Can Philosophers Be Patriots?

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Richard Rorty challenged the profession of philosophy to examine its own activities, to avoid false consciousness of what it is that we do. We are not, he claimed, scientists of the mind, nor discerners of eternal moral truths. Ours is not a view sub specie aeternitatis, but a view from a given culture at a given time. This challenge is salutary, and has been influential, but largely outside philosophy. The Princeton philosophy department is still doing the sorts of things they were doing when Rorty left and turned his back on the analytic philosophy he had practiced up until then. I attended a graduate seminar he gave on the philosophy of mind as a visitor in Pittsburgh shortly before he left Princeton, and I was a member of the APA board on the memorable occasion when he quarreled with his old friend Ruth Marcus and wept with the anguish of it. I myself came in for some flak from defenders of analytic philosophy for my championing of “pluralists,” so felt for Rorty in this confrontation. And I, too, had raised the question of what our professional ethics were for our own profession, what made us think public moneys should support us in our intellectual games. Yet I stayed in a philosophy department, while Rorty ended with only an honorary place in Stanford’s. Why did I stay? Largely because I felt that teaching ethics in the way I was doing, and teaching the history of philosophy, was increasing understanding and reflectiveness in my students. Rorty had not been an analytic moral philosopher, and it is interesting to speculate on what arc his thought might have taken had he begun, not with potentiality and the mind-body problem, but with the moral potential of American democracy, and good reasons in ethics. For he ended as a social and political philosopher, indeed as a patriot philosopher, defending the U.S. ideal of democracy, which he took to have an egalitarian component, believing in moral progress, and looking for the right version of human solidarity. He was very much a patriot, but also a globetrotter, speaking in Teheran and Beijing as well as Frankfurt and Paris.

Rorty raised the question of whether any claim about what does and does not exist can be raised independently of our current cultural and social goals. We interpret what we find to be the facts in terms of their
bearing on our hopes and our fears. To say that we currently face dangers from climate change, and from violence from disaffected groups, is certainly to make factual claims and also to make value judgments. I see social philosophers as having a duty to think about clear and present dangers, and I think that study of such philosophers as Grotius, Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Rawls can help us to do so. At any rate I shall hope that I am doing the sort of philosophy Rorty would have approved of, in what follows, when I consider two grave dangers currently facing all of us. My tone, however, will scarcely be ironical, since I know of no alternative debunking vocabulary for describing these dangers, so I fail Rorty’s criteria for an ironist. It is difficult to recontextualize climate change, unless we go back to Noah, and the only way I know to recontextualize terrorism is to attempt to see it from the terrorist’s point of view.

I shall be speaking as a critical citizen both of my native country, New Zealand, and of the country where I spent most of my working life, the U.S. I shall also be speaking as a committed cosmopolitan (who spent over three years in Britain, one in Berlin, and every summer for three decades in Austria), trying to advance the cause of what David Hume called “the party of humankind, against vice and disorder.” Travel helps the would-be world citizen, and my double citizenship also gives me, I like to think, an advantage, in that I can see each of my two countries from the standpoint of the other. Just as learning another language instructs one on the peculiarities of one’s native language, so having double citizenship helps one’s vision of each country, recontextualizes one’s patriotism. At least I hope double citizenship makes my vision bifocal, and not cross-eyed. (It might even begin to make me into an ironist patriot, seeing each country as the other sees it.)

The notion of leaving footprints behind us is one of those metaphors that, by serving a useful purpose and dying, has become as entrenched in our language as any nonmetaphorical talk. Its usefulness is practical and moral. We accuse each other, these days, of leaving dirty footprints. In terms of carbon footprints, the U.S. is the worst world offender, and so far has made no progress on that front, unless making films is progress, which I suppose it is, or at least as much progress as writing essays on the topic. The Pilgrim fathers did not pollute their environment more than the American Indians, nor worry about any environmental effects they were having. At least today some of us, in many countries, do worry, but it has taken melting icecaps to make us worry. Whether global warming is occurring, and, if so, how fast, is for scientists, not filmmakers or essayists, to tell us. I take it their reports assure us of real danger and have myself seen the icebergs that last year drifted from the Antarctic to off the Dunedin coast, half way to the equator. I confess to being an unreformed empiricist, for whom such evidence was absolutely
convincing. The icebergs were unforgettable, both beautiful and ominous. So now we in New Zealand do worry about climate change. And now the carbon footprints of visiting tourists and exported foods have to be weighed against whatever benefits come from the tourist trade, and from conveying food from where it is most efficiently produced to distant markets. This is of obvious importance to an isolated country, such as New Zealand, which depends on its tourist trade, whose markets for its dairy products are worldwide, and whose own local greenhouse gas problem stems to a considerable degree from its dairy industry, even before the carbon produced in exporting dairy products is taken into account. (No one has measured human methane gas emissions, only bovine ones.) And, of course, as an island nation with a long coastline, we will be among the most affected, after the polar bears and penguins, by rising sea levels.

