I missed knowing Richard Rorty at Yale in the 1950s when we overlapped as graduate students in different fields. Our acquaintance and, later on, our warm friendship started with an encounter at a lecture he was giving at Stanford, in the academic year 1980–81 when I was at the nearby Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. I came to hear his talk because I had just read *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* with great admiration for the quality of its thinking and writing. Our first encounter was quintessential Rorty; it prefigured the pattern of many subsequent conversations. His lecture included a strong attack on the ideas of Hans Reichenbach, my hero at the time because of his powerful argument in a book of 1920 saying that Einstein had refuted Kant’s notion of the a priori.1 Rorty was objecting to something different—Reichenbach’s idea that philosophy’s main job was to stay one step ahead of the sciences, and should try to make coherent sense of what they are currently telling us about reality.2 After the lecture, during the question period, I skeptically asked an earnest question whose import I now don’t remember at all. It had this structure: “If that’s the case, then how can we blah, blah, blah?” The thing I still remember vividly is Rorty’s response: “Yeah, that’s the sixty-four-dollar question.”3

Rorty’s quizzical and impish manner was the same whether in a lecture hall or in a seminar, where he enthralled his students, or in private conversation. He took philosophy very seriously in one sense, and in another, not very seriously at all. He loved the professional gossip in the field. He admired and produced good technical work. He defended the integrity of the subject, and its professional standards—especially against a proscience interloper like Steven Weinberg. He loved the thrust and parry. But, despite his high craftsmanship and productivity, he was as ironical about the pretensions of philosophy as he was about himself. He was immensely serious about the subjects he wrote on. But self-irony, gentle satire, and wittiness were as much a part of his deepest character as was his genuine seriousness. He was an *homme sérieux*, but his seriousness was complex. In this piece I want to record just a few unknown things about Rorty’s sixteen productive years at the University of Virginia, and then stress a theme in his thought.
The way he came to Virginia was in this wise. While I was at the CASBS at Stanford, I read *Mirror*, heard Rorty’s stimulating lecture, and learned that he wanted to leave Princeton. I remember saying to the head of the Stanford philosophy department, who was also spending a year at the Center, that “You really should hire this guy. It would be a real coup for you.” I was an innocent. I didn’t know that philosophy departments were not seeking intellectual diversity in those days. The head of the Stanford department was a committed analytical philosopher. From his responses I inferred that if Rorty was really, really good that was all the more reason to avoid him—not that anyone with such views could be truly excellent. The possibility that such a person would excite the young and set them to thinking and talking, maybe in the wrong direction, was all the more reason not to hire him. Rorty’s work still causes this aversion reaction among some analytical philosophers.

The early 1980s were big years for literary theory. Upon my return to the Virginia English department in the fall of 1981, I resumed my duties as chairman, and I had no difficulty in persuading the department that we needed to hire a theorist, who, unlike me, could deal intelligently, knowledgeably, and sympathetically with deconstruction and other postmodern ideas. This was a welcome idea to my colleagues. They agreed that the department should offer expertise in these recent currents of thought. Often a university department will resist a truly distinguished appointment because it endangers the status of existing faculty members. (I hope I am not revealing a truth hitherto unknown to print.) But the chairman has a different view. The most, perhaps the only rewarding aspect of being a department chairman in the humanities is the making of excellent appointments. Here was an opportunity to do so without endangering anybody. The idea of appointing Richard Rorty encountered no opposition and much enthusiasm among my colleagues. It also appealed to the dean and the then head of the UVA Center for Advanced Study, Dexter Whitehead, who considered it a great coup to hire a chaired professor away from Princeton. The scene was set for a telephone call to Rorty.

When I reached him, I recalled our Stanford meeting and mentioned my admiration for his book. I heard that he wanted to leave Princeton. Our department desired to hire an expert in recent theoretical trends, but we felt, and I definitely did, that many of the parties to the recent discussions were philosophical amateurs or worse. (In his later years Rorty himself was to say as much publicly about Paul De Man and Hillis Miller.) Moreover, if these trends were to recede, as I thought they would, a real philosopher could still teach real philosophy. What did he think of that idea? Would he be willing to be a professor of humanities, and to teach, among other things, recent literary theory? To my huge
delight Rorty’s answer was: “Sure. Why not?” When he and Mary visited, it was late fall. The colors were at their height. Dexter Whitehead was generous. A week or so after Rorty accepted the university’s offer, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* came out with a cover consisting of a full-page photograph of Richard Rorty. This earned the English department prestige with university administrators. The Rortys bought a place in the country—on a hill—which for the next sixteen years became a chief off-campus center of intellectual life at the university where memorable parties for visiting distinguished scholars from around the world and students from Rorty’s seminars would take place, sometimes including scenes of Rorty happily singing old union songs.

