Chapter Four

The Limits of Sympathy: Rorty, Hume, and the Politics of Sentiment

Sympathy can be a powerful force in political life. As a motor of collective politics, it is capable of forging affective ties strong enough to bridge the divides of nation, ethnicity, race, and gender to generate inclusive concern for the well-being of others. Yet if drawn too narrowly, sympathy can initiate an exclusionary dynamic that inflames these same divides by casting those who fall outside its sphere of concern as irretrievably different and “other.” Can the sentiment of sympathy ground an ongoing quest for social justice? Or will it merely spark an ephemeral state of felt concern that provokes no concrete action?

Placing our ability to imaginatively identify with others at the center of the quest for social justice, the recent work of Richard Rorty affirms the political value of sympathy. Other contemporary thinkers, like Martha Nussbaum, have taken a similar tack. Following Hume rather than Kant, these accounts look to sentiment rather than reason, sympathetic fellow feeling rather than dictates of moral law or universal duty, to account for our concern for others. By cultivating our ability to imaginatively identify with others, we can extend the reach of our sense of social injustice. A particularly attractive feature of this perspective is that it posits the nonessentialist and nonfoundational idea of sympathy as doing the work once done by rationality: identifying with others as in some way like us is more powerful than universal moral obligations or respect for human dignity when it comes to spurring political action. As Rorty puts it, “To believe that someone is ‘one of us,’ a member of our moral community, is to exhibit readiness to come to their assistance when they are in need.” Fostering such fellow feeling promises to remedy what William James once called our natural “blindness” toward others.
In this essay, I examine Rorty’s call for a politics of sentiment rooted in our capacity for sympathetic identification and identify three problems. The first is that the conception of sympathy or fellow feeling, drawn largely from David Hume, proves too partial to those close at hand to meet the requirements of Rorty’s sense of justice as a “larger loyalty.” Rorty does not adequately address the extent to which the thinkers who shifted the source of moral judgments from reason to moral sentiment, like Hume, Rousseau, and Adam Smith, recognized the limits of sympathy; at crucial moments, they fell back on an appeal to “nature,” often quite explicitly, to pick up the slack. For Hume, the principle of “humanity” is needed to correct the natural partiality of sympathy; in the case of Smith, the intervention of the invisible hand of a benevolent Deity is required to prevent his hypothetical “man of humanity” from preferring the demise of one hundred million distant Chinese in an earthquake to the loss of his little finger; and for Rousseau, sustaining the already weak natural sentiments of pity and commiseration amidst the contrary impulses endemic to civil society is only possible if properly cultivated through the extreme rigor and solitude of Emile’s training—assumptions that run counter to Rorty’s pragmatist stance.3

The second problem with the cultivation of fellow feeling as a political program is that it continually runs the risk of becoming a blueprint for imagining ourselves in the place of others and sharing their feelings of pain in lieu of actually doing something about it. The case for sympathy rests on a crucial link between fellow feeling and action or moral agency. Rorty adopts the reflective process Hume proposed to “correct” sympathy’s natural bias and give it a universal relevance. But this extension of the circle of sympathetic concern can only be achieved at the cost of dulling its capacity to move us to action.

Third, while Rorty is able to get around the transcendental appeals by making commonality a matter of the historically contingent agreement of a community, he does not address the normative pressures inherent in making concern for others dependent upon seeing them as “one of us.” Because procuring the commonality or agreement on moral issues formerly secured through reason was a central concern for the mid-eighteenth-century theorists of sentiment, their projects impose an accepted version of “right” conduct and taste to which individuals were expected (or assumed) to conform.4 This is not the place for an historical account of liberalism’s failure to adequately discern the repressive power of social conformity, but it seems to me that Rorty’s politics of sentiment shares in this shortcoming.5

To be sure, one of Rorty’s greatest contributions to the field of political theory has been his defense of contingent and historically relative forms of identification as no less weakly linked to moral or political action than universal human essences. His pragmatism rests on the fundamental premise that “a be-
Rorty's turn to Hume and to sentiment extends this fundamental premise. Yet because his approach relies so heavily on the category of identity—on who counts as a member of our moral community—it courts the pernicious exclusionary logic of identity formation. Alternatively, I argue that the ability to grant full reality to the suffering of others is a better ground for a collective politics that aims to diminish suffering than the ability to imaginatively identify with others as “one of us.” Not only does this route avoid the exclusionary logic of identity formation, but it provides a stronger impetus for generating action on behalf of others. Revisiting Hume reveals evidence for the view that the power of reality to affect our minds and spur action exceeds that of the moral sentiment. Understanding the suffering of others to be as real as one’s own involves a use of the imagination distinct from the imagining of oneself in the place of another entailed in sympathy, and is a better check on the moral blindness that can be a barrier to the expansion of our sense of injustice toward the suffering of distant and different others.

RORTY’S SENTIMENTAL EDUCATION

At work in the idea of sentimental education are two important strands of Rorty’s political theory. The first concerns Rorty’s depiction of an antiessentialist common moral identity—whether we call it “solidarity” or a “larger loyalty” or “fellow feeling”—as the prerequisite of any majoritarian political endeavor. This increasingly prevalent quasi-communitarian thrust in his thought has gone largely unnoticed. The unifying thread of “achieving our country,” “justice as a larger loyalty,” and Rorty’s recent work on human rights is the notion that an inclusionary moral community is the cornerstone of an effective democratic praxis. Without the emotional involvement entailed by the creation of a self-conscious moral community, largely through sympathetic identification with the suffering of others, attempts to remedy the injustices of the world will prove feeble and hollow. This, in short, is Rorty’s criticism of the detached and overtheoretical postmodern left. A kind of community of fellow feeling or “reciprocal trust” is needed for individuals to be likely to provide assistance to others. The moment one ceases to think of the other in the first person plural, the likelihood of acting on their behalf decreases dramatically. The second strand is the view that imaginative literature, in particular social realist novels, but narratives and stories in general, are the primary vehicles of moral progress and the quest for social justice.
Understood as the effort to forge a democratic moral community through appeals to sentiment rather than reason, the politics of sentiment has emerged as the primary “consequence” of Rorty’s antifoundational pragmatism:

The best, and probably the only, argument for putting foundationalism behind us is the one I have already suggested: it would be more efficient to do so, because it would let us concentrate our energies on manipulating sentiments, on sentimental education. (TP, 176)

Rorty describes this kind of education as that which “gets people of different kinds sufficiently well acquainted with one another that they are less tempted to think of those different from themselves as only quasi-human.” The goal here is greater inclusion: “to expand the reference of the terms ‘our kind of people’ and ‘people like us’” (TP, 176).