It is proper, I think, to be aware of what we are doing, as tourism promoters, dairy farmers, exporters, world travelers, and consumers, and to consider how that will affect those who come after us. “Peak oil” is another Cassandra cry these days, and that metaphor, of what is peaking among the supplies that we consume, and what will become less available to those who come after us, is also a popular one among worried alarmists. What should we leave for our descendants, what sort of footprint should we want to leave? What should we conserve, what can we afford to let peak and decline, without feeling we have wronged those who come after us? If we leave the technology to supply clean renewable energy, that legacy will be welcomed, as oil gives out. And if terrorism peaks in our generation, that will be good for those who come later. But unless we find a way to let it decline, to let the grievances of those with strong grievances be expressed in less lethal ways, then we cannot reasonably take its peak to have been reached. Unless we find alternative forms of energy, the peaking of fossil fuel supplies will mean a lowered standard of life for our great-great-grandchildren. And unless it is a clean as well as renewable form of energy, they will face pollution and disastrous climate change.

We are not without some success stories in changing our ways for the better. I lived in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania both when it was smog-shrouded and after its air was cleaned up, and it was transformed for the better as a place to live. But that change for the better in that one place was effected largely by the closing down of the local steel mills, the moving away of steel production to other places, some in other lands. Still, we do have some proven skills when it comes to controlling smokestack and automobile emissions. The challenge we now face is somehow to increase those skills, to invent new better ways to move around without polluting the space we move through, perhaps to return to sailing ships, and to
learn to produce what we need with forms of energy, such as solar and wind power, that are renewable and nonpolluting. We are an inventive species. We are also an adaptable species, and could, if we chose, return to the habits of my grandparents, who did without cars, refrigerators, washing machines, air-conditioning, and did not feel their way of life to have been bad. Patriots tend to look back to how their grandparents lived, as well as to look forward. We are aware of our heritage, and take notice both of the faults, and of the potential for improvement, of our own countries, the places whose culture formed us, and where we choose to live and work, retire and die. Being a citizen of two countries, one very powerful, one not, whose relations with each other are less than very close, imposes interesting constraints on my attempts to see clearly the good and bad aspects of my two countries. My grandparents lived in New Zealand, and its culture formed me. I confess I feel more at home in a powerless than in a powerful country. New Zealand will not allow nuclear-powered ships in its territorial waters. Its foreign policy is influenced as much by its memory of nuclear tests in the South Pacific as by its old friendship with England, its more recent friendship with China (dating from the days of Rewi Alley), and its hope to trade with the U.S. Since we are so powerless, no one much cares what our foreign policy is. We seem at present to concentrate our small military might in peacekeeping forces, in East Timor, in Afghanistan. At present New Zealand is doing better than the U.S. on carbon emissions, but we too have much room for improvement. “Pioneer values” are what we pay lip service to in New Zealand, mucking in and making do, operating with number-eight fencing wire, and we could, if we chose, show that we really can manage with fewer creature comforts. Will we so choose? Time will tell.

One modern luxury I certainly would miss, even if I did my laundry as my parents did for most of their lives with a boiler, rinsing tubs, and a hand-operated ringer, and kept my perishable foods in a fly-proof meat-safe, would be the Internet and e-mail. The ease of communication, and of consulting experts, that they have brought has transformed our lives for the better and could help with the sharing of ideas and expertise in coping with current world problems, such as the continent-sized swirl of plastic garbage floating in the North Pacific, or rising sea levels. Hume hailed the printing press as a transformer of human life, and the Internet is just as great a transformer. It can facilitate cooperative efforts to cope with world dangers.

