Richard Rorty's philosophy is of such scope and grandeur, so rich in thought-provoking asides and quickly sketched connections, that it is easier than usual to appropriate his ideas without being aware that one is doing so. Both at a conscious and at a less than fully conscious level, his work has been vastly influential, and has decisively shaped an impressive range of contemporary philosophy debates. One of the areas in which this is most evident is political philosophy. Although his writings on this topic form only a small part of his œuvre, they resonate in the discussions of less Olympian political philosophers and indicate paths for lesser mortals to explore. Among the many proposals that Rorty has advanced or refashioned is the idea that we should think of social and political advance as a progress of sentiments. The development of sensitivity to, and aversion from, oppression and cruelty is what makes it possible for people to live together more humanely, and constitutes moral as well as political improvement. In his recent writings Rorty has developed this theme, and in doing so has pointed briefly towards some of its many ramifications. In this essay I shall follow his lead and investigate a question he has uncovered about the emotional capacities presupposed by his vision of political progress.

At the core of Rorty's political philosophy lies an unequivocal and unapologetic defense of the sort of liberalism articulated by John Stuart Mill. The goal of politics, according to this view, is to build societies in which individuals are protected as far as possible from cruelty, and are as free as possible to determine the shape and meaning of their lives. To some
extent, Rorty believes, this program has already been realized; in Western democracies, and above all in the United States of America, autonomy and an aversion to cruelty are more firmly entrenched than elsewhere, although there are still many ways in which such societies fall short of the liberal ideal. The problem that liberal theorists need to consider is therefore not how it is possible for the norms they endorse to be realized at all, but rather how these norms can come to be more fully and deeply entrenched, so that cruel and oppressive practices can be progressively eradicated.

The means by which such a transformation will be brought about are, in Rorty’s view, imagination, redescription, and narrative. A prerequisite of political change is imagination—the capacity of more and less powerful individuals to imagine the sufferings and humiliations of others, and to conceive of better ways of life in which these deprivations are overcome. Integral to this process is redescription—the capacity to reconfigure and re-evaluate existing practices by challenging the terms in which they are normally discussed and by inventing new normative vocabularies. And among the fruits of imagination are narratives—the histories, myths, and stories that form our understanding of ourselves and each other, both as individuals and as members of societies. A new narrative can give a voice to pains and oppressions that have so far been unarticulated, or make compelling the claims of recognized victims. As a community comes to accept such narratives, it becomes sensitized to the suffering they describe and better placed to struggle against it.

When Rorty first set out this view in Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, he portrayed political progress as the outcome of a dialectical movement between public and private spheres. Liberal societies guarantee citizens the private freedom to imagine new narratives, and some of the narratives created in private come to be reflected in the public sphere, where they in turn have an effect on private imaginings. There is, however, no guarantee that this pattern of change will in itself be progressive. It may lead to new forms of cruelty or coercion as much as to new forms of compassion or freedom. This danger is acknowledged in Rorty’s account of change as a contingent and unpredictable process in which new descriptions may or may not catch on. The only barrier to moral regress, he suggests, is a particular feature of imagination which we should take for granted, namely our ability to sympathize with other people’s sufferings. The potential of contemporary liberal societies to advance rests ultimately on their capacity to cherish this trait, and to provide conditions in which it can grow.

One of the distinctive features of Rorty’s view is that, rather than talking in traditional Millian terms about liberty and the avoidance of harm, he focuses on liberalism’s commitment to the avoidance of cruelty, a much stronger notion than harm and one freighted with emotional pain. This is a revealing and significant shift, because what marks cruelty out as especially destructive are the affects surrounding it—the aggression and contempt that constitute it together with the anger, frustration, or despair of those it humiliates. In drawing attention to the forms of emotional protection that a society can and should provide, Rorty begins to develop a distinctive approach, one that has become increasingly prominent in his work as (borrowing from both Hume and Annette Baier) he has come to advocate his conception of political advance as a progress of sentiments. What liberalism strives for is a heightened awareness of cruelty and oppression, and a corresponding desire to alleviate the suffering they cause.