Resting on a view of the imagination as the central human faculty, and seeking to carve out a role for the sentiments in moral judgment, the idea of sentimental education evokes images of Schiller and Flaubert and an ideal of human fullness attainable through aesthetic education. But Rorty reverses the priority of the relation of individual growth to the larger social goals: his version has a communal good as its end in a much more direct way. Individual edification or “enlargement” appears to be a part of the process, but the sort of sympathy with others which allows us to see them as “one of us,” as we shall see, is often possible without it. The more direct intellectual forebears here are Hume and Rousseau, whose projects authorized cooperative endeavors and assumed universal agreement in matters of the communal good.

My overriding concern is whether the wellsprings of sentiment and sympathy are a sufficient engine to mobilize and drive collective efforts to reduce suffering. In other words, can sympathetic identification yield a concern for the well-being for different and often distant others that is binding enough to ground a meliorative politics of social justice? And, second, can Rorty’s project of sentimental education make due on its transformative promise?

As a general rule, the positions Rorty occupies are best understood in light of the “Philosophical” arguments he is reacting against. In this context, it is a view Rorty attributes to Plato: that the way to get people to be nicer to each other is to point out what they have in common—namely, rationality. Rorty does a nice job of illustrating how beside the point rational arguments are in the face of entrenched prejudice:

Resentful young Nazi toughs were quite aware that many Jews were clever and learned, but this only added to the pleasure they took in beating such Jews. Nor does it do much good to get such people to read Kant and agree that one should not treat rational agents simply as means. (TP, 177)
His point is that moral progress is not a matter of an increase in rationality, nor does it involve developing what Dewey called intelligence. The crucial factor is sympathy, how wide one is willing to draw the limits of one’s moral community. Thus, moral progress for Rorty is a matter of increasing “sensitivity”—one’s responsiveness to “the concerns of ever larger groups of people” (PSH, 81). Following contemporary moral philosopher Annette Baier, Rorty frames the goal of sentimental education as a “progress of sentiments”—that is, “an ability to see the similarities between ourselves and people very unlike us as outweighing the differences” (TP, 181). This is the idea that brings Rorty to Hume. On an important level, it is a matter of “moral” or “sympathetic” identification: cultivating the “imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers” and to imagine ourselves in their place (CIS, xvi).

As examples of the kind of progress he has in mind, Rorty points to the increased sympathy manifested in “the sort of reactions Athenians had more of after seeing Aeschylus’s The Persians than before, the sort that whites in the U.S. had more of after reading Uncle Tom’s Cabin than before, the sort we have more of after watching television programs about the genocide in Bosnia” (TP, 180). These are the vehicles of sentimental education: “genres such as the ethnography, the journalist’s report, the comic book, the docudrama, and especially the novel” (CIS, xvi). It is a task, in short, not for “theory” but for narrative:

The fate of the women in Bosnia depends on whether television journalists manage to do for them what Harriet Beecher Stowe did for black slaves—whether these journalists can make us, the audience back in the safe countries, feel that these women are more like us, more like real human beings than we have realized. (TP, 181)

There are, thus, two dimensions to this process of sentimental education. The first is “detailed description,” that is, actual accounts of what the lives of distant others are like that first bring their suffering to our attention—for instance, the work of television journalists on the condition of Bosnia women. While discoveries of who is suffering can be made in general by “the workings of the free press, free universities, and enlightened public opinion,” Rorty cites works like “Madness and Civilization and Discipline and Punish, as well as those like Germinal, Black Boy, The Road to Wigan Pier, and 1984” as having been responsible for such enlightening (CIS, 63–64). Also paradigmatic here are the works of Stowe and Charles Dickens. In short, social novelists and literary critics have done a lot more to advance “the struggle for freedom and equality” than have philosophers and social theorists. The second dimension Rorty calls “redescribing” what we ourselves are like in such a way as to come to see these distant others as “one of us” rather than
as “them” (CIS, xvi). That is to say, it is a matter of changing the stories we tell about ourselves to make the moral identity they furnish more inclusive.

Rorty groups these operations more generally under the rubric of what he calls “sad, sentimental stories.” The case he makes for their power is ultimately a pragmatic one. In response to the question, “Why should I care about a stranger, a person who is no kin to me, a person whose habits I find disgusting?” Rorty argues that the bonds of feeling and extension of moral community generated by such stories are more likely to move us to action than are invocations of a universal moral obligation rooted in our common rationality. “Because this is what it is like to be in her situation” and “Because she might become your daughter-in-law” are, pragmatically speaking, more powerful responses than “Because I am under a moral obligation to her.” Sad, sentimental stories, he argues, “repeated and varied over the centuries, have induced us, the rich, safe, powerful people, to tolerate and even to cherish powerless people—people whose appearance or habits or beliefs at first seemed an insult to our own moral identity, our sense of the limits of permissible human variation” (TP, 184–85).

Rorty may be on to something here. He makes the important point that traditional moral philosophy, too often concerned with extreme cases of a misanthropic nature, is guilty of neglecting the more common case of “the person whose treatment of a rather narrow range of featherless bipeds is morally impeccable, but who remains indifferent to the suffering of those outside this range, the one he thinks of as pseudo-humans.” The idea that these depreciated assessments of other humans were somehow susceptible to rational argument was wrongheaded from the start. On Rorty’s view, everything turns on “who counts as a fellow human being,” that is, on membership in one’s moral community (TP, 177). The central task thus becomes extending this moral community through the cultivation of our capacity for sympathy.