But the physical challenges are not the only ones we face, nor technological inventions the only ones we must hope for, as we attempt to recontextualize our lives and concerns. We also face the more intractable problem of how to prevent desperate and aggrieved people from suicidal
massacres, in schools, shopping malls, airports, and on airplanes. And with greater ease in knowing how others live comes greater likelihood of indignation at inequality, at exploitation, at neglect. Sometimes the desperation expressed in violent acts stems from a personal grievance, sometimes from a public grievance, possibly one against another nation. When it is the latter, then the main terrorists will be foreigners. American soil has recently seen several of the former, desperate acts expressing a private grievance, and one huge, impressively coordinated, three-sited version of the latter, expressing a public and international grievance. Given the ease for anyone to procure lethal weapons, or to transform a mode of transport into a lethal weapon, the only way we can protect ourselves from such suicidal desperadoes is by defusing their anger and aggression, by persuading them to express their grievances in ways that allow both them and their perceived enemies a chance to survive. For us to do that, we must listen to them and attend to their grievances. For the desperate young people in our schools, colleges, and shopping malls, private counseling services and social opportunities for making something of their lives are where we must hope that new efforts will improve things. The U.S. is not alone in having disaffected young. New Zealand, too, although it rated second best on an international “peace index,” while the U.S. was low on that list, has a high youth suicide rate and a terrible rate of violence in the home, including violence against very young children. We have not yet had anyone open fire indiscriminately in a children’s clothing store where Christmas gifts are being wrapped, nor any school massacres, but some frightful things have been done to little children. No nation can stand in judgment on another in this matter, whatever their place on any list, and we all depend on international agencies to advise us about how we can improve the conditions of life for our children and young people. For relative affluence is no guarantee of contentment, and social discontent arises from many causes. In New Zealand, our colonial past affects the discontents of some of our Maori population, and the very fact that there are several cultures in one territory always presents some problems. When one of them sees itself as the master-culture, and does have a history of ruthless mastery, trouble is to be expected. New Zealanders never were slave owners, but although we began our national existence with a treaty with the Maori, who had arrived several centuries before the Europeans, we did continue to displace and disappropriate them and had some very bloody Maori wars in the nineteenth century. De Tocqueville wonders how the fact that three races share American soil, one of them native, one colonizing, the third recently enslaved, would work out in the long run. (He did not foresee the Hispanic influx.) That, after a civil war he did not foresee, seems to be working out not too disastrously, and in a self-proclaimed melting pot, diversity of origins is surely to be welcomed, not feared.
But has there been all that much melting in the United States? Inter-
marrige is the best indicator of that. Maybe that has happened between
Polish Americans and Irish Americans, or even English and Puerto Rican,
but between the members of de Tocqueville’s three races? With us in
New Zealand, there has been so much that half the self-perceived Maori
population in the last census had partners who were not Maori. We New
Zealanders are increasingly becoming a monotonously pale brown race,
where presence of a facial tattoo, or speaking Maori, is needed to declare
oneself a Maori. The word “pakeha” is still used, but almost as a term
of abuse. It means “pale” or even “pallid” and was how the Polynesian
original New Zealanders saw the missionaries, whalers, and eventually set-
tlers who came to live among them. It is always instructive to see oneself
as others see one, and they saw my own Scottish and English ancestors
as unnaturally pale, almost as anaemic. As Seyla Ben-Habib said in her
presidential address to the APA in the Eastern Division in 2007, all
cultures are partial cultures, and we all need to look at ourselves from
the perspective of other cultures.

The United States had the great good fortune to be carefully observed
by de Tocqueville and would be wise not to ignore other foreign points
of view on its own character. From Graham Greene’s *Quiet American*,
to militant Islamic characterizations, to those from many nations who
booed in Bali before they had reason to cheer—all should be grist for a
self-analysis properly informed by such foreign viewpoints. “Wou’d some
power the gifties gie us, to see ourselves as ithers see us!” Robert Burns
said, and the U.S. has been given a great gift in Alexis de Tocqueville’s
*Democracy in America*. He did not foresee either the civil war or the wars
on foreign soil that America would wage, but did foresee that its military
leaders might be reckless of lives, especially of foreign lives. New Zea-
land, too, has had the benefit of some foreign viewpoints about what is
good and bad in our society. In 1872 both Samuel Butler, in his satirical
*Erewhon*, and Anthony Trollope, in his account of his travels, gave their
impressions. More recently Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, while praising
the beauty of our beaches, forests, and mountains, and praising our
friendliness and egalitarianism, notes a certain anti-intellectualism, a “tall
poppy syndrome,” which wants exceptional talents cut down to size. His
book has been ill-received by some New Zealanders, perhaps because
we smugly regard ourselves as “God’s Own Country” (“godzone”) and
do not take well to any criticism, especially from American intellectual
tall poppies. New Zealanders are thin-skinned when it comes to our
national character. We, like all countries, need more frank reactions to
the way we live.

