

Volume VI, No. 1

Spring 1994

LYCEUM

Cultural Relativism and Tolerance

John Tilley

Contradictions and the Refusal of Ethics

Rev. John J. Conley, SJ

Ideae Idearum in Spinoza's Ethics

Fred Ablondi

Facing the Political Implications of Existential Choices

A Reply to Putnam (and Rorty)

Michael Donovan

Note on a Contentious Conditional

Timothy Chambers

**A Publication of the
Saint Anselm Philosophy Club**

Cultural Relativism and Tolerance

John Tilley

Cultural relativists often speak as if their thesis entails, or somehow guarantees, tolerance.¹ Perhaps their idea is that a fully consistent thinker who embraces cultural relativism is sure to be tolerant of the behavior he finds in other cultures. Many people accept this idea, but many others reject it, including most moral philosophers. Disappointingly, the reasoning of those who accept it is rarely examined, and the stock argument by which philosophers reject it is unsound. In this essay I will examine the reasoning behind the view that cultural relativism entails tolerance, and show that the standard objection to that view fails. This does not mean that I think relativism ensures tolerance. Indeed, I will show that the reasoning behind that view is fallacious; it does not forge a connection between tolerance and cultural relativism. After showing this I will address two possible replies from the opposing camp.

I

By “cultural relativism” (hereafter “relativism”) I mean the following thesis:

What’s morally right (wrong, obligatory, etc.) for one culture is not likely to be right for the next culture. This is because the truth of any judgment that ascribes moral rightness or wrongness to an action is somehow dependent on, or “relative to,” the cultural norms of the agent’s society, and cultural norms vary from one society to another.

Does this thesis entail tolerance? Many people think so, on the following grounds. Relativism implies that we cannot impose our morality on the people of other cultures, which in turn implies that we must refrain from

¹ Two examples are Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934), 278; and Melville Herskovits, *Man and His Works* (New York: Knopf, 1948), 76, 78.

Cultural Relativism and Tolerance

doing so. But to refrain from doing so is to be tolerant. Thus, if we accept relativism we are logically committed to a policy of tolerance.

This argument is tempting but unsound—tempting because it contains some truth if charitably read; unsound because even if we read it charitably, it fails to support its conclusion. I will explain all this shortly, but first I will consider the standard response from moral philosophers, meaning the standard objection to the view that relativism ensures tolerance.² It runs as follows. Relativism maintains, roughly, that morality is relative to cultural norms. If relativism is true, an act is morally right if and only if it is customary in the agent's society. So if being intolerant is customary in a society, the people of that society are morally right to be intolerant. Thus, far from entailing tolerance, relativism implies that for some people, intolerance might be morally right, perhaps even obligatory. This is because relativism makes moral rightness, obligatoriness, etc., entirely a function of cultural norms.

The argument fails owing to its first premise, which interprets relativism to imply that

(A) an act is morally right if and only if it is customary in the agent's society.

This reading is uncharitable. First of all, there are other natural readings of the claim that morality is relative to cultural norms. For instance, we can read it to mean that

(B) an act is morally right **only if** it is customary in the agent's society.

² See F. Feldman, *Introductory Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 171; R. L. Holmes, *Basic Moral Philosophy* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1993), 37; and P. Schmidt, "Some Criticisms of Cultural Relativism," *Journal of Philosophy* 52 (1955), 786f.

LYCEUM

To see that (B) is an acceptable reading, consider the claim that bachelorhood (the property of being a bachelor) is relative to one's marital status. There is no need to read this as the ridiculous claim that a person is a bachelor **if and only if** the person is unmarried. Instead, we can read it to mean that a person is a bachelor **only if** he is unmarried. Likewise, statement (B) is a natural reading of the thesis that morality is relative to cultural norms.

Secondly, just as the first of the two statements about bachelorhood is less plausible than the second, (A) is less plausible than (B). To read relativism as asserting (A) is to expose it to objections that have no force against (B). One such objection is that if relativism is true, we can determine what's right within a society simply by discovering what's habitual in that society (e.g., by taking a poll).³ Since the consequent of this statement is preposterous, we must reject relativism.