In the summer of 1982 before he came to Virginia we were both at the Australian National University in Canberra, at the Center for the Humanities, where my wife Polly and I got to know Mary and Dick Rorty well, and liked them immensely, so I was all the more delighted at the prospect of their coming to UVA. The Rorty impishness began to reveal itself more fully. Once in Canberra when we were eating at a restaurant, I had a very bad cold and warned Mary and Dick not to get too near me. “Oh,” Dick intoned, “I see you believe in the germ theory of disease”—a typical instance of self-irony regarding his critique of the privileged pretensions of science. But he kept his distance from my nasal droplets.

Rorty’s instantaneous wit kept a person on the qui vive. Once, in late fall after he had been a while at Virginia, he and Mary invited Polly and me to go with them on a weekend at the sea, near Virginia Beach. The season was over. The place would be deserted by humans and full of birds. The Rortys had rented a house that had plenty of room, so why didn’t we come along? We did. The weather turned very bad, which precluded the bird-watching they had planned to introduce us to. In the rain, we were stuck in a rickety house, blown by high winds, with nothing to do but write or read books or play some odd kind of board game that involved quickness of hand and mind. No matter about the weather—the Rortys had brought plenty of books—a large number of books. I discovered that weekend that both of the Rortys devoured books at a remarkable rate. Rorty’s immense learning and range of reference, which give a special interest and authority to his writing, are products of voracious and rapid reading that started at a young age and continued to his death. His reading included all genres. I was amazed when he alluded to phrases in P. G. Wodehouse that I happened to know. I have no idea how many allusions just floated over my head. Many. At one point during the rainy weekend, Mary mentioned that she was rereading St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, because she was going to teach the pear episode the next week. “Yeah,” Dick drawled, “the Fourth-Century version of *The Fatal Glass of Beer.*”5
In his first year at UVA we had a medical scare when it was discovered that Dick had a detaching retina. The repair operation was a success, so the event is worth mentioning only because of the insight it offered into the sources of Dick’s literary talents. He loved literature. He was the best stylist among the philosophers of his generation, which added to his attractiveness to the literary side of the academy. He was also a very fine literary critic, as was made plain to all in his book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity.* He elevated the status of literature on principle, but on temperament too. While he was recuperating with bandages over his eyes, I brought him a cassette player and a box full of tapes that I had made for car trips from my LP collection. It included Mozart, Bach, lots of Beethoven—all of the piano sonatas played by Barenboim—and other music. When I visited him a couple of days later he warmly thanked me for including a tape that I had made of Anthony Quayle’s marvelous reading of *Paradise Lost*, Books 1 and 2. That was the only tape he thanked me for. He was not particularly interested, I gathered, in the musical tapes, but deeply delighted to listen to Milton’s poetry repeatedly.

His courses gained a big reputation. After a very few years, he became the intellectual center of humanities at the university, drawing students from all departments, and faculty members as well. He attracted graduate students from over the university and the world. I know of one brilliant student who had majored in philosophy at Harvard, and then came to law school at Virginia rather than Harvard, Berkeley, or Yale just to take Modern Studies courses with Rorty.

He and I cotaught several graduate courses, especially in the 80s when for two years running we taught a yearlong graduate course in literary theory. In prior years, I had always drawn a respectable number of students, but now the course became THE course that everyone from various departments wanted to take. The room was overflowing. Every class was an eagerly awaited event—because of Dick. It was in these courses that I figured out why students were so fond of him. He was interesting and learned on just about any subject, but he was also immensely *sympathique.* He had a much greater tolerance for confusion and pretentious nonsense than I. He encouraged not only students who were finding their way but also younger colleagues who gave guest lectures in the course. I would sometimes privately cringe at what they said, but Richard would smile benignly, and say something encouraging.

The only things that Dick was intolerant of were the pretensions of science and of religion. He rightly called me a “science worshipper,” a true charge, not an insult. One course that we cotaught in later years was the result of our conversations and arguments about science. Rorty’s dislike of science and the analytical philosophy connected with it was not just intellectual. It was also visceral. I suggested (irresponsibly since
I was an amateur) that we coteach a graduate course on the philosophy of science. I wanted to be able to carry out our ongoing conversations and arguments in a more thorough way, and I thought students would profit. In an act of friendship, Dick agreed. We enlisted a philosopher of science and a scientist to keep us honest. The arrangement was that I got to choose half of the texts, and he got to choose the other half.