We need to listen to criticism, including the charges of those who are
so aggrieved that they resort to violence. As I write, New Zealand has ex-
experienced its first domestic plane-hijacking, by a knife-wielding, unhappy thirty-three-year-old woman refugee from Somaliland, who wanted to be flown to Australia, to get right out of the godzone. Part of her problem was language. We take in refugees, then do too little to make them feel at home, and expect them to learn English. We never dream of trying to learn their language. Every English-speaking country is easily tempted to suppose that ours is the lingua franca, so, even if we are cosmopolitans, we can be excused from learning foreign languages. But the true cosmopolitan is multilingual, and the truly welcoming host learns at least a greeting in the guest’s language. Our new school curriculum in New Zealand is putting more stress on the importance not just of knowing the native language of our fellow citizens, the Maori, but of knowing at least one foreign language spoken in the Pacific Rim. (Somaliland, of course, is not on that rim.) When I was at school, French was the only language (other than Latin) I was taught. Now we in New Zealand teach Chinese and Japanese, as well as Spanish, French, Russian, and German, and, as I write this, my local paper has a photo of an Arabic man showing little schoolchildren how to write “New Zealand” in Arabic. Learning a people’s language is a step towards understanding their culture, and increased understanding of other cultures is urgently needed, if fear of the foreign is to be fought. Americans abroad would appear much less ugly if they could show forms of politeness in the language of the places they visit. In how many U.S. schools could anyone learn Arabic, I wonder, before being sent to serve in a capacity in the Middle East? Google tells me that only 1 percent of FBI personnel know even a few words of Arabic, and that there is a conflict between having that knowledge and getting a security clearance. British diplomats used to learn it, and it should be seen as a valued ability, rather than as a disqualification, in an applicant to the diplomatic service. But until knowing any foreign language is more valued, knowledge of Arabic is likely to remain more feared than welcomed. Another way to decrease the fear of the unfamiliar is to teach comparative religion. Some understanding of Islam, as well as Christianity, the Jewish faith, and other world religions, should be regarded as an obligation, not a peculiar hobby. Religious conflict is one major source of violence, so love of peace must include knowledge of world religions, and their potentials both for peace and for war.

One of the social tools we have evolved to enable us to get along is rights recognition, and rights are enshrined in the U.S. constitution. To recognize equal rights is to empower those who before the recognition were less than equal in power; it is for the stronger to strengthen the weaker in some respects. As a small state is empowered if it has two senators, just like a very populous state, and a humble, unknown citizen with a vote has the same elective power as the most famous voter, so
whenever we recognize rights we alter the power balance. If we recognize international rights in bodies like the United Nations, small countries like New Zealand acquire a voice they would otherwise have lacked, and big powers submit themselves to consultation and advice from those who are relatively powerless when it comes to military might. The presence of the United Nations headquarters in Manhattan signals an acquiescence on the part of the U.S. to the need for a world body to try to contain conflicts between nations, and to coordinate cooperative measures to cope with famine, deforestation, climate change, and other matters where what one nation does affects life for others. National sovereignty is threatened by such international bodies, but its sacredness is relatively recent in human history, and always was limited by treaty obligations and by policies like the Monroe Doctrine, which not merely warned European powers to keep out of the Americas, but was taken by Theodore Roosevelt to license some interference by the U.S. in other countries in what it declared its sphere of influence, the whole of North, Central and South America. That Mexico and Canada are neighbors, whose borders with the U.S. are very porous, is one thing. Even that the Caribbean is close and that the Panama Canal affects U.S. interests is a similar thing. But how was what went on in Argentina or Chile the concern of the U.S. any more than what happens in Mongolia, or how did it affect the U.S. more than it affected other equally distant countries? A common past of colonization from European powers would bring a right to intervene, even to prevent recolonization, only if the doctrine had been a joint one, by all American powers. It was not: it was a unilateral proclamation by one such power, and rightly was it mitigated by Franklin Roosevelt’s “good neighbor” assurance, which limited the intention to intervene. Now, after the recognition in NATO that there are neighbors across the Atlantic, and now that the U.S. has seen fit to intervene in Asia and the Middle East, the Monroe Doctrine seems quietly buried. But it did contain a grain of truth: that cooperation between nations who share a huge continent, divided into two only by human engineering, is only sensible as long as there are common dangers. The original common danger was colonial aggression from Europe. That was succeeded by the perceived danger of a spread of communism, then by nuclear proliferation. Now the declared war is on terrorism, but as Grotius pointed out, bringing a matter to issue by “terror and reputation of strength” rather than all-out war can be what Pliny called “the most brilliant kind of victory.” Grotius thought single combat to decide a matter was better than pitched battles, and threats of great force with only modest display of killing power better than all-out war. War kills the innocent and causes terror in its civilian victims, so a war against terror has to take care that it not cause more death and suffering than it prevents. Grotius wrote
while wars of religion were ravaging Europe, and we need a new Grotius, perhaps an Islamic one, and, until such a one turns up, more study of the original one, to help us cope with the divisions in today’s world. The nominally Christian Grotius sought wisdom from any source, not just his own religious tradition, and had a clear aim of finding the least destructive way to settle quarrels between nations and peoples. Conference, if we speak a common language, arbitration if we do not, even single combat and terrifying show of strength were, in his eyes, better than going to war, even if one’s cause was seen as just.