This objection threatens (A), but not (B). (B) states merely a **necessary** condition, not a necessary and **sufficient** condition, for moral rightness. Perhaps (B) is vulnerable to criticism, but it cannot be dismissed as easily as (A).

In sum, (B) is a natural reading of the claim that morality is relative to cultural norms; also, (B) is more plausible than (A). So fairness requires that we favor (B) over (A) when interpreting the claim that "what's right for a person is relative to what's customary in her society." Once we do this, the view that relativism entails tolerance is not open to the philosopher's standard objection.

³ See A. G. Oldenquist, *Moral Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 51.

Cultural Relativism and Tolerance

Some might disagree with all this, and reply as follows. Relativists often state their view in a way that approximates (A) rather than (B).⁴ Since we cannot be faulted for taking an author at his word, we have every right to interpret relativists as holding (A) or something like it. Any objection that refutes (A) is fair to use against relativism.

This reply falsely assumes that we should always take an author at his word. The principle of charity sometimes requires that we ignore the specific words of an author and focus on the more plausible ideas lying behind them. To take a familiar example, utilitarians sometimes speak as if their thesis were the doctrine of “the greatest good of the greatest number.” Philosophers agree that this is a poor formulation of utilitarianism, for it exposes that thesis to a forceful criticism.⁵ But they also agree that utilitarianism avoids the criticism if better formulated, and that fairness demands that we favor one of these better formulations when interpreting utilitarians. Likewise, fairness requires that we favor (B) over (A) when interpreting relativism.

II

Let us return to the argument designed to derive tolerance from relativism. According to that argument, relativism implies that we cannot impose our morality on the people of other cultures, which in turn implies that we must refrain from doing so. But to refrain from doing so is to be tolerant. Thus, relativism requires us to be tolerant of the people of other cultures.

⁴ An example is M. Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism* (New York: Vintage Press, 1973), 101.

⁵ For an example of this poor formulation, see the preface to J. Bentham's *A Fragment on Government* (many editions). For the criticism to which it is open, see Feldman, *Introductory Ethics*, 27f. In a nutshell, the criticism is that if utilitarianism is stated in the above way, it requires us to maximize two **independent** variables: utility and total number of people benefited.

LYCEUM

Although safe from the philosopher's usual criticism, this argument is fallacious. The problem is that the phrase "impose our morality" is ambiguous. The statement, "We can't impose our morality on the people of other cultures" has at least three possible meanings:

- (1) When speaking about another culture we cannot say, "Those people are obligated to do **x**" (where **x** is something the people of **our** culture are obligated to do), and be confident of saying something **true**.
- (2) We cannot force the people of another culture to comply with a moral demand simply because it is a demand to which the people of **our** culture are subject.
- (3) We cannot make the people of another culture the **victims** of our morality.

How do we make a person the "victim" of our morality? We do so whenever we harm an innocent person as a result of our moral views. We can clarify this by considering our treatment of animals, for we often make animals the victims of our morality. We not only harm them, but do so owing to moral beliefs that we consciously hold. To take an obvious example, most people think that killing animals for food is morally permissible. As a result, many animals are killed.

People often make other **people** the victims of their morality. The Crimean Tatars of the seventeenth century thought it was morally permissible

Cultural Relativism and Tolerance

to enslave Russians and Cossacks; so they made annual raids on these people and sold them as slaves throughout the Ottoman empire.⁶ No doubt some of the Tatars thought they were morally **required** to go on these raids—to “do their share of the work,” so to speak. Thus, the Tatars did not simply enslave, and in that way harm, the Russians and Cossacks they raided; they did so **owing** to their moral beliefs. The Russians and Cossacks were not simply victims of the Tatars, but victims of the Tatars’ **morality**.