The students who took the course were stimulated by it, and Dick seemed to be in his element—assigning with glee such writers as Lyotard and the flamboyant, egregious Bruno Latour, while I assigned earnest philosophers of science like Philip Kitcher. The students, who were mainly from literature departments, much preferred the egregious Frenchmen. The class discussions were lively, but far too epistemological for any real resolutions to occur. In retrospect, I realize that I was naïve to think there could be real engagement and resolution, since methodologists of science are indeed dissolvable in epistemological acid. The antifoundationalists are right. But then so is Otto Neurath right in the famous comment that Quine used as the epigraph to his *Word and Object*: “We are like sailors who have to rebuild their ship in the open sea, without ever being able to take it apart at the dock and remake it with the best materials.” On this Rorty and I were in agreement. He thought, as I did, that the best we can do is muddle through. But I thought that that insight by rights should have made him proscience. Instead he took it as just another way to bring science down another peg. On this we never agreed, and I still think he was deeply wrong about science. It goes its merry way, quite unconcerned whether it has proper epistemological foundations. One thing I noticed early on about *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*: not once did I find a mention of the word or concept of probability—the life-stuff of science. Granted, we can’t know that we are right. But at some point in particular instances there arises a high probability we are right, quite apart from all the inherent epistemological difficulties and the impossibility of being sure.

He never really got the feel of science, as I concluded on one occasion when Dick and Mary invited Polly and me to a family lunch at Peacock Hill, the Rorty establishment. I remember the occasion vividly because the prelunch conversation epitomized to me what was wrong with Rorty’s view of science. I was reporting my discovery of some really interesting work by the psychologist Eleanor Rosch. Dick was completely incurious about her discoveries, for, as he explained, we know in advance on that topic that the implication of A and the implication of not-A amount in the end to the same thing. I remember that he was sitting in an armchair when he said this—the very image of an armchair philosopher. The last time I saw Dick I was reminded of his incuriousness about the empirical details of science. We had lunch at the Stanford faculty club, and afterward
he had to go to the Stanford cancer clinic to get radiation for his fatal pancreatic cancer. He described the permanent marks they kept on his body so they could accurately aim the big machine that circled around him. I asked if the idea was to have harmless rays coming from a lot of directions at once get focused into a deadly ray at the right internal spot. Dick’s reply: “I haven’t the slightest idea how it works.”

Our disagreements about science were a mere blip. In the academic world he was my defender, at some cost to himself, during the late 80s and early 90s when I became persona non grata in the humanities because I published *Cultural Literacy* (1987). His doughty defense of me was not just personal loyalty on his part. While the immediate origins of my book were nonideological and scientific in nature (I stressed the scientific inadequacy of viewing reading ability and other academic skills as being formal, content-free skills), it did have as its ideological center the idea of giving every student a fair start, and of inducing social solidarity through a common core curriculum. That idea ran into a perfect storm of opposition—on the one side by the education world, which since the 1920s had abhorred the idea of definite content set out in advance, and by the cultural Left that wanted to change and diversify American literate culture, not perpetuate it. Both Rorty and I supported the idea of diversifying American culture, but not, as it were, on the backs of the poor. Both of us saw the claim that it is elitist to teach everybody Anglo-American-European culture as being itself antidemocratic and elitist.

Rorty, like me, belonged to the Old Left, not the new. The Old Left was universalistic in the tradition of the Enlightenment, and patriotic. It wanted to give everybody an equal chance, quite irrespective of race, ethnicity, and temperament. The New Left, in its effort to be more inclusive (but you can’t be more inclusive than including everybody), began to stress multiculturalism, by which it meant defining people by their race, ethnicity, and temperament. America, they said, was not after all a melting pot, it was a salad bowl. Rorty’s point, especially in his private/public distinction, was that America is both. In the sphere of private and group arrangements America is ethnic, racial, religious, whatever you like—a salad bowl. But there is also a public sphere, a commons where all can meet and communicate and be treated as equals. That is the melting pot, and it is the duty of the schools to enable everyone to participate in that public sphere. Rorty agreed with the New Left that this public sphere needed to be less lily-white and male. Sure. But the New Left was wrong and impractical when it started saying that all this had something to do with a person’s identity or essence—a repugnant idea in itself, and an inconsistent one with people who claimed to be “anti-essentialists.” The impracticality of all this, he said, made the New Left “spectatorial” rather than “reformist.” Dick liked to quote Irving
Howe: “The old left wanted to take over the government. The new left only wants to take over the English Department.”

Coming to the University of Virginia turned out to be a great thing for both the university and for Dick. The bulk of his oeuvre was done here. The potential problem of his being confined to a small town—and out in the countryside at that—was much diminished by his being regularly invited to give talks and receive honorary degrees all over the world. His greatest contribution was to the university as a whole, where he consistently stimulated and agitated the faculty as well as the students. He served on whatever committee he was asked to serve on, and always did a thorough and thoughtful job. He was our gadfly. About his strong positions some thought: “He only does it to annoy, because he knows it teases.” On occasion, that was true, as when, in a pious sounding public session on the aims of the university, before a crowd of very conservative alumni, he said that the aim of his teaching was “to turn his students into big tax-and-spend liberals.” But his provocations were another aspect of his being a responsible citizen of the university by deliberately livening up the conversation.