Sometimes the better part of wisdom is to lay down one’s rights, and one’s arms. We need some international equivalent of the mutually disempowering handshake, to enable us to approach other peoples in peace, to make and seal deals with them, not attempt to use our stronger arm to force them to the actions that suit us, to give us access to their oil, and to control their uranium enrichment plants. The arrogance of claiming exclusive rights to dangerous forms of power has to be somehow broken, and it is best if it is broken from within, rather than by tempting outsiders to make a spectacular display of how equally vulnerable we all are. The forms of international cooperation and diplomacy that we have evolved can still serve us to help get laws for nations, laws like Hobbes’s theorems of peace, ways to safely lay down our arms and give peacemakers safe conduct. The tradition of diplomacy is the one we have to hope will develop new skills. The oldest skill for getting along with foreigners is learning their language, not just expecting them to learn ours, and that is one the U.S. has not laid much emphasis on.

U.S. foreign policy has been dominated by its perceptions of a series of threats from foreign powers: first colonial powers, then communism, then nuclear proliferation, now terrorism and militant Islam. But some real present dangers have their source here on the home soil, as well as elsewhere. Carbon emissions in the U.S. threaten not just the U.S. and its nearest neighbors, Canada and Mexico, but everyone. What happens to Brazil’s rain forests is of vital concern not just to Brazil’s neighbors, but to all of us. Climate change, air pollution, water pollution, and icecap melting are no respecters of national boundaries, and we must act collectively, not just singly, to address them. Exemplary action by some is a start, but will be wasted unless all join in. The recent Bali agreement is a small step forward, and did demonstrate the willingness of the more powerful, and the worst polluters, to submit to the judgment of the rest, to be booed into concessions. A new inverse Monroe Doctrine, where those who pose the worst dangers agree to act to lessen them and to cooperate with all those facing the dangers, or a renewed and extended Roosevelt good neighbor policy, is needed now. For who, now, is not one’s neighbor?
David Hume mentioned abstaining from poisoned arms as among the recognized laws between nations. And it is obvious why such a law makes sense. For poison is difficult to direct only at one’s declared enemies, but tends to drift, both to one’s own troops and to innocent third parties. Poisoned water and air, and nuclear fallout, are well-nigh impossible to confine to one area or one population. One’s neighbors should now be seen as any who may be poisoned by what drifts over one’s fence. All people, whether or not they are citizens of recognized states, have a right not to be knowingly poisoned. When Hume faced the question of who should be granted rights, once rights are recognized and possessed by some (and it is important to realize that they do have to be recognized and spelled out; they are not written in the heavens), his answer was: by all who have the power to make their resentment of exclusion felt. This power to make exclusive clubs of right-holders feel the resentment of those who are kept out is possessed not only by small nations, if denied a voice, but by any group, whether or not it amounts to a nation. The Taliban, persecuted groups within Darfur, Palestinians in Israeli territory, all can show resentment in effective ways, if not listened to by those they resent, and this includes not just those in their own country who oppress them, but those who know of but ignore their plight. Hume pointed out to the women of his time, who did not have equal rights with men in marriage or in civil society, that their power to control whether or not men knew which children were their own children was something they could use to get a better deal. Today, with DNA tests, that can no longer be said, but fortunately women in many societies now have a better deal. The parenting and care of children is not the only cooperative activity in which men and women are involved. In pioneer societies such as New Zealand and the U.S. were, all hands were needed if the animals were to be tended, the hay made, the crops got in. Colorado and New Zealand were the first to give women suffrage. Both for the continuation of known families, and for the continuing supply of the means to feed them, cooperation is needed, and partners in the activity must be given due recognition. The same is now true, at the level of nations cooperating to ensure the continued supply of