We now have three readings of “impose,” which we can distinguish by using the terms “impose₁,” “impose₂,” and “impose₃.” For instance, to say that we cannot impose₃ our morality on others is to say that we cannot make others the victims of our morality.

Now let’s return to the argument concerning tolerance, and consider it step by step:

(C) If relativism is true, we can’t impose our morality on the people of other cultures.

(D) Thus, we must refrain from imposing our morality on the people of other cultures.

(E) To refrain from imposing our morality on others is to be tolerant of others.

(F) Therefore, relativism requires us to be tolerant of the people of other cultures.

⁶ For a brief account of this practice, and a hint as to why it was thought morally permissible by the Tatars, see O. Subtelny, *Ukraine: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 106–9.

LYCEUM

To make (C) true, we must employ only the **first** interpretation of “impose.” That is, we must read “impose” to mean “impose₁.” Relativism says that moral **truth** varies with culture; hence although it implies that we cannot impose₁ our morality on other cultures, it does **not** imply that we cannot impose₂ or impose₃ our morality on other cultures. Just think about it with reference to the Tatars. They might accept relativism, and as a result grant that because of cultural differences between Tatars and Russians, the statement “**We** are obligated to conduct raids and enslave people” is true, yet the statement “**Russians** are obligated to conduct raids and enslave people” is false. But this is merely to grant a point about the **truth conditions** of moral judgments; it does not compel the Tatars, either logically or morally, to refrain from their raids. In other words, it’s consistent for the Tatars to accept relativism and hence agree that they cannot impose₁ their morality on Russians, while insisting that they **can** impose₃ their morality on Russians.

So to make premise (C) true we must read “impose” to mean “impose₁.” We must interpret (D) in a similar way, for it is meant as a corollary of (C).

When considering (E), however, we should read “imposing” to mean, not “imposing₁,” but “imposing₂ and imposing₃.” This is because **tolerance** has nothing to do with failing or succeeding to state moral truths. It involves refraining from various **actions**—actions that interfere with the lives of other people. Even if we do not impose₁ our morality on others we can easily be intolerant of them by, say, imposing₃ our morality on them. Hence to maintain, plausibly, that by not imposing our morality on others we are being tolerant, we should use “imposing” to mean “imposing₂ and imposing₃.”

So the argument concerning tolerance becomes this:

Cultural Relativism and Tolerance

(C') If relativism is true, we can't impose₁ our morality on the people of other cultures.

(D') Thus, we must refrain from imposing₁ our morality on the people of other cultures.

(E') To refrain from imposing₂ and imposing₃ our morality on others is to be tolerant of others.

(F) Therefore, relativism requires us to be tolerant of the people of other cultures.

This argument is invalid. (In fact, even the first step of the argument—the step from (C') to (D')—is invalid, but I'll let that pass.) (C') and (D') have to do with imposing₁ our morality on others, but (E') has to do with imposing₂ and imposing₃ our morality on others. The result is an argument of the following form, which is plainly fallacious: If relativism is true, we cannot **X**, which means we must refrain from **X**. To refrain from **Y** and **Z** is to be tolerant. Therefore, relativism requires us to be tolerant.

The upshot is that we have been furnished no reason to think that relativism ensures tolerance. Relativism implies that various moral judgments cannot truthfully be made about other cultures, but this is a far cry from entailing a policy of tolerance. This often goes unnoticed owing to an ambiguity in the phrase, "impose our morality on others."

III

I will consider two possible replies to the preceding claims. The first is that although relativism does not ensure tolerance, it remains preferable to non-relativism because unlike the latter, it does not ensure intolerance. In short,

LYCEUM

relativism remains attractive because its opposite, non-relativism, entails a policy of intolerance toward other cultures.

This reply is mistaken. Non-relativism is merely the rejection of moral relativism, a family of theories that includes cultural relativism. It is not the rejection of tolerance. In fact, many non-relativists view the following as a transcultural truth: "It's morally right to tolerate others."