Discussing the advantages of his approach, Rorty sometimes suggests that it can help us to get over the delusion that we can ground our philosophical judgments about politics on transcendental reasons. The conviction that such reasons are stronger and more compelling than feelings makes us loath to displace them, and explains our resistance to the insight that our fate depends on the condescension of the powerful. We are unwilling to allow that, if people with the power to harm us feel no compassion or are insensitive to our suffering, we cannot appeal to reason to persuade them to treat us well. However, Rorty concludes, once we turn our attention away from reason and concentrate on feelings instead, this prejudice may begin to loosen its grip and we may be able to abandon a fruitless quest that has dogged philosophy throughout its career.

This argument seems to me to rest on an excessively sharp opposition between reason and passion, and to obscure a less apocalyptic argument for Rorty’s stance on which he mainly depends. The narratives that sustain and challenge our understanding of our way of life simultaneously engage our emotions and offer us reasons. For example, when writers on sexual harassment first succeeded in showing that the sexual advances of male bosses to their female employees were often demeaning rather than admiring, their descriptions provided reasons for criticizing the men in question, and made feelings such as disgust, contempt, or shame begin to seem appropriate. Our judgments about oppression and freedom, cruelty and kindness are largely shot through with feeling, just as our passions are mainly judgmental in the sense of being directed to descriptions of objects, events, or situations. Feeling and assessment are fused in what we might call passionate judgments or, to use Rorty’s term, sentiments.

Rorty’s approach to liberalism therefore works with a promising (though of course contestable) description of reasons as passionate judgments, and a correspondingly modified description of emotion. The anxiety that he sees as having led philosophers to cling to a suspect conception of transcendental reason is not entirely allayed, since passionate reasons are not always orderly. They can be altered by associations over which
we have little control; they can be rigidly fixed by descriptions that have a strong hold on our imaginations; or they can be reduced to confusion by the need to satisfy conflicting demands. Sometimes there seem to be tensions between their emotional and cognitive aspects and we come up against passions in search of narratives or narratives in search of passions, narratives that overpower passions or passions that bring narrative to a halt. Nevertheless, one of the strengths of Rorty’s approach is that it allows us to recognize these possibilities, and to examine the ways in which political life and change depend on them. It draws attention to the idea that our ability to live by liberal values rests on the existence of feelings about our common way of life, some of them widely shared but others more unusual. To understand liberalism and the possibilities it offers, we need to pay attention to the passionate judgments that it requires.

Rorty’s grand statement of this theme offers an invitation to explore the relations between passions and politics, which has been enthusiastically accepted. Much recent debate focuses on the affective dimension of political life and examines the processes through which people’s emotional capacities can be changed for the better. This optimistic strand of research rests, however, on a conception not only of the passionate judgments that are already at work in the inhabitants of liberal societies, but also of the emotional capacities that enable them to reconcile and alter their sentiments. Liberalism expects individuals to possess a considerable degree of emotional restraint. It expects them to live their own way of life, if necessary alongside people whose ways of life are unattractive and even abhorrent to them, and to reconcile themselves to a set of shared norms and standards which they may also view with hostility. To put the last point slightly differently, it requires them to negotiate the divide between the values and practices they themselves hold dear, and the values and practices that go into sustaining a shared ethic. The assumption that people are capable of holding these requirements together forms part of the background against which liberal debate takes place, so that the question of how they manage it, and what emotional capacities it requires, is liable to seem too straightforward to raise. Nevertheless, I shall try to show that it repays investigation. The ability to refrain from treating other people cruelly when their characteristics or practices challenge your own is by no means a foregone conclusion, yet its central place in the theory of liberalism gives exponents of this view an interest in trying to understand the conditions on which it depends. Since they are not alone in this—the same interest extends, for example, to some of the multiculturalists whom Rorty opposes—the problem could also be discussed within a broader, pluralist framework. Here, however, I shall concentrate on the liberal approach that Rorty upholds.