I now want to discuss my theme: Rorty and the priority of democracy to philosophy. After he arrived at Virginia, Rorty vigorously continued his technical work in epistemology, but his writing began to address a wider audience, and increasingly concerned ethics and politics. I grew ever more interested in his ethical and political writings, which I found more absorbing than his epistemology—as did he. He had taken a radical view in epistemology. That radical position, once stated, offered endless opportunities for writing ever more on the subject—for continually responding to technical attacks, with much fun in the doing, and with a guarantee of ongoing labor. If somebody criticizes such a position on a technical point then one can concede something and modify one’s position slightly, or one can attack with counterarguments, or one can expatiate a new direction and on and on. One can carry on what Rorty called a “conversation”—producing new books, new articles, new technical arguments, new rhetoric, new redescriptions. But being an outsider to technical epistemology, I saw this as a not-necessarily-progressive activity—entertaining though it was. On the other hand, Rorty’s later positions in ethics and politics were moderate, sober, deeply informed, and wise, and to me more deeply compelling than his radical epistemology. Rorty might at times have suggested that there was a temperamental connection between his epistemology and his ethics and politics, but, in the main, the letter and spirit of his epistemological position was that there is not a necessary connection, and in this I think he was right. This lack of connection between epistemology and ethics is a precious insight that will be my concluding subject.
As with positions in metaphysics or theology, so with positions in epistemology: no knockdown, final, definitive argument has yet occurred. There continue to be ongoing disagreements, and ongoing tribes and sects. Philosophers of recent times, like those of the past, have announced epistemological progress, and have claimed to have sublated all former positions. Rorty was cagey on this point. He implied that intellectual progress had occurred, but only in the sense that people began to find it less interesting and fruitful to talk about phlogiston or the form of the good, and more interesting and fruitful to start talking about oxygen and the reduction of cruelty. But he didn’t state that any progress towards correspondence with the truth had occurred, since that would contradict the anticorrespondence principle of Rortyism. Moreover, he and every other philosopher had to concede that warring philosophical sects did continue to exist.

This continued existence of warring sects is analogous to the situation that occupied the minds of the deist founders of the United States in the eighteenth century, and which determined underlying features of American democracy, and, later on, of most modern liberal democracies, with their toleration of different religious sects and multiple ethnicities. The rise of deism and a new spirit of religious toleration in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are attributable in part to a revulsion against the Thirty Years War, which in the name of theological truth set Catholics and Protestants murderously against each other. The wars of religion were the seventeenth-century, European version of the ongoing Middle Eastern conflict of Sunnis and Shias still killing one another on points of theology.

The subordination of theology to practical ethics occurred in the post-religious-war atmosphere that had brought theology into disrepute. The intellectual revulsion that set in helped produce Locke’s *Letters on Toleration* and many of the ideas of the deists, including those of Franklin, Jefferson, and Washington. Leslie Stephen has emphasized that one of the guiding ideas of the deists, perhaps its chief common theme, was that practical ethics trumps theology. This skepticism toward sectarian theology became widespread in the eighteenth century, even among those who did not pronounce themselves deists. The Catholic Alexander Pope wrote:

> For modes of faith let graceless zealots fight.
> Theirs can’t be wrong whose life is in the right.

In *Gulliver’s Travels*, Pope’s Protestant friend Jonathan Swift satirized the religious wars, as Big Enders and Little Enders cruelly persecuting each other over the theological question of whether an egg should be cracked
on the big or little end. In the 1770s, Goethe began *Faust* with the hero saying that he had, alas, studied theology (“*und leider auch Theologie*”) and found we can’t know anything. For the intellectuals of the eighteenth century, the practical question of how we shall all live with one another kindly and peaceably was more important than sectarian belief. Theory must not get in the way of kindness, good humor, and, above all, getting along peaceably with one’s neighbors. Rorty has been called a “cognitive relativist.” The deists could be called theological relativists. The deists, including Franklin, Jefferson, and Washington, were early pragmatists. Rorty stands in their line.

Rorty’s article, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” was delivered at the University of Virginia in 1984 at a conference held to celebrate the two-hundredth anniversary of the *Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom* by Thomas Jefferson, whose authorship of the statute was one of the three accomplishments he caused to be recorded on his tombstone, the others being the *Declaration of Independence* and the founding of the University of Virginia. Rorty used the occasion to defend John Rawls, whose political theory he saw as doing a better job of bringing up to date the tradition of Jefferson and other Founders than the ideas of his critics like Michael Sandel. The issue between Rawls and Sandel was whether a flourishing democracy depends on substantive moral or metaphysical principles beyond the formal ones of justice, freedom, and social peace. Sandel says “yes.” Rawls says “no,” and Rorty agreed with Rawls.