**Hume as a Protopragmatist**

In making sentiment the primary constituent of a common moral identity, Rorty invokes the legacy of David Hume. That Hume’s thought is a source of protopragmatist stirrings is nothing new; William James suggested as much in the 1898 essay credited with launching the pragmatist tradition, and Rorty’s oeuvre is peppered with remarks affirming the same, although, characteristically, he does not discuss the work of Hume at any length. The general direction of the Humean enterprise of turning philosophical reflection away from a preoccupation with God and transcendental matters and making it self-reflective and of a piece with human affairs, along with his inclination toward
“tests” of an empirical nature, requires little reworking to see its alignment with a broadly pragmatic spirit. To be sure, “Hume is a better advisor than Kant” if you are of pragmatist leanings, and both Hume and Dewey tend to be on the same side of most philosophical arguments: namely, against Kant.

Rorty makes ample negative use of Hume against particular metaphysical assumptions like the Platonic conception of a true self and the Kantian idea that it is rational to be moral (TP, 180). Yet what he calls the “relaxed, pragmatical, Humean attitude” has come to exert a more positive influence in his recent work undergirding his understanding of morality and justice (CP, xxxii). In a brief 1987 essay, likely Rorty’s first affirmative reference to sentiment, he states that he would like “the sentiments of pity and tolerance” to supplant “belief-systems (or of what Habermas calls ‘the commitment to rationality’) as the bond which holds liberal societies together” and suggests that his forthcoming Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity be read as an attempt to develop this line of thought and “follow up on Hume rather than on Kant.” Even if only present in broad strokes, the Humean effort, in Baier’s words, “to give morality a secure basis, not in moral theory but in human active capacities for cooperation” accounts for a basic strand of the Rortyan project. In particular, the idea of morality as a matter of custom and shared practices, and the displacement of conceptions of moral “obligation” and “rules” with “corrected sympathy” and a “progress of sentiments” are central.

Hume opens his Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, an attempt to rework the themes of his Treatise of Human Nature a decade after, in his words, “it fell dead-born from the press” in 1739, with the assertion that “moral philosophy,” or the “science of human nature,” may rest on either of two fundamental assumptions. It may either approach the human being as “chiefly born for action; and as influenced in his measures by taste and sentiment,” or it may “consider man in the light of a reasonable rather than an active being.” Hume, it becomes clear, adopts the former. Indeed, the linchpin of Hume’s case for sentiment over reason, or impressions over ideas, is that the former “strike the mind” with a greater “degree of force and liveliness. . . . The chief spring or actuating principle of the human mind,” he asserts, “is pleasure or pain; and when these sensations are remov’d, both from our thought and feeling, we are, in a great measure, incapable of passion or action, of desire or volition.” Whereas reason, “being cool and disengaged, is no motive to action,” taste, or sentiment, becomes “a motive to action, and is the first spring or impulse to desire and volition.”

This all suits the antirationalist and anti-Kantian in Rorty rather well. The stress on action resonates with classic pragmatist themes, running from Charles Sanders Peirce to John Dewey. In particular, it prefigures James’s claim that “our judgments concerning the worth of things, big or little, depend
on the feelings the things arouse in us.”

But what of sympathy as the ground for the pursuit of justice? Hume considers the capacity for sympathy very basic to human beings, making such claims as “the minds of men are mirrors to one another” and so “similar in their feelings and operations” that no one can be actuated by any affection “of which the others are not in some degree susceptible.” Of sympathy, Hume remarks that “no quality of human nature is more remarkable . . . than that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own.” Yet sympathy is first perceived by us as an idea, not an impression; it requires the power of the imagination to “convert” it into an impression which will nonetheless “acquire such a degree of force and vivacity as to become the very passion itself, and produce an equal emotion as any original affection.” An “easy sympathy and correspondent emotions” are predicated upon three factors: “relation, acquaintance, and resemblance.” Confirming what is intuitive about sympathy, he notes that “the stronger the relation betwixt ourselves and any object, the more easily does the imagination make the transition and convey to the related idea the vivacity of conception.” The “relation of blood” produces the strongest tie; acquaintance “without relation” gives rise to “love and kindness”; and any “peculiar similarity in our manners, or character, or country, or language,” especially “our country-men, our neighbors, those of the same trade,” “facilitates the sympathy.” Indeed, “the sentiments of others have little influence, when far remov’d from us, and require the relation of contiguity, to make them communicate themselves entirely.”

Interestingly, although he equivocates in a few places, Hume avoids positing an innate moral core or natural moral law to provide a way out of this partiality. As is well known, Hume rooted morality in sentiment rather than reason, and he argued that morality “is more properly felt than judg’d of.” The moral sentiment for Hume “can be no other than a feeling for the happiness of mankind, and a resentment of their misery.” This is precisely the quality Rorty seeks to cultivate, and that which generates sympathetic identification between human beings. But for Hume, the moral sentiment is not simply equivalent to sympathy; the capacity for sympathy alone is not enough to produce the moral sentiment. “Our natural uncultivated ideas of morality, instead of providing a remedy for the partiality of our affections, do rather conform themselves to that partiality, and give it an additional force and influence.” Sympathy must first be corrected; that is, the moral sentiment—“the sentiment of humanity”—is “not deriv’d from nature but from artifice.”
In this way, Hume underscores the origins in human artifice of not only the moral sentiment but justice as well. Yet while it is never in doubt that our sense of justice and injustice is “not derived from nature, but arises artificially . . . from education, and human conventions,” it remains a very weak force on Hume’s account. Unable to overcome either the partiality of our affections or the “temptations” humans are prone to, the idea of justice “can never be taken for a natural principle, capable of inspiring men with an equitable conduct towards each other.” Humean justice, and the civil government whose primary raison d’etre is the administration of it, arises to combat the “instability of possessions” characteristic of our uncultivated state and is largely a matter of the enforcement of property rights and the performance of promises. Offenses against one’s person, the restraint of antisocial impulses—in short, anything beyond transactional wrongs—fall outside its purview.21

Hume’s claims about the partiality of sympathy are fairly straightforward, and Rorty adopts similar views when he argues that we are most likely to help those whom we consider “one of us.” Like Hume, who argues that the imagination “is more affected by what is particular, than by what is general,” Rorty makes the imagination central and stresses the importance of “detailed descriptions” of the lives of others as most likely to generate imaginative identification.22 In the chapter on solidarity in Contingency, he argues that “our sense of solidarity is strongest when those with whom solidarity is expressed are thought of as ‘one of us,’ where ‘us’ means something smaller and more local than the human race.” The force of “us,” he claims, recognizing a contemporary insight about identity formation, is “contrastive in the sense that it contrasts with a ‘they’ which is also made up of human beings—the wrong sort of human beings.” This is his explanation of why Danes and Italians were more likely to provide a safe harbor for Jews fleeing Nazi persecution than Belgians: they used “more parochial terms” to provide a basis for their identification with Jews—“a fellow Milanese, a fellow Jutlander, a fellow bocce player” (CIS, 190–91).