Some relativists will be skeptical of this, and will argue as follows:

(G) To be a non-relativist is to think that some actions are wrong in a non-relative way; their wrongness is not a function of cultural norms. Call those actions **x**, **y** and **z**.

(H) But if we believe that **x**, **y** and **z** are wrong in this way, we are committed to the further belief that we must interfere with any culture that practices **x**, **y** and **z**.

(I) But to interfere in this way is to be intolerant.

(J) Thus, if we accept non-relativism, we are committed to being intolerant of other cultures, specifically those cultures that practice **x**, **y** and **z**.

The argument goes wrong at step (H). The view that **x** is wrong in a non-relative way does not entail the view that we are obligated to interfere with **x**. We can accept the former view without accepting the latter. To make the point another way, it's consistent to be a non-relativist and at the same time hold the following thesis:

We should interfere with an action **x** only if: (a) **x** seriously violates a person's autonomy or causes significant physical or psychological injury; (b) **x** is not done to defend an innocent

Cultural Relativism and Tolerance

person from harm; and (c) our interference is likely to remedy the harms **x** produces—those mentioned in (a).

Some people will challenge this thesis; others will say that it needs to be clarified or revised before we grant it. For our purposes none of this matters. The important point is that the above statement is consistent with non-relativism, yet a person who sincerely accepts it will seldom interfere with the behavior of others, even when she thinks their behavior is wrong. Perhaps she will **sometimes** interfere with others—e.g., when they are guilty of child abuse, racial discrimination, and so forth—but to do so in **those** cases is not to be intolerant, at least not in a way that counts as a vice. This is significant, for the proponent of (J) surely has in mind a **vice** when he speaks of “being intolerant.” If he does not, his argument fails to fulfill its purpose, which is to throw a negative light on non-relativism.⁷

The next reply to the claims in section 2 is that although relativism does not logically guarantee tolerance, it surely **leads** to tolerance. That is, anyone who believes that morality is relative to culture will almost surely take a “hands off” approach toward other cultures and life-styles.

The key idea here is that as a matter of psychological fact, a belief in relativism usually produces tolerance. I have three comments about this view. First, it remains a piece of armchair psychology until it is backed with thorough empirical research, and to my knowledge it is without such backing. Second, it fails to make relativism more attractive than non-relativism unless (a) the “tolerance” it speaks of is genuine **tolerance**, not apathy or complacency, and (b) it is combined with evidence that no plausible form of non-relativism has the same attractive property—that of fostering tolerance if sincerely believed. But such evidence is not likely to be found, given that many forms of non-relativism (e.g., the Golden Rule) actually **prescribe** a policy of tolerance. Third, although I cannot decisively refute the above view, I find it doubtful, and not merely on **a**

⁷ This raises problems for premise (I) of the above argument (as well as some other problems for relativists who use the argument), but I will let them pass.

LYCEUM

priori grounds. I won't belabor this point; I'll simply close this essay with some of the empirical evidence that spawns my doubts. I have in mind the following quote from a famous (or better, **infamous**) relativist who clearly was not led by his moral theory to take a "hands off" approach toward others:

Relativism is simply a fact Everything I have said and done in these last years is relativism If relativism signifies contempt for fixed categories and men who claim to be the bearers of an objective immortal truth . . . then there is nothing more relativistic than Fascist attitudes and activity From the fact that all ideologies are of equal value . . . the modern relativist infers that everybody has the right to create for himself his own ideology and to attempt to enforce it with all the energy of which he is capable.⁸

- Benito Mussolini

Indiana University

Indianapolis, Indiana

⁸ The quote is in H. B. Veatch's *Rational Man* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), 41. He cites Mussolini's *Diuturna* as the original source. (I do not claim that Mussolini held the precise form of relativism I have been discussing. But I don't think this matters given the purpose to which I am putting the above quote. The differences between cultural relativism and Mussolini's brand of relativism are not such that we should expect widely different psychological effects from the two.)