Rorty’s own treatment of this issue is characteristically laid back. The history of liberalism has accustomed its citizens to the cultivation of autonomy and the alleviation of cruelty, he suggests, and certain interpretations of these norms are now so effectively internalized that for many people they are habitual and effortless. The pressing worry is not that citizens may backslide and threaten levels of peace and security that have already been achieved; it is rather that they may rest on their laurels and fail to advance the process of diminishing suffering. Taking up Rorty’s line of thought, we can try to imagine what such habitual liberals are like. Confronted with the need to tolerate a practice that they find tasteless or abhorrent, such people may distance themselves from it by commenting that it takes all sorts to make a world, by reminding themselves to live and let live, or by muttering that there is nothing to be done about it anyway. If this is not enough, they may express their disgust in ways that fall short of cruelty and do not violate anyone’s liberty, for example by complaining to their friends or writing to the newspapers. Without particularly thinking about it, they bring to bear the capacity to act in a way that subordinates their own conception of the good to the shared norms around which liberal society is organized.

Where habit is insufficient, Rorty claims, citizens can adopt a different strategy, and can appeal to philosophical argument to negotiate the conflicts that liberalism throws up. The strategy is that of the liberal ironists, committed to liberty and the avoidance of cruelty and committed to their own particular values, but aware that there is no indefeasible justification for either. This philosophical position shapes an ironist’s understanding of clashes between public and private values, and no doubt molds his feelings about them as well, but his overall stance coincides conveniently with that of the habitual liberal. Faced with a way of life he finds abhorrent, threatening, or an insult to the truth, the liberal ironist reminds himself that his own position is not couched in a final vocabulary and is open to revision in the light of redescriptions. When seized by a desire to undermine the freedom of the practitioners of the abhorrent way of life, or to treat them cruelly, he diffuses his feelings by reflecting that progress depends on redescriptions, and that redescriptions can only make a difference where people are free to create and express them. If his own views are not to become ossified they must be confronted by competing descriptions of the world, and as long as these are not embedded in practices that are cruel or oppressive there is no reason to revolt against them. Liberalism, as he sees it, is a precondition of a fruitful ironism, and ironism brings with it a commitment to liberalism.

Each of these ways of reconciling public and private values—argument and habit—clearly has a purchase on everyday liberal life, but it is striking that sentiments make no appearance in Rorty’s account. The emo-
tional capacities integral to the liberal ironist’s use of argument, or to the habitual liberal’s fully internalized dispositions, are assumed (as are the connections among argument, habit, and feeling). To remedy this lacuna, we need to dwell on Rorty’s justified presupposition that many people who live in liberal societies manage to reconcile public and private values. This will enable us to see in more detail what exactly they are required to achieve. If we can elucidate this in any terms at all, we shall be better placed to articulate the emotional capacities it involves.

Rorty’s initial portrayal of liberal societies as divided into public and private realms suggests that citizens are required to reconcile a unified public commitment to freedom and the avoidance of cruelty with the existence of a plethora of private values. For example, an Episcopalian who believes that homosexuality should be outlawed because it is sinful finds herself at odds with the state’s determination to respect the freedom of gays and forbid their persecution. She is required to obey a law of which she profoundly disapproves, on the grounds that it neglects a value that she regards as fundamental, and she is required to respect homosexuals whom she passionately judges to be wicked. The ability to negotiate these kinds of clashes is one that liberal citizens are expected to possess, but their situation, and thus the demands they face, is not as straightforward as this account implies. First of all, what Rorty describes as the public vocabulary of liberalism extends in varying degrees into spheres of social life that have traditionally been regarded as private, so that the requirement to respect other people’s freedom and avoid treating them cruelly has both more public and more private interpretations. The Episcopalian probably understands her homophobia as part of a religious practice that upholds freedom and abhors cruelty, and takes herself to express these values in the various aspects of her life. If her passionate determination to root out sin prompts her to depart from them—if, for example, she is vindictive towards homosexual priests or vicious to her gay relatives—these expressions of her own values will be colored by her recognition that they are widely interpreted as cruel and oppressive, and that they evoke disapproval and disgust. Even if she moves in circles where her feelings are widely shared and are thus given a certain legitimacy, the force of this more hegemonic interpretation will still be felt. Well-established understandings of the liberal requirement to respect liberty and avoid cruelty press upon deviant groups as well as individuals, so that frankly nonliberal conceptions of the good tend to be forced underground.