More recently, however, Rorty has begun to argue that “loyalty,” another variant of imaginative identification, though admittedly most powerful when narrow in purview, can be extended virtually limitlessly to cover distant others—for example, Third World victims of globalization. In this way, loyalty can assume the universal coverage reserved for Kantian justice. The latter notion, whose universality was posited largely on the basis of now untenable philosophical abstractions like “universal validity” and “Reason,” can be reformulated or even replaced with the idea of a “larger loyalty” brought about through a progress of sentiments. As for the problem that every invocation of “us” entails a contrasting “they”—that identity needs difference, as it is often
put—Rorty now simply requests, without further explication, that people “define their identity in nonexclusionary terms” (TP, 179).

Any sense of the limits of sympathy has thus evaporated. Through the Humean notion of a progress of sentiments, sympathetic concern can now be limitlessly extended. For Hume, the progress of sentiments refers to the road from the “rude and more natural condition” of our uncultivated sense of morality to the more “enlarged” moral sensibility informed by a sense of the “public interest” which is the inevitable consequence of a “civilized” collective existence, or, as Baier puts it, the progress from solitary reason to social passions. While the former is “founded on the nature of our passions, and gives the preference to ourselves and friends, above strangers,” the more “cultivated” social state is achieved via the voluntary subjection to convention or artifice, the influence of “education and acquired habits,” and the important lessons of experience.

This is the most sympathetic reading of what Rorty is up to in broadening our capacity for loyalty: “extending the natural sentiments beyond their original bounds.” In an interesting passage, Hume says of this progress, “‘Tis certain, that it is here forwarded by the artifice of politicians, who, in order to govern men more easily, and preserve peace in human society, have endeavor’d to produce an esteem for justice, and an abhorrence of injustice.” If we expand “politicians” widely enough to include philosophers and political theorists, this provides a good description of Rorty’s project of sentimental education: cultivating an “abhorrence of injustice” through the gradual enlargement of our “affections” (Hume) for others. After all, the liberal aversion to cruelty and suffering has long been the hallmark of Rorty’s political weltanschauung.

THE CORRECTION OF SENTIMENT

So how, then, does Hume propose that the partiality of sympathy be corrected? The new wrinkle in Hume’s “science” of human nature that emerges in part 3 of book 3 of the Treatise is that the human condition is one of “continual fluctuation. . . . In general, all sentiments of blame or praise are variable,” he argues, “according to our situation of nearness or remoteness, with regard to the person blam’d or prais’d, and according to the present disposition of our mind.” To correct this inherent bias and to “prevent those continual contradictions,” Hume proposes a method of arriving at “a more stable judgment of things” by fixing on “some steady and general points of view.” Through what he calls the sentiment or principle of “humanity”—namely, “some general inalterable standard . . . which may not admit of so great a vari-
ation," we are able to correct the inherent biases in our capacity for sympathy and thereby extend its domain.\textsuperscript{28}

But there is a catch: sympathy may indeed be extended to distant others, but only via a reflective process of correction that weakens its force. As we have seen, for Hume, "Sympathy with persons remote from us is much fainter than our concern for ourselves, and a sympathy with persons remote from us much fainter than that with persons near and contiguous." The key point that now emerges is that our greatest neglect of these differences occurs "in our calm judgments concerning the characters of men." The reference to "calm judgments" reminds us that the moral sentiment, as a "calm" passion, is reflective: even though sympathy is "proportionately weaker" and our praise or blame "fainter and more doubtful" when their objects are more remote, by "correcting the appearance by reflexion, we arrive at a more constant and establish'd judgment concerning them."\textsuperscript{29}

Hume illustrates how through reflection we can enlarge and correct our selfish passions through the example of "a rude, untaught savage" who is driven by "ideas of private utility and injury" and has "but faint conceptions of a general rule of behavior." If this man of uncultivated nature were to find himself face to face with a battlefield foe—an appropriate symbol for any kind of difference or Other—Hume explains that the attitude of the "savage" toward his opponent would be one of unmitigated hate, which would continue beyond their present context "for ever after." Not even the "most extreme punishment and vengeance" will exhaust this animus. By contrast, "we, accustomed to society, and to more enlarged reflections" consider our battle opponent in a different light: "that this man is serving his own country and community; that any man, in the same situation, would do the same; that we ourselves, in like circumstances, observe a like conduct; that, in general, human society is best supported on such maxims." By paying "this homage to general rules," we are able to correct our "ruder and narrower passions" and thereby avoid "imputing malice or injustice to [our adversary], in order to give vent to those passions, which arise from self-love and private interest."\textsuperscript{30}

Hume goes on to tie the narrowness of the uncultivated man’s perspective to a "heart full of rage"—this is what necessitates the "calmness" of reflection. Moving from the variable level of particularity to the more stable social and universal sentiment of humanity has the effect of mitigating the force of moral passion, thereby curtailing its power to motivate action. What is significant about these "general notions" is that "the heart does not always take part" in them. As Baier puts it, Hume’s version of the moral sentiment is "derived from a sentiment so calm, so different from ‘the heart’s’ more fiery passions" that it is ultimately quite limited in its "dependably action-producing
power.” The passage where Hume states that “tho’ the heart does not always take part with those general notions” ends with the qualification, “yet they are sufficient for discourse, and serve all our purposes in company, in the pulpit, on the theatre, and in the schools.” Baier interprets this to mean that the actions “most dependably” produced by the moral passions amount to “expressive acts occurring in evaluative discourse”—namely, those which take place in the pulpit, in universities, and in morally instructive plays. This is consistent with other statements by Hume in the Treatise that our sense of justice and injustice “arises artificially, tho’ necessarily, from education, and human conventions” and elsewhere that morals are “the object of the most ordinary education.” This of course now sounds a lot like Rorty’s sentimental education. However, does it remain as attractive a project if its ability to cultivate widespread sympathy comes at the cost of being unable to effectively spur action?

