Jonquils and Wild Orchids: James and Rorty on Politics and Aesthetic Experience

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One of the primary “consequences” of Richard Rorty’s antifoundational pragmatism is a turn to what we might call the politics of sentiment. As he puts it in *Truth and Progress*, “The best, and probably the only, argument for putting foundationalism behind us is the one I have already suggested: it would be more efficient to do so, because it would let us concentrate our energies on manipulating sentiments, on sentimental education” (1998, 176). Rorty describes the goal of sentimental education as a “progress of sentiments”—that is, “an ability to see the similarities between ourselves and people very unlike us as outweighing the differences” (1998, 181). By cultivating our ability to imaginatively identify with others, we can extend the reach of our sense of injustice and form the kind of democratic moral community where sympathetic fellow feeling renders us more likely to act on behalf of less fortunate distant and different others.

Other contemporary thinkers, like Martha Nussbaum (1995), have appealed to a politics of sentiment as well. Highlighting the power of literature and other forms of narrative as a means of cultivating a “morality of perception,” these thinkers draw on Adam Smith and David Hume for an account of moral sentiments—“rational emotions,” in Nussbaum’s phrase—possessed of “a powerful, if partial, vision of social justice” and “powerful motives for just conduct” (1995, xvi). The rich, detailed descriptions of the lives we encounter in social realist novels and even good narrative journalism, the argument goes, not only make us aware of previously unnoticed forms of suffering and injustice but spark the kind of “fellow feeling,” in Rorty’s phrase, that can serve as the engine of a melioristic politics of social justice.

In this essay I make a case for the relevance of William James to these contemporary arguments. Specifically, I argue that these defenses of the politics of sentiment are vulnerable to what James called “the sentimentalist fallacy”: the tendency “to shed tears over abstract justice and generosity, beauty, etc., and never to know these qualities when you meet them in the street” (1987, 586–87). Like Rorty and Nussbaum, James sought “to enlarge [our] sympathetic insight into
fellow-lives” (1977b, 655). He not only understood that “our judgments concerning the worth of things, big or little, depend on the feelings the things arouse in us,” he acutely perceived the fundamental “blindness” toward “the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves” that afflicts us all (1977a, 629). But he was also cognizant of the need to ground this sympathy in concrete habits of action, lest our sympathetic identifications with others become a recipe for sentimental escapism. Absent a Jamesian conception of character realized through action, perspectives like Rorty’s and Nussbaum’s run the risk of becoming a program for escapism and hypocrisy, where felt sentiments of empathy and an identification with suffering take the place of concrete acts. What would seem a compelling turn away from appeals to abstract, theoretical justice in these accounts may itself become a victim of abstraction if not rooted in actual experience. The differences between James and Rorty emerge in their contrasting views of the role moments of inner joy in our own experience play in our perceptions of others.

Rorty and the Politics of Sentiment

In essays in the late 1980s, Rorty began asserting that the novel is “the characteristic genre of democracy” (1991, 68), arguing that novelists and literary critics have done a lot more to advance “the struggle for freedom and equality” than philosophers and social theorists (1987, 579n26). This is not because narrative is more intimately linked to moral foundations than theory but because detailed descriptions of the lives of others can foster “an ability to identify imaginatively” with their plight and a politics driven by “sentimental calls for alleviation of suffering.” On this view, through “sentimental education,” works like Dickens’s *Bleak House* and Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* can forge a democratic moral community of citizens more attuned to suffering and more likely to overlook differences with others to see them as “one of us” (Rorty 1991, 80–81).

The role posited for sentiments in this transformative politics of “moral progress,” as Rorty calls it, specifically targets the affective domain as the path for making individuals more responsible and society more just. Rorty appeals primarily to a shared category of collective identity, which he first called “solidarity” and then “loyalty,” for ethical import and suggests that absent this sentimental or affective dimension, citizens will be not only less likely to notice or perceive the suffering of others but less inclined to act on their behalf when they do. As a sympathetic reader of such accounts, my argument is not that they are wrongheaded in their appeals to sentiment; my view is simply that they do not go far enough. More specifically, I claim that they fall short in articulating the crucial connection between activated sentiments and concrete actions.