As the example of the Episcopalian illustrates, many of the deepest conflicts that liberals are expected to negotiate center on the interpretation of oppression and cruelty, rather than on the relation of these to other values. Sticking for the moment to Rorty’s framework of public and private vocabularies, the point is that there can be conflicts between private interpretations of these values, and conflicts between public and private narratives, where there is no consensus that the presumption of right (as opposed to power) lies on the more public side. Feminists who believe that aspects of the status quo are humiliating to women, for instance, confront sexual partners or bosses who are convinced that they are treating women with compassion and respect, as well as states which take themselves to be effective guardians of these very values. The conflicts with which they live manifest themselves both in the private disagreements of domestic life and in clashes between public norms and private aspirations. One of the tasks of feminism, as Rorty has eloquently pointed out, is to get men to feel the force of a narrative which challenges their habitual self-descriptions, and to get states to institutionalize it. In the meantime, however, both men and women are expected to be able to manage this emotionally charged conflict without resorting to forms of cruelty or oppression that are generally recognized as such and are therefore deplored.

So far, I have followed Rorty’s original implication that a relatively unified public interpretation of liberal values confronts a variety of more or less liberal private narratives, and I have identified some of the conflicts that can occur within such a framework. But this way of putting the issue remains potentially misleading because it obscures the intricacy of the norms with which citizens are expected to deal. In the first place, locally authoritative interpretations of what it means to guarantee freedom and avoid cruelty are generated and upheld in different sets of practices, some more powerful than others—in government institutions, the law, the media, the market, in religions, universities, the arts, the family, in different cultural groups, and so on. The norms governing these do not combine into a seamless whole. They conflict to varying degrees, so that citizens (and institutions) must adapt themselves to a patchwork rather than to a single system of values and expectations. The freedom of financial markets to give priority to the interests of shareholders, for example, has consequences which sit oddly with the aspiration of governments to protect workers from the humiliations of poverty, or the aspiration of parents to do the same for their children. Private variety is not confronted by public unity. Instead, diverse sets of practices, many of them cutting across the public/private spectrum, coexist. To inhabit a practice, individuals must to some degree internalize the interpretations of liberty and cruelty on the basis of which it functions: a futures trader who does not give priority to potential profit will be criticized and may ultimately be sacked; parents who do nothing to ensure that their children are educated will be censured and may ultimately have them taken away. Agents are expected to conform to the norms that operate in a given area of social life, and those who fail to do
so come up against corresponding forms of coercion and criticism. In addition, agents are expected to move relatively smoothly from the norms of one set of practices to those of another (between the demands placed on a parent and those placed on a futures trader) and thus between intricate and sometimes conflicting ways of understanding what is involved in avoiding cruelty and respecting autonomy. In place of a harmonious, overarching commitment to “freedom and the avoidance of cruelty,” they must find a path through various and changing interpretations of liberty, divergent notions of avoidable suffering, and tensions between the demands of freedom and those of a life where no one is humiliated or treated with disrespect. They are expected to manage this, moreover, without resorting to oppression and cruelty as these are interpreted in different areas of life, and thus without insisting unequivocally on divergent interpretations of these values, or on other conceptions of the good. Someone who beats his or her children as a means of getting them to respect others is held to have failed to live up to a shared interpretation of what the avoidance of cruelty in family life involves; someone who abuses people of another race, even in ways that fall short of violating the law, has failed to internalize a political norm of freedom; someone responsible for shareholders’ money who avoids investing in a particular enterprise because she finds its practices revolting has failed to respect the liberty to make a profit.