unpoisoned air and water. The fact that some have greater military might does not give them any right to exempt themselves from the common task. Theodore Roosevelt, in announcing his extension of the Monroe Doctrine, advised speaking gently while carrying a big stick. Big sticks do not make friends, nor inspire trust. The neighbor one trusts is one who comes with a strong right arm extended for a handshake, displaying clearly that he carries no weapon. And big sticks are too easily acquired to give much of an advantage. They should be left to aggrieved and excluded groups, who have to make threats to get recognition. Those with the monopoly of power can afford to speak firmly, while leaving their hands free of weapons.
Hume, that naturalist and empiricist, wrote of the role of what he called social “artifices,” what we invent to remedy our natural inadequacies: “By the conjunction of forces our power is augmented: By the partition of employments our ability increases: And by mutual succor we are less exposed to fortune and accidents. ‘Tis by this additional force, ability, and security, that society becomes advantageous.” Conjunction of forces, and federation of states within one nation, has given the U.S. force enough to threaten weaker nations, both near and far. That, of course, was not the use of force that Hume had in mind, except for purposes of defense. He saw a need for cooperation not just within but between nations, both in the form of free trade and also in observation of “laws of nations.” Security is not increased by aggressive use of force, but only, on Hume’s story, by “mutual succor.” Such mutual help can go on between nations as well as within them, and can take the form of exchange of expert advice. Some countries do better than others, whatever the field one specifies. Costa Rica does a lot better at lowered greenhouse gases than the United States. Iceland takes the prize for books purchased per head of population, and New Zealand is not far behind. New Zealand leads at curbside recycling. If those who do well in some area were invited by those who do less well to come in and advise, in a sort of expanded and targeted Fulbright exchange scheme, then all could benefit. Or the existing Fulbright scheme could be adapted, so that those who come to the U.S. from other places be invited to give their reactions, both favorable and less favorable, to life in the U.S., and those Americans who study abroad be encouraged to bring home lessons for the home scene. Guests usually feel they must not criticize their hosts, but we all need to see ourselves as others see us, especially those others who have had a chance to have a good look at us. We need a rethinking of the duties of host and guest, so that guests can share their observations. Hume noted that although most nations show politeness to guests by an “after you” gesture, when leaving a dwelling, Spanish hosts deliberately leave the guest to follow, as if leaving them briefly in charge. To leave our guests in charge of our homes is to trust them, to relinquish control of the situation, and for a token moment, to grant temporary special rights. The right to be the last to leave a dwelling is not the only right we sometimes freely grant, nor need courtesy be a mere masking of who really is in charge. The old habit of doffing one’s hat and bowing to an acquaintance on meeting, or offering a handshake, are other cases of a voluntary putting of oneself at a temporary disadvantage. Baring one’s head or extending one’s strong right hand to be taken by another are other cases of renouncing protection.

Why would anyone make herself vulnerable, relinquish any protection or superiority she possesses, by granting others, even briefly, equal or superior rights in some matter, in cases where she is not vanquished, so is
not bowing to the other in submission? Because anyone, however strong, wants to be trusted by others, and knows she will not be trusted if she relies on superior power to get her way. Some measure of equality must be secured if we are to have any mutual trust. I return to the handshake as symbol of that voluntary mutual disempowerment that makes cooperation possible. When a strong man approaches another weaker one with his right hand outstretched, showing he has no weapon, nor intention to strike, the weaker can afford to take that hand in his own. The Romans grasped each other’s elbows, making sure the whole lower arm was put out of dangerous action, but right hands are good enough. We take the handshake to seal a deal, and, of course, like any agreement, it can fail to secure performance, but the handshake can also initiate a meeting, make the very possibility of a deal possible between strangers.