I remain enormously grateful to Dick for this essay. A light went on for me when I read such passages as: “The philosopher of liberal democracy may wish to develop a theory of the human self that comports with the institutions he or she admires. But such a philosopher is not thereby justifying these institutions by reference to more fundamental premises, but the reverse: He or she is putting politics first and tailoring a philosophy to suit” (178). He quoted Rawls approvingly:

The essential point is this: as a practical political matter no general moral conception can provide the basis for a public conception of justice in a modern democratic society. The social and historical conditions of such a society have their origins in the Wars of Religion following the Reformation and the development of the principle of toleration, and in the growth of constitutional government, and the institution of large market economies. These conditions profoundly affect the requirements of a workable conception of political justice: such a conception must allow for a diversity of doctrines and the plurality of conflicting, and indeed incommensurable conceptions of the good affirmed by the members of existing democratic societies.

The word “priority” in “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy” may be too weak. The great illumination offered by the Rorty-Rawls account
is to help us understand that the price of freedom with comity is not simply the idea that practical ethics, politics, and laws shall have priority over theology, epistemology, and every other scheme of thought, but that democratic principles shall have dominance over them. Democracy isn’t just like being a priority passenger to be first in line to get on an airplane ahead of other passengers; it is coercive. It trumps any and all other philosophies not only intellectually but also practically. It enforces a system of laws and customs that doesn’t allow you to follow your beliefs or customs when they get in other people’s way—coercion with a smiley face. And if democracy trumps philosophy and religion, it is reasonable to conclude that the secular principle of democracy itself is the top philosophy and the top religion. The separation of church and state really means, in a real pinch, the domination by the secular state over the church and everything else. In his early writings, Rorty, following Dewey, liked to reject all dualisms, but not later on. Because democracy trumps and dominates philosophy, the world gets divided into the private domain where you can think and do what you want and associate with whom you please, and the public, rule-dominated domain—the commons. The private sphere is what we and our subgroups get to participate in so long as we follow the laws and don’t impose ourselves on others.

Rorty took the view that he and Rawls had gone a significant step beyond the Founders in that we moderns, unlike Jefferson and his contemporaries, declined to claim that democracy is founded upon a universal human nature with universal rights and a dependable, universal conscience. We can get along without these, Rorty said. As a straight historical description of Jefferson’s views, this description of his theory of human nature is, of course, right. But before proceeding with Rorty’s exposition I would like to suggest that his contrast with the Founders on this point is probably less significant than he suggests. He is more like Jefferson than he thinks.

Rorty began his talk: “Thomas Jefferson set the tone for American liberal politics when he said: ‘It does me no injury for my neighbor to say that there are twenty gods or no god.’ His example helped make respectable the idea that politics can be separated from beliefs about matters of utmost importance—that shared beliefs on such matters are not essential to a democratic society” (175). Rorty went on to draw a contrast between eighteenth-century skepticism about theology, and its credulity about common human nature. He quickly left Jefferson and his human nature dogmatism, to bring the issue up-to-date. The bulk of his essay is an adjudication of the argument between Rawls and Sandel over whether it is necessary for a community to hold in common definite, substantive shared beliefs about human nature and the good, in order for liberal democracies to work.
Rorty and others in the discussion—Dewey, Dworkin, Rawls, Sandel—see themselves as departing from the outmoded ideas of Jefferson and his contemporaries. Rorty thinks we have made an advance upon our two-hundred-year-old predecessors, because we no longer believe as they did in what he describes as “a universal human faculty—conscience—possession of which constitutes the specifically human essence of each human being. This is the faculty that gives the individual human dignity and rights” (175). Since we no longer believe in this universal moral faculty, we need to find a new basis for liberal democratic societies. Rorty says: “We are free to see the self as centerless, as a historical contingency all the way through” (188), and he proceeds to show how Rawls, who is the hero of the essay, differs from Jefferson in this, and marks a real advance in our thought.

I agree with Rorty in giving the palm to Rawls over Sandel, but I would have liked to see more historical imagination in the account. If Jefferson could assert “it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no God,” he could equally assert, should that have been the truth of his day, that “it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty human natures or no human nature.” It is a much more daring step to question religious belief than anthropological belief. The deists deliberately followed the principle of the priority of democracy to all kinds of theory. The thinking of Jefferson and his contemporaries was not in principle different from ours on such matters. What would have barred any deist, had he been offered a Rortian, historicist account of human nature, from saying, “OK, but let’s still go ahead and make a democratic constitution that lets people with different beliefs live freely and peacefully with each other”? Rawls and Rorty don’t think we need substantive theoretical commitments to form a cohesive liberal democracy, nor, if we look closely, did Jefferson or Washington. They recommended adherence to various beliefs in order to foster democracy, not the other way round. A pragmatic indifference to disputed theory is the principle upon which the United States was founded—convenient though it happened to be to invoke inalienable rights based on universal human nature.