This balancing trick is often not as difficult as it is beginning to sound. As Rorty emphasizes, most people generally manage to meet the demands that liberal societies place on them, while at the same time remaining true to their own conceptions of the good. They are neither too passive and conformist, nor too critical and rebellious. What, though, makes this possible? How is the frustration, indignation, yearning, hatred, or compassion aroused by conflicts of value diffused, so that citizens are able to conform to norms that diverge more or less sharply from their own most passionate convictions? Some elements of the answer, of which I shall identify three, are familiar and are prominent in those master narratives of liberalism which describe its benefits and virtues. First, we are on comfortable terms with the calming idea that the emotional tensions inherent in liberalism are made manageable by its diversity. People who are discontented with the status quo can express their feelings in licensed ways, for instance, by joining opposition parties, worshipping in their own fashion, or explaining themselves on television. The freedom to live by one’s sentiments in certain practices, even if not in others, means that few emotional dispositions have no legitimate outlet at all, and this makes conflict endurable. Close on the heels of this justification comes a second—that liberal societies are open to change and can be altered by the activities of their own citizens. The pain one suffers in the face of what one regards as existing cruelty or oppression need not last forever, and this makes it easier to bear. Social mobility is upward, rags lead to riches, and the excluded are eventually rewarded with recognition.

At a different level, the capaciousness and fluidity of the values that liberalism celebrates provide a third source of reconciliation. Although Rorty focuses on freedom and the alleviation of cruelty, he interprets these normative standards as almost interchangeable with justice; he elides freedom and autonomy, and intertwines cruelty with humiliation and lack of respect. A society committed to so many goods can hardly be altogether bad and is unlikely to fail on all counts, so that the pain evoked by its narratives or its failure to live up to them will often be offset by grudging admiration or gratitude for some of its achievements. Even discontented citizens are likely to have mixed feelings about the societies in which they live, and the sentiments that make it difficult for them to accede to the demands that are placed on them will be counterpoised by more positive ones. Outrage, for example, may exist alongside gratitude for certain forms of security and fear of what may happen if these are destroyed. (The myth of the state of nature helps to perpetuate this pattern of feeling, as do contemporary narratives, mythical or otherwise, about the threats posed by terrorism.) One sentiment restrains another, containing criticism while keeping it alive.

The success of interpretations such as these depends largely on the existence of practices which make it possible to act on them. Rorty’s emphasis on narrative sometimes blurs the important difference between narratives about mainly imaginary states of affairs and narratives that are already realized in more or less powerful practices. The impact of a security service on citizens is not the same as the impact of a novel about a security service, and while both may give us the means to describe and redescribe our experience, each evokes its own sentiments. When appropriate practices are in place, citizens may use them more or less self-consciously as checks, balances, outlets, or safety valves which help them to accommodate to social norms, including norms about acceptable forms of protest. They may be respectful of sexual difference in public and homophilic in church, or may admire a government that aims to make its citizens take responsibility for themselves, while working to alleviate the suffering that its particular policies cause.

Embedded in such strategies, however, and in the practices through which they are realized, is a set of presuppositions about the ways in which conflicting sentiments can normally be defused, which itself constitutes a further normative description of liberal citizens. The first of the three means of reconciliation I have mentioned works on the assumption that the distress caused by a conflict between two sentiments is often reduced
if both can be expressed; the second is grounded on the idea that distressing sentiments can be offset by hope; and the last relies on the view that a sentiment can be weakened or transformed by an opposing one. These are banal assumptions, to be sure, but that is part of the point. It is a mark of the success of liberalism that we regard these claims as lay accounts of ordinary mechanisms that enable us to manage conflicts between our sentiments and to live with the kinds of discontinuity that liberal societies generate. People are expected to be able to conform to these standards, and when they fail to do so they become the objects of criticism or puzzlement. Thus, sentiments that will not give way in the face of contrary ones are delegitimized, and individuals who cannot manage their convictions without resorting to cruelty are seen as culpable. The key point is that, viewed from this angle, Rorty’s confidence in the stability of liberal values emerges as a more complex, and perhaps more questionable, confidence in our capacity to legitimate a set of emotional capacities and accept them as shared standards of normality.