This problem of the limits of sympathy leads to a double bind for accounts like Rorty’s which rely on its extension for a politics of remedying injustice. If left uncorrected, our capacity for sympathy, though powerful, will remain partial to those closest to us, and apply largely to those most like us, either by resemblance or relation. To extend sympathy farther, it must be corrected through reflection and the adoption of a common viewpoint of humanity. But in moving from the particular to the general level to correct its biases, the moral sentiment loses its ability to “produce or prevent actions.”

Rorty’s appeal to the correction of sympathy required to extend its purview runs into trouble on two counts: first, it loses its ability to generate action, and second, it must assume a degree of intersubjective agreement or consensus that is at odds with Rorty’s pragmatist assumptions. That is to say, there is an enormous amount of interdependence of human sentiments assumed by Hume, and his account makes universal agreement on matters of moral sentiment a foregone conclusion. It is not so much that Hume posits this sociability as an innate human quality—it is as a result of “common experience” that the solitary man is led to a communion with others—but that it is so “necessary” and “inevitable” that it might as well be. This is a problem, since Rorty, in his criticisms of Habermas and elsewhere, has repudiated the assumption that human discourse is automatically convergent. Serving as a guarantee of the “rationality” of such discourse, the assumption of such an ideal endpoint of communication merely ushers a kind of de facto universalism in through the back door to secure an ahistorical grounding for our beliefs. Instead, Rorty counsels that we cultivate “an increasing willingness to live with plurality and stop asking for universal validity,” and that we rest content with the “merely poetic foundations of the ‘we-consciousness’ which lies behind our social institutions” (CIS, 67–68).
Hume, for his part, is able to get out from under this bind for two reasons: first, at the end of the day, he accepts a de facto essentialism about human nature which on some level locates a concern for others embedded inside all of us (whether it is put there by nature or customs and education, we all have it), and second, because, like fellow Scotsman Frances Hutcheson, and to a certain extent Adam Smith, Hume is more interested in moral judgment than moral action and ultimately is willing to compromise the latter. Rorty, by contrast, has neither of these two avenues open to him. His antiessentialism and contingent view of human nature close off the first route, and since his notion of sentimental education is part of a transformative political project, he cannot compromise the crucial link to action by making sentimental education into a merely literary exercise. Even if Hume’s sentiment of humanity does not rise to the level of a full-blown transcendental principle like a Kantian standpoint of Reason, on its most sympathetic interpretation it still resembles the intersubjective agreement presupposed by Habermas’s ideal speech situation.

IDENTITY, BLINDNESS, AND REALITY

Even if sympathy can be stretched beyond its natural partiality, sympathy, imaginative identification, and a progress of sentiments all aim at something that exists solely along the plane of feeling. While emotions and feelings certainly have a role to play here, contra rationalist or Kantian accounts of morality, Rorty’s argument and others like it are vulnerable to William James’s critique of participation in emotional states of fellow feeling that result in no concrete acts. Here James is worth quoting at length:

There is no more contemptible type of human character than that of the nerveless sentimentalist and dreamer, who spends his life in a weltering sea of sensibility and emotion, but who never does a manly concrete deed. Rousseau, inflaming all the mothers of France, by his eloquence, to follow Nature and nurse their babies themselves, while he sends his own children to the foundling hospital, is the classical example of what I mean. . . . The habit of excessive novel-reading and theatre-going will produce true monsters in this line. The weeping of a Russian lady over the fictitious personages in the play, while her coachman is freezing to death on his seat outside, is the sort of thing that everywhere happens on a less glaring scale . . . . The remedy would be, never to suffer one’s self to have an emotion at a concert, without expressing it afterward in some active way. Let the expression be the least thing in the world—speaking genially to one’s aunt, or giving up one’s seat in a horse-car, if nothing more heroic offers—but let it not fail to take place.37
This wonderful passage requires little commentary. In it James underscores the importance of connecting states of feeling with habits of action, a point we will take up in a moment. But it also suggests the line of argument I want to advance: namely, that spurring us to act is less a matter of seeing others as “one of us” than of recognizing the reality of their suffering. In other words, is the category of identity the best way to remedy James’s Russian lady’s blindness toward her coachman’s suffering?

In a rather curious and ironic way, since Rorty has always been rather dismissive of identity politics, identity now occupies a place at the center of his meliorative project. Sounding a bit like one of the contemporary theorists of identity/difference, Rorty argues that the problem is that the identity of the architects of cruelty—the “thugs”—is “bound up with their sense of who they are not . . . not an infidel, not a queer, not a woman, not an untouchable.” The reason why attacking these responses with a rational arsenal fails is because they are not merely rhetorical, nor irrational; they are “heartfelt” (TP, 178), hence the project of sentimental education and Rorty’s turn to Hume and away from Kant. At the very least, we must recognize that identities are not static entities or neutral categories; as Rorty’s own account of the narrative structure of identity makes clear, the constitution of identities occurs within the space of politics, they are not fixed but alterable, and they have implications which bear directly on political projects.

For a politics of sentiment to be effective, then, it must do more than merely extend the moral identities of “the rich and lucky billion,” as Rorty calls us; it must transform them as well. To the extent that the expansion of sympathetic concern for distant and different others merely reaffirms the existing identities of the fortunate in the North Atlantic democracies, it remains a severely limited endeavor. Rorty introduces a rather odd limitation on any meliorative political project by requiring that “the rich will still be able to recognize themselves” in the denouement, assuming not only that people wish to remain in their current identities, but that it is indeed desirable that they do so.