In fairness, for his part Rorty attempted to link moral identification to moral action, holding to the view that “to believe that someone is ‘one of us,’ a member of our moral community, is to exhibit readiness to come to their assistance when they
are in need” (1996, 13). In the spirit of Adam Smith and David Hume, sympathy plays a key role for Rorty, understood in terms of Annette Baier’s (1991) notion of a “progress of sentiments”—that is, fostering “an ability to see the similarities between ourselves and people very unlike us as outweighing the differences” (Rorty 1998, 181). Rorty illustrates this progress with an example drawn from an issue of international concern at the time: “The fate of the women in Bosnia depends on whether television journalists manage to do for them what Harriet Beecher Stowe did for black slaves . . . make us, the audience back in the safe countries, feel that these women are more like us, more like real human beings than we have realized” (1998, 181).

Fostering such fellow feeling promises to remedy what James called our natural “blindness” toward others, especially when it comes to our tendency to undervalue their “feelings” (1977a, 629), an issue we will return to below. Despite these efforts, however, the links to action in Rorty’s account remain inadequate; imaginative identification, after all, is still at a significant remove from political action. Indeed, the point where Rorty’s account would benefit from greater attention is in elucidating the path from sympathy, imaginative identification, and more acute perception on the part of individuals, to everyday experience. In the end, it remains vulnerable to James’s critique of emotional states of felt concern in which sympathetic identification with the suffering of others supplants the need to actually do something about it.

My argument here is that incorporating a Jamesian conception of character realized through concrete acts is the best way for accounts like Rorty’s to address the sentimentalist fallacy. Interestingly, to some extent Rorty did move in the direction of a greater attention to character in this sense, arguing that what he called “redescription”—restating views in an alternate vocabulary to reveal previously unseen possibilities—should be understood as “a tool for social and individual change” and framing pragmatism as most fundamentally “an attempt to alter our self-image” (1999, 220, 72). However, Rorty insisted upon making “a firm distinction” between our shared public commitments and our idiosyncratic “private” vocabularies, which he captured memorably through the metaphor of his own obsession with wild orchids. Combined with his reduction of the “webs of belief and desire” (1989, 85) that define his nonessentialist view of the self to purely linguistic terms, his bifurcated approach divorces our public pursuit of social justice from the Jamesian stream of individual experience. As a result, Rorty’s argument about the novel as the primary vehicle of moral reflection in a democracy seems to lack the kind of private–public interchange necessary, on the one hand, to get from the (private) practice of reading to a (public) concern for the injustices suffered by others and, on the other, to get from a concern for the suffering of abstract others to concrete actions in our everyday lives. This shortcoming is precisely what the conception of character realized through action found in James—to whom the idea of dividing public from private was rather foreign—would seem to remedy. Without direct inroads from these imaginative
states to our everyday experiences, Rorty’s account remains vulnerable to the sentimentalist fallacy.

**James and the Sentimentalist Fallacy**

In the sixth of his *Pragmatism* lectures, “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth,” James laments our tendency, in philosophy and in life, to divorce ideals and theories from concrete experience. We often lose sight of the fact that all our abstractions, even the most pure and ideal, find their “mother soil in experience.” When we traffic in abstractions, he argues, a certain blindness to these origins often results. As James explains, we “extract a quality from the muddy particulars of experience, and find it so pure when extracted that [we] contrast it with each and all its muddy instances as an opposite and higher nature.” In other words, we fail to recognize this quality in its un-idealized, everyday state. Even emotional states are vulnerable to our tendency to abstract from concrete experience. As we have seen, James calls this the “sentimentalist fallacy”: “to shed tears over abstract justice and generosity, beauty, etc., and never to know these qualities when you meet them in the street” (1987, 586–87).

Although James discusses the sentimentalist fallacy of feeling deep concern for abstract justice (or injustice) alongside a blindness to concrete injustice in front of one’s eyes in his *Pragmatism* lectures, the same issue was present nearly two decades earlier in his *Principles of Psychology*. His penetrating inquiry into the role of “habit” in the earlier text offers James’s thoughts on potential remedies for what he later would call the sentimentalist fallacy. In a word, for James habit is pervasive in human life. Socially, as “the enormous fly-wheel of society,” habit is society’s “most precious conservative agent.” “Set like plaster” by the age of thirty, individually, habit is the primary determinant of character, “doom[ing] us all to fight out the battle of life upon the lines of our nurture or our early choice.” Akin to “an invisible law, as strong as gravitation,” habit keeps the individual “within his orbit” and requires the utmost attention and effort to change (James 1950, 121–22).