One can get a feeling for the historical and cultural specificity of this outlook if one compares Rorty’s evocation of the habitual liberal with Spinoza’s discussion of the practices that enable the members of a society to commit themselves to peaceful cooperation. Spinoza agrees that narratives embedded in practices are vital to our ability to conform to the demands imposed by the state. However, the citizens he portrays are assailed by anxieties that readily issue in aggression, and the task of calming and redirecting these antisocial energies is seen as intricate and uncertain. If it is to succeed, a polity needs to create practices which generate what Spinoza calls devotion to a harmonious common life; but even when these are established, devotion can easily be eclipsed by less sociable passions. Spinoza hesitantly envisages the creation of a set of emotional capacities that will make a form of peaceful pluralism possible, but unlike Rorty he is not in a position to take them for granted. The gap between their stances illustrates the fact that the capacities a society expects of its citizens can change, and shows how narratives about these capacities are used to legitimize both political ideals and social arrangements.

The narratives on which I have been concentrating describe the capacities that are taken to enable liberals to live alongside people whose values conflict with their own, and to conform to the various interpretations of autonomy and absence of cruelty that are embedded in liberal social practices. They are in many cases rather general dispositions, such as a capacity for emotional self-restraint or a degree of emotional resilience in the face of respectful criticism, which can be used in a multitude of more specific ways. The freedom to practice a version of fundamentalist Christianity may, for example, help the homophobic Episcopalian to be respectful to the gays she encounters, just as the freedom to demonstrate may help to restrain the violent impulses of people who oppose a war that their government supports. Citizens are expected to have not only general capacities that enable them to modify and redirect their own passions, but also the ability to use these capacities in particular cases.

In his recent work, Rorty has begun to develop his conception of politics as a progress of sentiments, though not in the fashion I have been advocating. Rather than concentrating on the general emotional capacities that liberalism presupposes, he has identified particular sentiments that he believes citizens should possess. Achieving Our Country defends the claim that an insurgent liberalism requires more than emotional flexibility. If societies are to root out oppression and cruelty, their citizens must have an emotional investment in the enterprise, manifested in particular hope for a fuller realization of the liberal ideal, and in national pride. The absence or presence of these passionate judgments marks the boundary between spectators who conform to liberal norms but do nothing to advance them, and actors who are committed to improving society, on whom the fate of the liberal project depends. Actors, therefore, must possess both the emotional capacities so far discussed, and the particular sentiments that Rorty now introduces as necessary conditions of political and social activism.

Hope and national pride seem to me to bear in different ways on political agency. We have already seen that the capacity to hope for a better state of affairs in which existing forms of suffering are relieved is a component of one of the everyday ways of dealing with emotional distress that liberalism takes for granted. An improvement that is imagined and hoped for can work on us in various ways; for example, the sheer pleasure of fantasy may relieve the pain of the present. However, in the case that interests Rorty, hope leads people to try to bring about the improvements they envisage. His discussion of this process focuses on the part played by inspiring narratives; if these can only move citizens to yearn for a society free from oppression and cruelty, they will give up other goals to struggle for it. Perhaps Achieving Our Country has given hope to politically disaffected Americans, but here, as before, Rorty’s faith in free-floating narratives disjoined from existing practices leads him to confront only part of the problem. If the hope of bringing about change is to rise above competing desires on which other hopes are fixed, it must be vested, at least in part, in the achievement of reasonably determinate goals. These in turn depend on practices and the relationships among them. They may, for example, depend on the existence of relatively accessible and effective means of protest, on dissident movements which manage to sustain both patience and enthusiasm, or on the absence of practices that represent attempts at
reform as old-fashioned or a waste of time. Specific hopes cannot be commanded. They are shaped by experience as well as imagination, and such hopes are parasitic on the opportunities and goals that societies represent as worthy and rewarding. While idealistic liberals may wish to establish the hope for a freer and less cruel way of life as one of the sentiments that liberal citizens are expected to possess and act on, this task requires more than inspirational narrative. It also requires institutional reform.