Moreover, the Rortian conception of human nature is no less historically contingent than Jefferson’s view, and, as Rorty concedes, neither view is necessary to democratic arrangements. Rorty prefers the historicist view that human nature makes itself because, pragmatically, that leaves room for utopian politics. He thinks that a too-constrained prior conception of human nature doesn’t allow people to set their imaginations free, and dream of new forms of life. We don’t know what the human constraints really are until we try, and try again. We are all self-made men and women. But Rorty stressing the utility of believing in the historicity of human nature is not in principle different from Washington and Jef-
ferson stressing the utility of believing in a deity to encourage citizens to tell the truth in the law courts and act with honor and decency to their fellow citizens.

The pragmatist then and now says two kinds of things on such topics as God or human nature: first, that it’s not essential to a peaceful and just democracy to hold any belief other than this formal one: that the needs of a free, peaceful, and just democracy will, by coercive law, trump every other need and belief that endangers a free, peaceful, and just democracy. As Rorty puts it: “A liberal democracy . . . will use force against the individual conscience just insofar as conscience leads individuals to act so as to threaten democratic institutions” (183). The second thing a pragmatist may want to say is that certain historically contingent beliefs are better at producing a free, peaceful, and just democracy than some others, acknowledging, though, that it’s not strictly necessary to hold these optimal beliefs. Rorty says that you don’t have to agree with him that human nature is historically contingent all the way down, but as a practical matter it would be better for us all if you did.

Rorty is “entitled to his opinion on that” as we say, in the good American tradition started by the deists. But an equally pragmatic view of the human nature question holds that we will be more likely to get a free, peaceful, and just democracy if we promote a more accurate, mixed historicist/naturalist view of human nature. We science-minded pragmatists claim that such a view will be more useful because more accurate, and therefore better able to accommodate and deal with the realities of human thought and action. This was the nub of Rorty’s recent debate with Steven Pinker over his books *How the Mind Works* and *The Blank Slate*, which took issue with a purely historicist conception of human nature not only because it led, in Pinker’s view, to historical horrors under Marxism, but also because it was a scientifically wrong theory.15

Rorty’s argument with Pinker recapitulated an ongoing argument between Dick and me over the relationship of epistemological theory to pragmatic efficacy. When we discussed scientific realism—the idea that science sometimes tells us how things really are—I took the view that a good pragmatist needed to be a realist, because that position was more conducive to intellectual advance. Just as Washington held that it was more useful to human life to be a deist than to be an atheist, I argued that people who think that they are working to get closer to some truth (whether or not they can fully justify that idea) will get more productive work done than those who hold a skeptical, antirealist view. I got support in this from an unlikely source: the arch scientific skeptic, Paul Feyerabend, in a brilliant 1964 essay called “Realism and Instrumentalism.”16

Taking examples from the history of science, Feyerabend showed that in all examined cases a realist point of view—the idea that one’s labors are
getting closer to the truth—has been a more productive idea in science than a pragmatic, just-go-with-what-works point of view.

Rorty and Rawls both concede to Sandel the need for some substantive conceptions of the good in order to form democratic institutions. Why, after all, should freedom, justice, and peace be all-trumping principles? Why should they override, say, chastity and obedience? The answer is found in the idea of democratic tradition—a question-begging, circular answer, because the tradition got started only when the founding group decided that freedom, justice, and peace were in themselves the most important institutional principles, and not just by virtue of a prior tradition. Avoidance of such circularity leads Rorty to the conclusion that the privileged values of social arrangements are “ethnocentric.” They can have no absolute claim to privilege and priority. I believe this analysis is right. It shows how consistently and apparently unconcernedly Rorty held this view. Though he was intensely devoted to democratic values, he had a great capacity for simultaneous contrary states: commitment and distance, engagement and irony. He was highly tolerant of strange cultures and lifestyles, but at the same time took ethnocentrism all the way. He argued, for instance in his discussions with Clifford Geertz, that, as a good ethnocentrist, he was willing to tell somebody in another culture that he or she is absolutely wrong to engage in practices that are truly abhorrent to our ethos, just as, in a democracy, we ethnocentric democrats are absolutely willing coercively to contain and repress “fanaticism” that impinges on the freedom of others.

Despite this avowed ethnocentrism, Rorty was willing at times to grant that there might be something special about the democratic ethos that distinguishes it from others, making it a kind of meta-ethos—one that says it will tolerate all other ethe so long as they don’t bother us, don’t get in our space. This structural argument for democracy’s special status is reinforced by the historical argument that the modern democratic experiment in tolerant human organization has been gaining ground ever since it was invented. If democracy can accommodate different religions then it can accommodate almost anything. In his last phase, Rorty was willing, especially in interviews when he let his hair down, to say that the democratic system really is something special in human affairs, a super-ethos, not just an ethnocentric prejudice that we Americans happen to hold: “I don’t think there will be any big intellectual revolutions from now on. The educated political classes of all countries are going to be thinking in the terms of the European Enlightenment, and civilization is going to be Eurocentric. The politicians in places like China, Burma, and Singapore, will try to prevent this from happening, and they might succeed, but if communication remains really free, then the European Enlightenment might win.”