Of greatest interest to James are the “ethical implications” of this “law of habit.” When it comes to education, if we are “mere walking bundles of habits,” as he asserts, “the great thing,” he argues, “is to make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy” (1950, 127, 122). He draws on the conception of character as “a completely fashioned will” he finds in John Stuart Mill—to whom he would later dedicate his *Pragmatism* lectures as the person from whom he learned “the pragmatic openness of mind”—as the basis for articulating his own: “an aggregate of tendencies to act in a firm and prompt and definite way upon all the principal emergencies of life.” What results is an implicit critique of both Kant, on the one hand, and Smith and Hume, on the other: “No matter how full a reservoir of *maxims* one may possess, and no matter how good one’s *sentiments* may be, if one have not taken advantage of every concrete opportunity to act in a firm *act*, one’s
character may remain entirely unaffected for the better” (James 1950, 125). If in the end Rorty seeks to use the activation of sentiment as a vehicle for cultivating character, on James’s view this effort will fall short if not directly linked to an understanding of character rooted in habits of action.

Nowhere does James illustrate this more powerfully than in his discussion of “the nerveless sentimentalist and dreamer,” a person “who spends his life in a weltering sea of sensibility and emotion, but who never does a manly concrete deed” (1950, 125). In what seems a direct assault on Rorty’s stance, he claims that “the habit of excessive novel-reading and theatre-going will produce true monsters in this line.” Citing Rousseau as “the classical example” for his admonishing all the mothers of France “to follow Nature” while he sent his own children to the foundling hospital, James continues: “The weeping of a Russian lady over the fictitious personages in the play, while her coachman is freezing to death on his seat outside, is the sort of thing that everywhere happens on a less glaring scale. . . . One becomes filled with emotions which habitually pass without prompting to any deed, and so the inertly sentimental condition is kept up” (1950, 125–26).

The remedy for James is simple, a matter of the active cultivation of contrary habits: “never to suffer one’s self to have an emotion at a concert, without expressing it afterward in some active way. Let the expression be the least thing in the world—speaking genially to one’s aunt, or giving up one’s seat in a horse-car, if nothing more heroic offers—but let it not fail to take place” (1950, 126). By settling, if you will, for something less than heroic here, in terms of the reduction of human suffering and injustice around the globe, James not only forestalls the tendency of letting (salutary) sentiments pass without action but begins to cultivate a habit of acting upon affective states that will enable more heroic action to occur when the opportunity presents itself.

In the time between these comments, published in his Principles of Psychology (1890), and the discussion of the sentimentalist fallacy in Pragmatism (1907), James delivered a series of addresses that form an inquiry into, among other things, the need “to enlarge [our] sympathetic insight into fellow-lives” (1977b, 655)—precisely the issue of interest to Rorty.7 Keenly aware of the fact that life is “soaked and shot-through . . . with values and meanings which we fail to realize because of our external and insensible point of view,” James first and foremost counsels tolerance—tolerance of ideals and ways of life so different from our own that we remain blind to their value and meaning for those who practice them. Indeed, the pretense to “judge” and “dogmatize” about other ways of life is in his view “the root of most human injustices and cruelties.” James advocated tolerance over understanding here because he believed that the “great cloud-bank of ancestral blindness” to the meanings of others’ lives is virtually insurmountable (1977b, 645–46).

At times James seems to point beyond mere tolerance to the active cultivation of our capacity for greater fellow feeling. In these moments one sees
the interesting interweaving of pragmatism and Romanticism—or “empiricism and idealism” in Russell Goodman’s terms (1990, 68)—present in James. If Rousseau is his foil in the passage from Principles, in “What Makes a Life Significant,” it is Tolstoy. Here too James seeks to illustrate the limits and dangers of ideals and identifications abstracted from concrete experience, offering a critique of Tolstoy’s proclivity to romanticize. For all of the vastness of Tolstoy’s “love of the peasant” and acute perception of their “maladies and misfortunes” and “privations and pains” that enabled him to imaginatively enter into their life, his philosophy, as James puts it, remains “a false abstraction” (1977b, 651, 653). Tolstoy’s “deification” of the values he saw there “hardens his heart toward the educated man.” James sums up his critique with these words: “If it is idiotic in romanticism to recognize the heroic only when it sees it labeled and dressed-up in books, it is really just as idiotic to see it only in the dirty boots and sweaty shirt of someone in the fields” (1977b, 653).