Alternative accounts of the origin of the handshake show it as the inadvertent outcome of two people each trying to take the other’s hand to the lips, for a kiss. If neither wants to be in the position assumed by those who offer their hands to be kissed, and each tugs the hand away from the one who tries to lift it, a handshake of a sort will result. As one who has been subjected to the Austrian hand kuss when not expecting it, and whose hand tended to be inky, I rather like this account of the handshake—a mutual “better not try to kiss my hand!” It builds the equality in at the start, not just as the outcome.

In our customs of giving ambassadors special protection against arrest and home invasion, we do grant those foreigner ambassadors invited into our capitals some special rights, a bit like Spanish hosts. Notoriously, such privileges can be abused, so embassies can become the sanctuary of spies. The open invitation to foreign visitors, temporary residents, and immigrants, to offer comments on the way life is conducted might also be occasionally abused, but as with ambassadorial privilege, more benefit than injury would come from it. A sort of visitors’ book should always be open to suggestions on how matters strike the outsider: in New Zealand an ongoing “Erewhon,” or additions to Anthony Trollope’s 1872 observation that “New Zealand is over-governed, over-legislated for;” in the U.S. an ongoing “Democracy in America.” What struck me most when I first came to live and work in the U.S. after New Zealand, Britain, and Australia, was the acceptance of gun ownership as normal. That still horrifies me, and all the explanations in the world of the second amendment, and the birth of the nation in rebellion against a colonial power fail to persuade me that it is anything other than an encouragement to violence. The other thing that struck me was the sexism that still made life difficult for ambitious young women. That was in the 1960s, and since then Condoleezza Rice, Hillary Clinton, and others have certainly demonstrated what American women can do. De
Tocqueville was impressed with the self-confidence of young unmarried American women, but also by their acceptance of their fate to become devoted and obedient wives. Of course, as a New Zealander, I had high standards for women’s rights. We were the first nation to give suffrage to women and have had two women heads of state, one now well into her third term of office, while the U.S. is yet to have one. And recently we had, besides a woman prime minister, also at the same time a woman governor general, a woman chief justice, and a woman heading the largest corporation, Telecom.

I return to the question of what kind of welcome legacy we should leave behind us. We should leave complete records, both documentary and photographic. Shaming photos of the treatment of prisoners are better than attempts at cover-up. Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay are names and images not likely to be quickly forgotten, nor should they be. Thucydides wrote a history of the war he himself had been involved in, “for posterity,” and posterity has a right to full records of what went on in our lifetime. As Thucydides did not write to whitewash the Athenian actions, nor should the historians of our era attempt a whitewash. We have done as well as suffered grave wrongs. We need to leave black boxes of what led us to crash, when we morally crash, as well as when our planes go down. Social philosophers can contribute to these. Time capsules should be left among our ruins, so later generations can learn from our mistakes. That is the least we can do. Even if we poison our air, melt our icecaps, let nuclear weapons loose to wreak their havoc (and we should not forget who first let them loose), let there be some way that any survivors of the messes we are making can work out, after we are gone, where we went wrong. That footprint at least, in the form of honest records, we should leave among our ruins. The U.S. department of national archives should have underground storage, even if the Pentagon does not survive the next attack. For unless we do succeed in talking with those who want to attack it, there will surely be a next attack. Freud defined civilization as hurling words rather than stones at one another, but if the words are threats and insults, they will be just as deadly. They must be peaceable words, and in the language of those they are meant for. Understanding the other’s language and culture are the first steps to good relations; refusing to do so, isolating oneself arrogantly in one’s own language community, feeling superior, even if one is the greatest global poisoner, is the surest recipe for making deadly enemies.

Were David Hume among us today, I think he would want not just to enlarge his treatment of laws of nations, with more on the obligation not to poison, but to rewrite his essays on suicide and on immortality. He did not, could not, foresee how the prospect of an afterlife could tempt people to patriotic martyrdom, though he did see dangers in any
belief in an afterlife: “Death is in the end unavoidable: yet the human species could not be preserved, had not nature inspired us with an aversion towards it.” Once the natural aversion to death is overcome by promise of paradise for religious martyrs, killing themselves along with the ungodly, the preservation of the human species is threatened. Once the fear of death is outweighed by indignation at grievances, there is no way to deter would-be martyrs, except removing their grievances, and giving them some prospect of a good life here and now.