This unwillingness to challenge the existing identity of the denizens of advanced capitalist democracies strikes me as one of the more problematic aspects of Rorty’s thought. Rather than debate the possibilities of a nonexclusionary identity, however, I want to take a different tack here. My contention is that there is a better way to theorize the politics of sentiment than via the concept of identity. Rather than an ability to see distant others as “one of us” as the operative element in making us more likely to come to their assistance, my suggestion is that an ability to grant full reality to their suffering is the more powerful force and a better ground on which to build a politics of sentiment. Moreover, I argue that there is support for this view in Hume.
As the salient factor in social prejudice or hatred, Rorty identifies the human propensity to draw the circle of those to whom you are most loyal, of one’s moral community, too narrowly. Those who fall outside this sphere obtain a depreciated status, often as subhuman, as Rorty points out in his example of “the gallant and honorable Serb who sees Muslims as circumcised dogs” (TP, 177). While I do not doubt that this is a good description of what goes on in situations of ethnic hatred and that the logic of identity formation and the creation of a subhuman category of otherness is a central force here, my point is that if our concern is what motivates people to act to end the suffering of others, perceiving the reality of their suffering is a more potent compulsion, and one more readily achievable, than coming to see them as “one of us.”

To a certain extent, these notions are not unrelated: coming to see another as fully human may certainly entail granting full reality to their suffering. And both involve operations of the imagination to some degree. Nevertheless, the difference in emphasis does have significant implications. For example, on my view, the impact of Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* from the perspective of a politics of sentiment was not so much that it persuaded white Americans to see blacks as “one of us,” as Rorty argues—after all, given the prevalence of segregation well into the 1950s, not to mention more subtle forms of racism, it could be argued that another century was required for this identification to occur in any widespread sense—but rather that it brought home the reality of the unspeakable suffering of life under a system where, among other inhuman cruelties, children were torn from the arms of their mothers to meet the demands of a coldhearted marketplace (TP, 181). This is something, I believe, that novels are indeed good at. To ask that novel reading help achieve a moral community, however, is to make a demand of a much higher order.

Rather than seeing instances of cruelty as a failure of sympathy or of our capacity for imaginative identification, the view I am proposing identifies as the main factor a kind of moral blindness. Drawing on James’s famous essay on the subject, Kateb interprets this blindness in terms of James’s contention that “almost no one grants reality to others.” Suggesting that “the feeling for the human reality of others” marks a use of the imagination distinct from the cultivation of the moral imagination or “sympathetic identification” of placing oneself in the shoes of the other and generating empathy through an operation of the imagination depicted by thinkers like Rousseau, Smith, Hume, and Rorty, Kateb theorizes a new dimension of moral blindness. An important facet of moral blindness is the opposing operation of “refus[ing] to allow the present to be present.” Kateb’s point here is that blindness to the reality of another’s feelings is not a case of an absence or a failure of the imagination, but actually an active use of it, where the other’s reality is blocked from our
vision. This blindness seems to provide a better account of the Russian lady’s
treatment toward her coachman in the Jamesian passage quoted above and of
the failure of a majority of Americans to be affected by the prosaic but real
suffering of the poor and underprivileged in their own backyard. Kateb also
illustrates how the group feeling associated with “the self-incorporation of the
I into a We,” a process which involves both using the imagination and refusing
to use it, can be a barrier to perceiving these others to be as real to them-
selves as we are to ourselves.\(^43\)

The power of “reality” to move us to action finds support in Hume’s
thought as well. Hume draws a distinction between the “seeming tendencies”
of objects that affect the mind and that which proceeds from the “real conse-
quences” of objects.\(^44\) He suggests that the strongest impulses to action come
neither from sympathy, nor from the imaginative ability to share the suffering
of others, nor from the reflective correction of sympathy. Instead, the most
potent spur to action and acute activation of the moral passions arises from
experiencing the “reality” of the suffering of others. As he put it in the En-
quiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, “Wherever reality is found, our
minds are disposed to be strongly affected by it” (223).

Hume illustrates the power of reality through the example of a man “now
in safety at land” receiving pleasure from the thought of “the miserable con-
dition of those at sea on a storm.” Here he is explicating what he calls “the
principle of comparison”: because “we judge of objects more from compari-
son than from their real intrinsic merit,” it follows that “according as we ob-
serve a greater or less share of happiness or misery in others, we must make
an estimate of our own, and feel a consequent pain or pleasure.” Thus, “the
misery of another gives us a more lively idea of our happiness, and his hap-
iness of our misery.”\(^45\)

However powerful the principle of comparison is, it will never, says Hume,
“have an equal efficacy, as if I were really on the shore, and saw a ship at a
distance tossed by a tempest, and in danger every moment of perishing on a rock
or sand-bank.” In this latter case, the liveliness of the idea will ensure a sym-
pathetic rather than comparative reaction. Making his example even more
“lively,” Hume then notes that if the ship were in fact close enough that the
man could “perceive distinctly the horror, painted on the countenance of the
seamen and passengers, hear their lamentable cries, see the dearest friends
give their last adieu, or embrace with a resolution to perish in each other’s
arms: No man has so savage a heart as to reap any pleasure from such a spec-
tacle, or withstand the motions of the tenderest compassion and sympathy.”\(^46\)
Rather than sympathy or an imaginative identification with the shipwrecked
crew as “one of us,” then, the operative force in Hume’s example is a per-
ception of the inescapable reality of their suffering.
If an experience of the reality of another’s suffering is the best goad to action, the implication is that the most effective program for igniting the will to improve their condition would be to physically experience their life and their suffering firsthand. But this is a rather impractical solution for the case of distant others. Hume suggests an alternate method. The “liveliness” or “vivacity” of an idea for Hume is the determining factor of the force with which it acts upon our mind. However, in his final account, this is not something our imagination is capable of generating on its own. In his work on morals, Hume suggested that it is “the business of poetry” to accomplish this task, “to bring every affection near to us by lively imagery and representation.” He then added the reason why: poetry can make every affection “look like truth and reality.”

