher king. (Dewey himself was already complaining of the disruptions and divisions caused to community life by the technological, industrial, and economic changes of his day.) One need only recognize that in our postmodern times, these socially decentering, fragmenting, and destabilizing forces have been greatly intensified and increasingly destructive to community coherence. David Harvey’s socio-economic narrative of the transition from Fordist modernism to the “flexible accumulation” economy of postmodernism makes this clear, in The Condition of Postmodernity (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990). See also the account of the increasing erosion of community in Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton, Habits of the Heart (New York: Harper & Row, 1985). Even earlier sociological studies, which affirm (up to the 1970s) the continued existence of active community life, nonetheless recognize that it has become increasingly “fragmented,” “disarticulated,” incoherent, and poorly integrated with larger public structures, resulting in “the decline of public confidence and trust in the political process.” See Morris Janowitz, The Last Half-Century: Societal Change and Politics in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 9, 22-3, 271-319.

18. It is therefore quite ironic, although altogether understandable, why Rorty so stridently attacks the philosophy of campus, cultural politics. We shall consider his critique below.

19. I should make clear that the problem with Anglo-American linguistic philosophy was not its concentration on language, which of course, has deep sociopolitical dimensions, but rather its excessively formalist and socially neutered analysis of language. Even the apparent great exceptions here, like Austin and Wittgenstein, who insist on the crucial social dimension of language, never engage in detailed empirical study of the actual sociopolitical factors and struggles governing linguistic meaning in the manner suggested by Foucault and Bourdieu. I discuss the formalizing and professionalizing pressures of analytic philosophy in greater detail in “Analysing Analytic Aesthetics,” Analytic Aesthetics, ed. by Richard Shusterman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 1-19.

20. Rorty was professionally formed by philosophy’s logico-linguistic turn, so it is not surprising that he regards language as the only social dimension that is crucial to self-realization.
But even here he problematically divides the self’s language into public and private idioms, privileging the private and idiosyncratic as what is essential to self-realization, while regarding public language as merely a means to provide the secure environment to realize ourselves through our private language. For critique of this division of linguistic labor and more generally of Rorty’s disembodied textualization of the self, see Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 101-6, 255-8.

21. Besides urging philosophy to propose specific concrete means, Dewey often recommends its general utility as a guide to social reform through its embodiment of intelligence and experimental method. But, just as one may wonder how philosophy is qualified to offer concrete social reforms, so one may find that Dewey’s notions of intelligence and experimental method remain so vague and general that it is hard to take them seriously as real philosophical means for social ends. Thus Rorty could argue that, in ignoring these Deweyan social uses of philosophy, he is reading Dewey more charitably by not linking Dewey’s pragmatist liberalism to empty philosophical nostrums, unpragmatic “solving names.”

22. See, for example, his SH and IP, n. 1.

23. Lingering communal religious sentiments, deeply imbued through Dewey’s long association with the Congregationalist Church, may provide another explanation of Dewey’s commitment to community and to the fusion of private and public perfection, as if the salvation of the individual soul depended on the strengthening purity of the community of the faithful. The religious aspect of Dewey’s democracy has recently been emphasized in James Miller’s “The Common Faith,” *Nation*, October 14, 1991, 450-4, a review of Westbrook’s biography of Dewey, and with great detail in Steven Rockefeller’s biography, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). It is likewise noted in James Kloppenberg’s *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Throughout 1870-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

24. Ironically, in Rorty’s text, this quote reads “For Dewey,” and so on.

25. Dewey himself already recognized in 1927 “the eclipse of the public” as a substantive, harmonious community. He attributed this loss to the disruptive effects of industrial, economic, and administrative forces that imposed new impersonal forms of societal organization necessary for the complexity and vastness of our technological “Great Society.” But he thought philosophy had a crucial role to play in “the search for the conditions under which the Great Society could become the great Community,” insisting that one necessary condition was the renewal of “local communal life” (PP, 147, 214). I shall discuss the option of local community below.

26. The feminist community is another, overlapping, public. Indeed, it is one whose progressive theory and politics Rorty commends, and to which he even recommends pragmatist philosophy as “useful.” See Richard Rorty, “Feminism and Pragmatism,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* (Spring 1991): 247-50. Yet he contrastingly denigrates, for reasons I explore below, the project of cultural politics, even though feminism is surely one of its forms. His advocacy of a feminist theory (even to the point of recognizing the value of forging a separatist feminist culture) leads me to think that Rorty’s diatribe on cultural politics is not really directed against this project per se, but merely against the negative extremism of what may be its most dominant and radical academic form. I explain this confusion below as part of my effort to defend cultural politics.

27. Without real contact, as Rorty suggests in “Love and Money,” *Common Knowledge*, 1, no. 1 (1992): 12-17, poor people tend to become “unthinkable” (p. 12) abstractions to whom it is easy to be cruel, because (in Levinas’s words) “we do not see their face.” Self-deceptively narcissistic as Rorty may consider us to be, we cultural, campus politicians may learn how to progress from caring about our often quasi-invisible students to caring about more unthinkable and invisible masses.
Richard Shusterman is a professor of philosophy at Temple University and the College International de Philosophie. He is the author of T. S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism (Columbia University Press, 1988), editor of Analytic Aesthetics (Blackwell, 1989), and coeditor of The Interpretive Turn (Cornell University Press, 1991). His recent book, Pragmatist Aesthetics (Blackwell, 1992), has been published in French (Minuit) and German (Fischer Taschenbuch).