Rorty’s account of the role of national pride in a healthy polity is subject to comparable limitations. To feel pride in one’s country, one must be able to identify with some positive description of it, and the description of America on which Rorty fixes represents it as the nation in which liberal values are most deeply entrenched, and in which they have the best chance of being more fully realized. Americans, he argues, should identify with and be proud of a country which symbolizes, even though it does not instantiate, a society where cruelty and oppression have no place. Furthermore, they should sustain this identification while detesting the policies of particular American governments, or feeling ashamed of particular episodes in American foreign policy. This account assumes, uncontentiously, that people can distinguish distinct descriptions of a nation and feel differently about each of them. But it also requires that the national pride felt by Americans should be strong enough to move them to work for liberal values, and the relations among diverse passionate judgments come into play. If one’s predominant feeling about one’s country is shame or disgust, a commitment to ideals with which it is metaphorically associated may not even amount to pride, since one may be unable to attach these ideals to one’s experience of the nation in any way. Even if we put this problem aside, however, it is not obvious that pride in an idealized and imagined conception of the nation will galvanize one into trying to improve it. It may encourage complacency instead.

These objections to Rorty’s argument need to be considered, but are in the end peripheral, because it is not obvious that he needs to appeal to patriotism at all. He is surely right to argue that liberals must be able to hope; but whereas it is difficult to see how one could strive for reform without at least some hope, one does not have to feel pride in one’s country in order to set about trying to change it. One may just as easily be moved by shame, indignation, or compassion. Admittedly, this assessment of the matter fails to address one of the central themes of Achieving Our Country, namely, Rorty’s wish that America may become not just somewhat better than it is, but “wonderfully different,” a paradise of creative autonomy and compassion. Such a lyrical vision draws attention to the imaginary dimension of his interpretation of liberalism and to the gulf dividing his portrayal of it from existing societies which are purportedly liberal, but in which forms of oppression and cruelty are to varying degrees rife. It is a vast oversimplification to claim that these societies cherish autonomy and the alleviation of suffering, but an oversimplification of which liberal societies themselves are fond, and one that Rorty aims to make inspirational. Hope and pride certainly have an inspirational ring; but as I have tried to show, these sentiments play at best a relatively minor role in bringing about the kind of progress he desires.

Taking up Rorty’s broadly Humean view that moral and political improvements are constituted by progressions of sentiment, I have offered an account of some of the emotional capacities that liberal societies take for granted. The forms of freedom and compassion around which Rorty’s account revolves presuppose a set of emotional capacities that his narrative implicitly represents as the ones that ordinary people can be expected to exercise. Where this narrative is influential, it no doubt helps to inculcate the capacities it assumes; but even where there is a gap between the standards it sets and the capacities that people actually possess, it sets norms in the light of which they are judged. Rather than trying to make the sweeping kinds of sentimental change that Rorty outlines in his discussion of the importance of hope and pride, I believe we shall do better to follow the path I have taken here. We need to investigate the emotional expectations embodied in liberal narratives and institutions, and we need to recognize that these place far more complex and contradictory demands upon us than Rorty’s liberalism has so far allowed. This project will not in itself bring about a progress of sentiments; but it will give us a better understanding of how progress might be achieved.

SUSAN JAMES

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

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NOTES

As Susan James says, I take “the only barrier to moral regress” to be our willingness to put ourselves in other people’s shoes, to sympathize with their suffering. We have made enormous moral progress in the last few centuries because the citizens of the rich democracies are much better able to put themselves in the shoes of people unlike themselves than were most of Spinoza’s contemporaries. Moral regress occurs when the strong become convinced that the miserable lives led by the weak are appropriate to their intrinsic nature—when, for example, they decide that some people are natural slaves, or that the poor are simply lazy. In periods of moral regress, identification with the sufferings of others is treated as a sign of despicable weakness: those who pity the weak are sneered at as “bleeding hearts.”