**CONCLUSION**

Rorty’s turn to sentiment in his recent work has coincided with an effort to assume the mantle of the transformative projects of Emerson and Dewey. Portraying the consequences of his pragmatism as the advent of a greater plurality and openness to change, he now sees himself as continuing what Cornel West has called “the Deweyan project of an Emersonian culture of radical democracy.” There is a line of thought running from Emerson’s “The Poet” through Whitman and James to Dewey’s *Art Experience* that echoes Hume’s notion of making reality more “lively” through the aesthetic enhancement provided by poets and novelists so that it will leave a deeper and more transformative impression on us. Once thus inspired, we may then return to that reality and remake it. There are occasional moments where Rorty appears to want to extend this line of thought, like his invocation of a Whitmanesque “poetic agon” in which “jarring dialectical discords would be resolved in previously unheard harmonies,” and where he sounds an Emersonian call for a “new culture” (AOC, 24–25).

However, if we accept that the reality of another’s suffering is a more powerful force than a shared moral identity with the sufferer, given Rorty’s rather stringent antirealism, there seems little room for such a notion in his account. Those familiar with Rorty’s thought know that “reality” occupies a rather consistent place on the side of the metaphysical, “Philosophical” with a capital p, views he seeks to jettison. Yet at the same time, his turn to the social realism of the novels of Dickens and Stowe and the “detailed descriptions” provided by journalists as the primary vehicles of moral reflection and sentimental education, primarily because of their ability to depict the suffering of others, suggests that accounts of “reality,” for lack of a better term, do in fact have a role to play here.
Some of this inconsistency may be attributable to Rorty’s familiar proclivity of letting his antimetaphysical fervor get the better of him; that is, there may be room within his pragmatist assumptions to reject the idea that there is any true or ultimate reality out there and still recognize that particular versions of reality have a certain power over us and function politically. Perhaps the tension in his thought can be alleviated somewhat by saying that it is not the accuracy of these accounts that matters but their “vivacity,” to use Hume’s term, their ability to affect us in some deep and penetrating way that activates our sentiments such that inaction or indifference becomes impossible. Still, while this may help to surmount some of the obstacles in Rorty’s thought, it does not get around James’s critique of feckless states of fellow feeling. Even if we accept that granting full reality to the suffering of others is more conducive to generating action than a species of identification which exists solely along the place of feeling, this does not obviate the need to cultivate habits of action.

The best account of habits and their relation to democratic practice is probably John Dewey’s *Human Nature and Conduct*. When juxtaposed to Rorty’s, it provides a striking contrast. By making moral sentiment a matter of a shared identity premised on widely accepted and unchallenged conventions, Rorty appears to follow Hume in viewing custom as “the great guide of human life.” Like Hume, he provides few resources for critical reflection on customs, authoring a program for the accommodation of individuals to a common standpoint that smacks of social conformity and a neglect of the plurality of human perspectives. Dewey, by contrast, set his entire philosophical and political project at odds with the uncritical acceptance of customs, which he saw as the predominant habits of a society. The commonality required by Rorty’s shared moral identity, even if contingent and historicist, leaves little room for subsequent critical reflection on the customs, traditions, and institutions that form the background assumptions of Rorty’s liberalism.

The exclusionary effects of the constitution of a common moral identity make it a poor foundation for generating sympathetic concern for others. The inherent partiality of sympathy dooms any attempt to extend such concern to different and distant others from the start. Through an act of the imagination, the suffering of distant others can be made as real as one’s own, and the threat of moral blindness can be mitigated without the undesirable (and unrealizable) requirement that we identify with everyone whose suffering we seek to diminish as “one of us.” Here the role of novelists and poets resides in rendering the reality of another’s suffering more “lively” rather than forging a singular moral identity. Finally, any form of felt concern for others not tied to habits of action threatens to become a hollow invocation of the spirit of social justice that provokes no real change. With less emphasis on a shared iden-
tity and more on reality and concrete practices, Rorty’s politics of sentiment will better achieve its goal of moving society toward greater justice; as it now stands, his project will fall short of its aims, but, as I hope I have suggested, perhaps not irretrievably so.

NOTES

4. Annette Baier posits that it is not until John Stuart Mill that philosophers writing on ethics drop the supposition of a moral consensus and begin from the presumption of “a plurality of conflicting moral outlooks.” See Annette Baier, Postures of the Mind: Essays on Mind and Morals (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1985), 228–29.
5. For one of the better critiques of liberalism in general on this point, see Sheldon Wolin, Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1960), 331–51 and chap. 9, passim.
9. Rorty makes this claim in several places. See, for example, “Thugs and Theorists: A Reply to Bernstein,” Political Theory 15, no. 4 (1987), 579n26; and “Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens,” in EHO, 68, 80, passim. This essay is one of the best sources for Rorty’s case for the value of novels to a democracy. This is in part because the novel, as the province of “narrative, detail, and diversity,” is more suited than philosophy, given the latter’s taste for “theory, abstraction, and essence,” to portraying the lives of others in vibrant detail, but also because novels give us “an ability to identify imaginatively” with those distant others, and they help foster the kind of “comfortable togetherness” fitted to a politics driven by “sentimental calls for alleviation of suffering” (EHO, 81).
10. See William James, “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results,” in *The Writings of William James*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 360–62. For Rorty’s remarks, see for instance CP, xxxii; EHO, 143–48; and PSH, 67, 153. In PMN, Rorty makes numerous passing references to Hume, the most germane being a reference to his appreciation of “the unimportance of epistemology and the importance of sentiment,” but little else in the way of substantive comment (140n). Rorty’s explicit turn to sentiment dates to the early 1990s and the essays collected in the third volume of his philosophical papers (TP).


13. The more immediate influence on Rorty’s conception of morality as a matter of “we-intentions” is Wilfrid Sellars. See CIS, 59–65, 190–98.


18. While Hume is occasionally given to statements like, “There is some benevolence, however small, infused into our bosom; some spark of friendship for human kind; some particle of the dove kneaded into our frame, along with the wolf and serpent,” he repeatedly stresses the influence of “custom and habit” and the influence of “education and acquired habits,” in *Enquiries*, 271, 202–3. He does have something of a preoccupation with calling things “natural,” but this seems to be a semantic quirk, which he addresses explicitly: while he employs *natural* in certain places as opposed to *artificial* or the product of artifice, he also retains a usage of *natural* as that which is “inseparable from the species,” in *Treatise*, 485. Much of this may be rooted in his view that human beings, while not innately social in any essentialist sense, could not flourish or even survive in the absence of some social interconnection with others. Cf. also, *Enquiries*, 275.