The power of James’s reading of Tolstoy resides in his view that once we leave the realm of concrete experience, even the most benevolent and well-intentioned ideals may prove counterproductive at best, dangerous at worst, when it comes to programs for political or social improvement. It is not that James wishes to denigrate ideals or abstractions or imaginative identifications per se; he merely wants to ensure that their origins in the “mother soil of experience”—precisely what paves the way for the cultivation of habits of action—are not lost. Regarding ideals, James writes that “the most worthless sentimentalists and dreamers, drunkards, shirks and verse-makers, who never show a grain of effort, courage, or endurance, possibly have them on the most copious scale” (1977b, 657). But the problem is not the ideals themselves; the problem is the lack of connection between ideals and actions. This is the core of James’s bridging of idealism and empiricism: “The more ideals a man has, the more contemptible, on the whole, do you continue to deem him, if the matter ends there for him, and if none of the laboring man’s virtues are called into action on his part” (1977b, 657). As we saw above, James held that the cultivation of character in the absence of concrete opportunities to act amounts to no cultivation at all. Never insisting on a divide between public and private, as did Rorty, James sought to merge inner ideals and sentiments to outer opportunities for action and to concrete others: “a marriage, namely, of some unhabitual ideal, however special, with some fidelity, courage and endurance; with some man’s or woman’s pains” (1977b, 659).

James walks a rather fine line here. Just as he critiques Tolstoy’s detached romanticizing, he also recognizes “the price we inevitably have to pay for being practical creatures” in which our hearts are “harden[ed]” to everything outside our own way of life. Like Rorty and Nussbaum, James sought to awaken “responsive sensibilities” toward others by appealing to “feelings of excited significance.” Yet despite his harsh words for “worthless sentimentalists and dreamers” and “verse-makers,” James turns to Emerson and to Whitman, as well as Wordsworth, Shelley, and Robert Louis Stevenson, to praise the exalted, “gleaming moments”
of transcendent self-absorption exemplified by the “Crossing a bare common” passage in Emerson’s *Nature* and Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” in *Leaves of Grass*. Indeed, James writes that “only in some pitiful dreamer, some philosopher, poet, or romancer, or when the practical man becomes a lover” does a “gleam of insight” into “the vast world of inner life beyond us” become available (1977a, 634).

How do we make sense of these apparently conflicting stances toward sentimentalists and dreamers? In my view what distinguishes the “worthless sentimentalists and dreamers” discussed above from Emerson and Whitman is that their flights of transcendence are rooted in moments of everyday experience, “the peculiar sources of joy connected with our simpler functions”—that is, the everyday and the “common,” rather than the “rare” and the “exquisite” (James 1977a, 642). In ways that relate to what Dewey would later call “having an experience,” James notes that “as Emerson says, there is a depth in those moments that constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences” (1977a, 635). Importantly, for James, this includes our experience of “non-human natural things.” As an example, he quotes a passage from early nineteenth-century French novelist Etienne Senancour’s *Obermann* describing the experience of an “ideal of a better world which one feels” that he has upon encountering “a jonquil in bloom” on a dark and gloomy day: “I felt all the happiness destined for man. This unutterable harmony of souls, the phantom of the ideal world, arose in me complete” (1977a, 635). Unlike Rorty, who sought to disconnect such sublime moments of inner joy as exemplified by his own experience of wild orchids, which he calls “interest in socially useless flowers” (1999, 7), from our attitudes toward others, James argues that these moments are precisely what open us to the possibility of the suffering and joys of others being alive to us. As James puts it in a rhetorical flourish of his own, “But how can one attain to the feeling of the vital significance of an experience [of another], if one have it not to begin with?” (1977a, 640).