Islamic suicide terrorists have included women. That women wearing the Muslim headscarf should take on this role is as bizarre as that they should take up soccer in Canada and provoke debate about the danger their headscarves occasion to all players. In some Islamic societies, wearing a headscarf is not a symbol of modesty and inferiority to men, but a badge of allegiance against Western oppressors, just as Maori facial tattoos are in New Zealand. These soccer-playing young Muslim women, who know what Western culture has to offer and also value their own tradition, are the ones we must hope can help mediate the differences threatening us today. For they surely can speak to both sides, and there are not so many others who can be expected to be qualified enough to be the mediators of peace that we desperately need.

Richard Rorty agreed with Montaigne, Hume, and Judith Shklar that the worst vice is cruelty. Cruelty takes many forms, and exclusion is one of the worst of them. The victims of cruelty can themselves become cruel—New Zealander’s knife-wielding hijacker, who wounded a pilot, had herself suffered humiliation and rape in refugee camps in Kenya. We must include all our possible attackers in our conversations, and not exclude any. This is the recipe not for utopia, which neither the U.S. nor New Zealand can expect to offer, but for mere survival.

I have considered two unconnected grave dangers facing us, threatening our very survival: climate change and terrorism. To respond to them we need to put aside blinkered thinking and exercise some moral imagination. We cannot wait for novelists to help us with these urgent challenges, but philosophers could help. Irony is a luxury we may no longer be able to afford—it is hard to achieve it as one is overwhelmed by flood waters. Philosophers of many kinds could help: Kantians can ask if they can will everyone to leave a carbon footprint as large as their own, Humeans can ask what new international artifice might give us the security we now lack, and pragmatists have urgent practical issues to think about. Applied ethics of many kinds have come to flourish since Rorty left Princeton, and catastrophe ethics could be added to their variety. Liberal hope is difficult to sustain in today’s world. Perpetual peace seems a pipe dream, yet, with nuclear weapons in the picture, also necessary for survival. Lifeboat ethics may soon be the only kind
there is any scope for, unless somehow we avert the dangers, physical and social, now facing us. Rorty called himself a liberal ironist, and an optimist. I am a socialist pessimist. Both of us are patriots, both also cosmopolitans, trying “to create a more expansive sense of solidarity than we presently have.”

DUNEDIN, NEW ZEALAND

NOTES

1 During the 1980s he seemed to leave the analytic philosophy to Donald Davidson and give himself the role of interpreting him, relating his views to those of Wifrid Sellars, and to his favorite, Dewey. In the index to Richard Rorty, Philosophical Papers, vol. 1, Objectivity, Relativism and Truth (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), there are eight lines of references to Dewey and six lines to Davidson.

2 I refer to his characterization of the ironist in “Private Irony and Liberal Hope,” in Contingency, Irony and Solidarity (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), 73.


4 David Hume, Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, conclusion, pt. 1, para. 9.

5 When as a student I learned ancient Greek, I was fascinated with its middle voice and dual number, and felt English the poorer for lacking them.

6 One in seven New Zealanders is Maori, one in ten of Asian descent.


8 Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, Slipping into Paradise: Why I Live in New Zealand (New York: Balantine), 2005. Masson, since the publication of his book, has also become a New Zealand citizen, but now sees the troubles in Paradise more vividly than when he devoted a perceptive chapter of his book to them.

9 It was inevitable, I think, that a pastoral country like New Zealand, dependent on its dairy exports, would eventually not prove paradise to a vegan like Masson, and a bookish, Sanskrit-reading vegan at that.

10 Rorty in “Representation, Social Practice, Truth” in Philosophical Papers, vol. 1, Objectivity, Relativism, Truth, 157, defends those who “explain true in terms of language I know” but the defense would be better, and a better answer to charges of insularity, if language became languages.


14 The Supreme Court will, in June, 2008, decide if the people’s “right to bear arms,” which the Second Amendment guarantees, can be taken, as its introductory clause about the need for a citizen militia to guard freedom suggests, to refer only to the right to be a member of a citizen militia, like the National Guard. This will be a historic clarification.