23. Hume’s arguments here, reworked and revised from the *Treatise* to the *Enquiries*, and through several editions of his *Essays*, are complex, changing, and frustratingly contradictory. His understanding of the progress of sentiments seems by turns to be that of a pragmatist, a utilitarian, and an empiricist, at times taking on a hue of Lockean convenience, at others, one of Hegelian inevitability. Hume’s terminological idiosyncrasies do not help matters; it is not uncommon to encounter references to this progress variously as a matter of “early education in society” and
“experience” adjacent to descriptions of it as “natural” and “necessary.” My sense is that part of the confusion traces to Hume’s account of the progress of sentiments as both a onetime civilizing process which occurs in the transition from the “rude, un-taught savage” to men “accustomed to society,” and an ongoing process of reflection aimed a more humane world. Baier nicely captures the spirit of the latter sense with the term “civilizing practices” in an essay by that title in Postures of the Mind. Perhaps it is in the nature of Hume’s thought—his “protopragmatism”—that matters of moral philosophy sometimes merge with matters of political theory or justice.

24. Baier’s ingenious reading of Hume’s Treatise holds that the work’s development actually “stages a thinker’s dramatic development from inadequate and doubt-inviting approaches to more satisfactory reflections.” Here the progress Hume himself exemplifies in the famous conclusion to book 1 becomes representative of this progress more generally. The moral of the story, as Baier tells it, is that “all our interpretations will ‘loosen and fall of themselves’ until they become cooperative and mutually corrective,” in A Progress of Sentiments, 142, vii–ix. See esp. chap. 1.

27. Rorty cites his definition of liberal, which he borrows from Judith Shklar: “liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do” (CIS, xv).
29. Hume, Treatise, 583, 603.
30. Hume, Enquiries, 274n. This is a telling passage, with manifold implications. The idea of “enlarged reflections” seems to suggest a kind of Nietzschean perspectivism, seeing a situation from multiple angles. But there is only one perspective operative here, that of the sentiment of humanity. Despite the passing reference to rules, it should be pointed out that the notion of moral rules or Kantian obligation is quite foreign to Hume’s thought. Rather than any kind of transcendent law, these principles represent “the party of humankind” (275).

31. Hume, Treatise, 603; Baier, A Progress of Sentiments, 184. This interpretation goes against the grain of many of Hume’s more famous claims that “morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions,” in Treatise, 457. Baier accounts for this with the explanation that in the earlier sections Hume is “appealing to the rationalist moralists’ own presuppositions, and trying to reduce their positions ad absurdum, just as he did in Part IV of Book I.” See A Progress of Sentiments, 184–86, 174–97, passim.

32. Hume, Treatise, 603; Baier, A Progress of Sentiments, 183–84.
33. Hume, Treatise, 483; Baier, Postures of Mind, 132. As we pointed out above, Hume’s conception of justice is relatively weak, concerned only with restraining the “love of gain” and securing a “stability of possessions,” making no reference to wrongs against persons. See Baier, A Progress of Sentiments, chap. 10.
34. Baier, Postures of Mind, 163–65.
35. Hume, Treatise, 332, 363.
36. The main difference between Rorty and Habermas on this count is that while Rorty does assume a kind of fixed “background” of “shared descriptions, assumptions, and hopes,” this is a fluid notion, with no preestablished harmony or ideal end—that is, a “true” or “genuine” consensus—presupposed (EHO, 164–76).
38. See, for example, his criticisms of identity politics in “A Cultural Left” (AOC, 73–107).
42. Nussbaum makes the point, “We have compassion for nonhuman animals, without basing it on any imagined similarity.” She adds, “Although of course we need somehow to make sense of the predicament as serious and bad.” See Martha Nussbaum, “Compassion and Terror,” *Daedalus*, Winter 2003, 15. I argue that imagining the suffering of others to be as real as one’s own suffices for the latter.
45. Hume, *Treatise*, 291, 375. This inherent threat to sympathy from comparison was more keenly perceived by the eighteenth-century authors of this perspective than by its contemporary devotees, like Rorty and Nussbaum. However, in a recent article, Nussbaum provides a more nuanced conception of the concept of sympathy or “compassion,” identifying four problems that work against compassion: a judgment of the seriousness of their situation, a judgment of nondesert of their plight, a judgment of similar possibilities, and what she calls a eudaimonistic judgment. See Nussbaum, “Compassion and Terror.” While comparison, which is most powerful when its objects are close to us, seems less of an issue for Rorty’s attempt to extend sympathy toward distant others, I believe it represents a more widespread negative force than either Hume or Baier allows, particularly in an egalitarian society, where the kinds of hierarchies which create distance between individuals are absent. To the extent that comparison is most active amongst those nearest and most alike one another, it could quite possibly become the source of the kind of seething but concealed resentment between fellow citizens that manifests itself in the frightening ways Arthur Miller portrayed in *The Crucible*. But that is another topic.


50. The traditions of American pragmatism and analytic philosophy after the linguistic turn are increasingly at odds in Rorty’s later work: in the more explicitly political recent writing, the insights of Sellars and Quine that fueled his influential critique of the Cartesian-Kantian foundationalism undermine the important emphasis on reality and experience endemic to the pragmatist tradition. Rorty’s welcome leveling of epistemological privileges must not lead us to adopt the erroneous view that inequalities between different perspectives or knowledges—inequalities of power, not epistemology—are thus automatically leveled too. The fact that certain viewpoints still have the power of the dominant behind them remains.


52. Hume, *Enquiries*, 44.

53. In fairness to Rorty, it should be pointed out that there is one passage where he does in fact suggest the necessity of yoking moral identification to action: “Moral identification is empty when it is no longer tied to habits of action.” See “Who Are We?” 15. Cryptic, if suggestive, remarks of Rorty’s, like, “James’s claim that thinking is ‘only there for behavior’s sake’ is his improved version of Hume’s claim that ‘reason is, and ought to be, the slave of the passions,’” are the closest we come to an account of habits of action (PSH, 153).