## Conclusion

The value of James’s insights for contemporary arguments about the cultivation of ethical character through literature is his insistence that attempts to improve character will prove ineffective if they do not involve regular opportunities for acting on one’s ideals and sentiments. As Joshua Miller put it, for James “action is good in itself” (1997, 13). Likening James to the Marx of the “Theses on Feuerbach,” Miller asserts that for both thinkers, “merely changing consciousness was ineffectual” (1997, 16, 126n31). What James called “the strenuous life” ensures that citizens do not merely hold ideals and experience sentiments but, indeed, act upon them.
Although the politically motivated turn to sentiment and affect in recent work like that of Rorty and Nussbaum marks a salutary move away from narrow theory and disembodied rationalism, the link from felt sentiments to concrete acts cannot be assumed automatically to exist. Neglecting this crucial dimension will on the best scenario result in an ineffectual, sentimental escapism where changes in consciousness remain just that. Situated in a political context characterized by oppression and the persistence of social and political hierarchies, the result may be an even more pernicious exercise in politically impotent self-exculpation.\textsuperscript{14} James’s bridging of empiricism and idealism helps strengthen the politics of sentiment not only by preserving the imaginative, romantic impulses that can form the basis of insight into the lives of others, but by grounding them in our everyday experience.

Although perhaps less so than Dewey, James was attuned to the central role of education in advancing the democratic way of life. If we are to make what Nussbaum (1997) calls “cultivating humanity” a primary goal, which I think we should, we would do well to conjoin to this, in a pragmatist spirit, equal attention to the cultivation of habits of action in our everyday lives. When understood in terms of James’s conception of character realized through action, the words of Dewey in “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us” offer an important reminder: “Powerful present enemies of democracy can be successfully met only by the creation of personal attitudes in individual human beings; … we must get over our tendency to think that its defense can be found in any external means whatever, whether military or civil, if they are separated from individual attitudes so deep-seated as to constitute personal character” (1986, 226).

Notes
2. For this argument, see also “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality” in Rorty 1998 and “Justice as a Larger Loyalty” in Rorty 2007. For a more detailed reading of Rorty’s approach to the novel, see Voparil 2006, especially chap. 3.
5. On Rorty’s public–private split, see Rorty 1989, especially chap. 4.
7. I am referring to James 1977a and 1977b. Both were originally published in 1899 in James’s Talks to Teachers on Psychology: and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals.
8. Goodman suggests that James “construes pragmatism as a mediator between empiricism and idealism” and calls James “a Romantic in his basic vision” (1990, 59). In his most extended treatments of James, Rorty calls him a “romantic utilitarian.” See “Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism” in Rorty 2007, 28.
9. For James, this holds as true for sentiment as it does for rationality; he also discusses the “rationalist fallacy,” which is critiqued alongside the sentimentalist fallacy. See James 1987, 587–90.
10. For Rorty’s argument for a “firm distinction” between public and private, see Rorty 1989 and “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids” in Rorty 1999. See also Voparil 2006, chap. 5.

11. Here James quotes a long passage from Josiah Royce’s The Religious Aspect of Philosophy that issues a call for us to “learn the truth” that “pain is pain, joy is joy, everywhere, even as in thee,” rather than to say of our “neighbor” that “a pain in him is not like a pain in me, but something far easier to bear” (quoted in James 1977a, 634–35).

12. For James’s discussion of this passage of Emerson’s, see James 1977a, 635, 642; for his discussion of Whitman’s, see James 1977a, 637–41.

13. Interestingly, Rorty discusses these very same “Wordsworthian moments” that he himself experienced in the presence of particularly rare wild orchids “in the woods around Flatbrookville [N.J.],” where, not unlike Emerson or Whitman, he “felt touched by something numinous, something of ineffable importance” (1999, 7–8). However, he concludes that to think of these moments as something more than “interest in socially useless flowers” is to fall prey to the dangerous metaphysics of “holding reality and justice in a single vision” and its “guarantee” that “those special ecstatic moments . . . are of some relevance to [our] moral convictions” (1999, 19). By framing the options this starkly, Rorty elides the space in which thinkers like Emerson and James attempt to unite these things without guarantees. In more recent work, though, Rorty has praised Whitman for his belief that “non-human nature culminates in a community of free men,” linking this notion to Dewey’s idea of a society in which “poetry and religious feeling will be the unforced flowers of life” (Rorty 2007, 41; cf. Dewey 1980). Yet even here Rorty insists upon a “distinction” between “projects of social cooperation and projects of individual self-development” (2007, 35) in sharper terms than James or even Dewey would be likely to embrace.

14. Although I cannot pursue this here, consider as an example Martin Luther King Jr.’s critique in his “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” of the “white moderate” as “the Negro’ s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom.” The reason why he saw sympathetic whites as a greater obstacle than “the White Citizen’s Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner” is that their sympathetic identification with the goals of the civil rights movement never translated into action (1986, 295).

Works Cited


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