As James remarks, my view entails that “a prerequisite of political change is imagination.” She is right to point out that my description of liberal societies—the sort in which imagination is given a looser rein, and in which such change is more likely—is oversimplified. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* I did indeed paint a picture in which a “private variety” of norms confronted a “public unity.” James paints a more plausible picture when she says that in liberal societies “diverse sets of practices, many of them cutting across the public/private distinction, coexist” and that members of such a society must find a path through “various and changing interpretations of liberty, divergent notions of avoidable suffering, and tensions between the demands of freedom and those of a life where no one is humiliated.”

She is also right that there is a big difference between Spinoza’s time and ours in respect to “the capacities a society expects of its citizens.” We in the West have come a very long way in three centuries—not just by acknowledging the need to separate the private sphere from the public but also by producing citizens capable of negotiating their way through a bewildering maze of public obligations.
James says that my “confidence in the stability of liberal values emerges as a more complex, and perhaps more questionable, confidence in our capacity to legitimize a set of emotional capacities and accept them as shared standards of normality.” I do not in fact have much confidence in the stability of liberal values. We are no more in a position to take these values for granted than was Spinoza. They would not survive, for example, the breakdown of civic order in the rich democracies that the terrorists are trying to bring about (and which, with the help of nuclear warheads, they may achieve). Nor could they survive a collapse of the global economic system that would wipe out the savings, and the sense of security, of the middle classes of the developed world. When things get really tough, human beings have no time or energy to spare for what James calls “emotional resilience in the face of respectful criticism,” any more than for imagining themselves in the shoes of people unlike themselves.

Spinoza could not have envisaged the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, the Romantic Movement, or the socialist novel, any more than he could have envisaged nuclear terrorism or a collapsible globalized economy. In the interval between Spinoza’s time and our own, technological changes produced changes in socio-economic conditions, and the latter made it possible for more and more people to become literate, and to have enough surplus time and energy to read books, magazines, and newspapers. The strong found themselves reading about the weak (the slaves, the poor, the women). Their imaginations were enlarged and moral progress eventually ensued.

James concludes her paper by suggesting that I may make too much of two particular sentiments that I believe citizens of liberal societies should possess: hope for a fuller realization of the liberal ideal and national pride. I agree with her that the former is far more important than the latter. As she says, “Whereas it is difficult to see how one could strive for reform without at least some hope, one does not have to feel pride in one’s country in order to set about trying to change it.” In *Achieving Our Country*, which was more of a tract for the times than an attempt to put forward a moral or social theory, I emphasized the need for the Left in my own country to identify itself with the best parts of the country’s history. But I noted in that book that shame over the worst parts of that history is also a form of emotional identification with one’s nation.

But though James is right about national pride, I think that she may underestimate the need of liberal societies for a “lyrical” socio-political vision, for dreams of a New Jerusalem, for romantic, utopian hope. The theistic and rationalistic philosophical traditions assured us that there was something powerful on our side—God or Reason. The horrors of modern history have made it difficult to take any such assurances seriously.

But groundless hope that chance will work in our favor remains possible. The realization that there was nothing inevitable about the moral progress made in recent centuries—that it may have been little more than a flash in the pan—leaves us with nothing but such hope.

I do not think that James has shown that hope and pride in past achievements “play at best a relatively minor role” in bringing moral progress about. Nor do I put my faith in “free-floating narratives disjoined from existing practices.” The sort of narratives I rely on have as their morals upbeat expressions of specific hopes, based on specific experiences: “Just as we eventually get rid of the laws against inter-racial marriage, so we might get rid of those against same-sex marriage”; “Just as, against all the odds, we got rid of the Communist dictatorships of Eastern Europe, so we might get rid of the Wahabist tyrannies of the Arab world”; “We spent a lot money and got rid of yellow fever in North America, so if we spent a lot more we could get rid of malaria in Africa.”

Such narratives remind us that our current practices would have been inconceivable to most of our ancestors, and that there is a long record of impossible, “lyrical” dreams having actually come true. Once God and Reason are no longer available to underwrite our projects, dreaming dreams becomes the most effective way to keep social hope alive.

R. R.
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RICHARD RORTY

EDITED BY

RANDALL E. AUXIER
AND
LEWIS EDWIN HAHN

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