The problem Rorty set himself in ethics
and politics was: how in the contemporary world can we preserve universalistic, Enlightenment values such as freedom, equality, procedural justice, toleration, and benevolence when we have removed the traditional foundations of such values? In the absence of foundations we can’t offer a metaphysical defense; we can only say that we happen to admire those values that we were brought up ethnocentrically to admire. This is the root of the Rortian irony, both as a subject of his writing and as a deep personal trait. Detached from foundationalism, he was nonetheless passionately committed to the universalistic Enlightenment politics of the Old Left—the Left of John Dewey, Sidney Hook, Walter Reuther, Irving Howe, and A. Phillip Randolph, the Left that wanted to pass legislation for minimum wages, maximum work hours, nondiscrimination, good education for all, protection of the weak, and redistribution of wealth. This could be called “socialism,” but the word Rorty tended to use was “solidarity.”

When the union’s inspiration through the workers’ blood shall run,
There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun;
Yet what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one,
But the union makes us strong.

Solidarity forever,
Solidarity forever,
Solidarity forever,
For the union makes us strong.

He saw the United States as entering an era of individualism, in which the we-Americans-are-all-in-this-together feeling was receding, much to the harm of the nation and its least fortunate citizens. He connected solidarity with patriotism, implicitly agreeing with Benedict Anderson’s contrast between patriotism and nationalism. Patriotism is the attractive side of group loyalty and solidarity; nationalism is the unattractive side that sets one’s own group against and above other groups. Rorty was a patriot by personal sentiment and on principle—the principle of solidarity. He scolded the New Left, and especially Christopher Lasch, for instigating an era of anti-Americanism in the universities. He rightly saw that the only practical result of the academy’s unpatriotic indifference to solidarity was to become scorned by the American public and thus be rendered useless in the task of significantly improving American life.

He was therefore distressed to find himself in the midst of a postmodern, theoretical, jargon-filled, “spectatorial” Left that to some small degree he helped create. By the 1980s and 90s, this left was in charge of humanities departments in the universities. Its focus was on identity politics—such as feminism, black studies, postcolonial studies, and mul-
ticulturalism. For Dick to confront and challenge the pious doctrines of his adoring students was an act of high moral courage. Some older professors dug in their heels, and could not really engage the new generation. The older generation professors I knew either stayed quiet, or ingratiated themselves with their students by becoming with-it adherents of the new currents of thought. Dick was one of the few who both commanded the respect of the Althusser-intoxicated theorists, and at the same time worked to make them as uncomfortable as possible.20

In Rorty’s later years, his acting out of this completely selfless, uncomfortable role of being an irritant to the theoretical/political pretensions of the young was one of the most admirable academic performances I have witnessed. The *locus classicus* for his pedagogical gadflyism is the little pamphlet reissued by the Prickly Paradigm Press called *Against Bosses, Against Oligarchies: A Conversation with Richard Rorty*, first published in 1998. In it, his earnest, admiring New Left interlocutors, Derek Nystrom and Kent Puckett, ask him about the grounds for his critique of writers and themes they hold dear—especially in the area of identity politics, a movement that Dick considered fundamentally undemocratic. The lively ensuing conversation reminds me of nothing so much as Wordsworth’s “We Are Seven,” in which the poet keeps repeating in different ways his questions to the little girl (here played by Rorty) because her answers are so disorienting. This little booklet is a prize piece of Rortiana.

One way in which he challenged the pretensions and shibboleths of the New Left was his praise of the word and concept *bourgeois*.21 His admiring use of the most disparaging term in the Marxist vocabulary had of course a characteristic element of: “He only does it to annoy because he knows it teases”; but the purpose was deadly serious. He saw the practical aim of solidarity politics as creating a quasi-middle-class proletariat—what he called a “semi-bourgeois” working class. What else, after all, was the older, practical Left working for if not to reduce income inequality, increase leisure, and provide first-class education for all? Rorty’s defense of the word *bourgeois* and its accompanying virtues reminded me of an experience I had at a conference in Amsterdam conducted entirely in Dutch. A simultaneous translator was whispering in my ear, but not fast enough for me to get the nuances of the discussion. What became clear, though, was that the term of highest praise for these Dutch intellectuals was *burgerlijk*. It meant something like: being a good citizen (*burger*), by exemplifying honorable, honest civic-mindedness. It had none of the scornful Marxist connotations. By rehabilitating *bourgeois*, Rorty was simultaneously scrning the vocabulary and pretension of the New Left, and at the same time courageously trying to rehabilitate the lost ideals of the “reformist” Left, which is the only kind of Left that can get anything practical done to create a “semi-bourgeois proletariat,” a classless society.
That aim explains his coming to my defense when I proposed a national core curriculum in the early grades. Currently the public schools are perpetuating, even deepening divisions of class and wealth, because they are failing to offer the young enough coherent information for them to be able to read with comprehension or make sense of what transpires in the classroom. Dick was even willing to criticize his hero Dewey for having proposed that the schools should not “pile up information.” Piling up information was, he said, exactly what the elementary schools need to do to create a semibourgeois proletariat and a feeling of solidarity among all groups of Americans. He said that we need to have a core curriculum in the early grades so students can become patriotic citizens and be able to push out on their own when and if they go to college. He once remarked to me that students need a definite core curriculum in grade school and in graduate school, and need to be left alone in between—a brilliantly succinct formulation.

His last writings on ethics and politics are his most profound. The clouds that gathered round the setting sun did take a sober coloring from an eye that had kept watch over the Bush years, and the “priggish” excesses of the spectatorial Left. He continually wrestled with the demands of American solidarity when they came into conflict with the greater solidarity of humankind. It was a problem that he claimed not to be able to resolve. Yet the flavor of what he wrote, and the questions he raised, keep one rooting for American solidarity and the more protectionist view. For, he reasoned, if we immiserate the American worker, if the rich-poor gap gets ever bigger in our country, then we will lose democracy, too, and what doth it profit a nation if it help the poor of the world but lose its own soul?

These tragic thoughts about facing bad choices all the way down gave a special richness and interest to the essays of the last decade of his life. His essay on “Justice as a Larger Loyalty” (1997) has a deep autumnal tone and is wonderfully evocative and thought provoking. The same is true of the remarkable talk presented in 2003 called “Honest Mistakes,” in which he rejects the self-righteous view that we fall into all too easily when we make moral judgments about the past. He describes both Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers as truly honorable men who made honest mistakes. Again, just as in Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, he turned to the novel rather than abstract philosophizing to make his point. And he concludes:

Plato was wrong. The best we can do when making moral or political choices . . . is to work out as coherent a story as we can. But doing that will not insure that the judgment of history is on our side. Whether sticking to our stories will make us objects of admiration or of disgust to future generations is entirely
beyond our control. . . . [T]here was no star on which either group fixed their gaze, and from which the other turned away.

The absence of such a star entails that honorable men and women are quite able to do disgusting things. It also entails that the judgment of history is quite likely to be wrong, since our remote descendents will also lack such a star.24

When discussing philosophy with Dick, I was always reluctant to give full vent to my disagreement with him over the character and promise of science. He sensed this hesitancy and would say in a kind of leitmotif (he said it at least a dozen times): “Don’t worry about it, Don. We only disagree about philosophy. We agree about everything important.”

NOTES

2 This talk was reprinted as “Philosophy in America Today” in *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972–1980* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1982), 211–30.
3 For those too young to make any sense of this phrase: The “sixty-four-dollar question” was the big, hard, final question on an old radio quiz show, which had, in those innocent days, the big payoff of sixty-four dollars.
5 I have a hunch that this memorable piece of Rorty wit needs a footnote. In the pear episode, young St. Augustine with other boys steals pears from a farmer’s tree. That’s more or less reasonable, St. Augustine says; they were hungry and wanted pears. But they did more. They loaded up on pears and wantonly threw them away to rot. The only explanation for that is original sin. Q.E.D. As to *The Fatal Glass of Beer*, it’s a W. C. Fields movie whose plot can be guessed. That his erudite kind of wit may need to be explained is characteristic. The Rorty wit was instantaneous, but it was bookish and allusive rather than personal or earthy.
9 See his superb article “Deism” in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th ed.
11 Washington (possibly using Hamilton’s words) said: “Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion.” “Washington’s Farewell Address,” in *Documents of American History*, ed. H. S. Commager, 5th ed. (New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1949), 169–74. Note that the reason to hold on to some sort of religious belief has a pragmatic justification that is ethical and not theological.

14 I have mentioned in note 11 Washington’s emphasis on the utility of belief in a deity. Jefferson was not always willing to concede even the pragmatic utility of religious belief as the basis for morality: “If we did a good act merely from love of God and a belief that it is pleasing to Him, whence arises the morality of the Atheist? . . . Their virtue, then, must have had some other foundation than the love of God.” Jefferson to Thomas Law, 13 June 1814, in The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson, ed. A. Koch and W. Peden (New York: Random House, 1944), 636–39.


20 As, for example, in this priceless snippet: “I haven’t the foggiest idea what Althusser meant by ‘science.’ His book seemed to me bullshit from beginning to end.” Rorty, Derek Nystrom, and Kent Puckett, Against Bosses, Against Oligarchies: A Conversation with Richard Rorty (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2002), 18.

21 See, for example, “Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism,” in Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth.


23 Both of these essays are to be found in Rorty, Philosophical Papers, vol. 4, Philosophy as Cultural Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007).