Contradictions and the Refusal of Ethics

Rev. John J. Conley, SJ

Ethics might be defined as the science of human action considered under the rubric of right and wrong.¹ It is a practical science, concerned with the proper use of human conduct, rather than a purely speculative science. It is a normative science, concerned with how human beings should act, rather than a purely descriptive science, which only details how human beings do act. Obviously, the science of ethics differs considerably in its methodology from the empirical sciences, such as chemistry or physics. Nonetheless, it is broadly scientific inasmuch as it develops a systematic and coherent set of principles and rules concerning human conduct. It develops its arguments through the use of reason critically examining whether a given action promotes or vitiates the fundamental goods of human existence. It attempts to develop universal rules and justifying reasons concerning human acts, since morality concerns the obligations of human beings *qua* human. It criticizes the appeal to authority, emotion or purely private experience as a criterion of morality. Obviously, ethicists often dispute the morality of a given act, but this dispute, if it is to remain scientific, still bears the marks of rationality and universality which distinguish moral philosophy.

The scientific status of ethics, however, is hardly self-evident. Certain philosophers, like many participants on the *Phil Donahue Show*, dispute the very possibility of a science of morality. These criticisms usually fall into three major types: skepticism, subjectivism and relativism.² Although seductive at first, these positions suffer serious logical (internal) and practical (external) contradictions. Numerous treatises on ethics underline the logical contradictions inherent in these positions, at least in their extreme form. More

¹ For a more detailed treatment of this Aristotelian-Thomistic conception of the science of ethics, cf. Austin Fagothey, *Right and Reason* (St. Louis: Mosby, 1959), 19-30; Andrew Varga, *On Being Human* (New York: Paulist, 1978) 1-3; O'Keefe, *Known from the Things that Are* (Houston: Thomistic Studies, 1987), 1-10.

² The analysis of these three schools is indebted to the presentation in Vincent G. Potter, *A Philosophy of Knowledge* (New York: Fordham, 1987), 19-39.

Contradictions and the Refusal of Ethics

attention, however, should be addressed to the practical contradictions: how the moral *praxis* of the tenants of skepticism, subjectivism and relativism undercuts the moral *theoria* they purport to uphold.

Skepticism. The moral skeptic argues: “Moral judgments can never be known to be true or false.”

Logical contradiction. Is this statement, itself a moral judgment (inasmuch as it declares truth or falsehood in the moral domain), true or false? If it is true, there is at least one exception to the judgment and the proposition collapses. If the statement itself is neither true or false, then the proposition makes no truth-claim and may be dismissed as a pseudo-proposition.

Practical contradiction. (1) Moral knowledge, like all knowledge, is a matter of justified true belief. In our moral discussions, we frequently try to persuade others that our position is true by appealing to specific reasons or evidence. Despite occasional deadlocks, the entire enterprise of moral dialogue and conversion presupposes the capacity to discriminate between moral truth and falsehood. This reason-giving activity strongly appears to contradict the skeptic’s position.

(2) Our moral disputes presuppose a common core of moral knowledge. If we disagree upon an issue (for example, whether an abortion is justifiable in a given set of circumstances), it is only possible to disagree because we share a consensus on a number of moral values (life, freedom, rights or health). Rather than demonstrating our ignorance of moral truth, ethical disputes usually indicate a broad moral consensus shared by rational subjects. Further, exclusive focus upon borderline cases (such as whether I may lie in order to save an innocent’s life) seriously distorts moral experience and the nature of moral knowledge. While our society is split over the morality of capital punishment, it does not dispute whether we should kill everyone over forty.

(3) In order to act (the very object of ethics), one must choose between alternatives. It is simply impossible to remain a skeptic when confronted by a practical moral choice. I must cheat or not cheat on the examination. I cannot

LYCEUM

do both at once. Ethics tries to illuminate these choices by identifying and weighing the most reasonable courses of action through methodical reflection. The skeptic simply ignores the practical necessity of responsible action, which is the stuff of the moral life. As Jurgen Habermas argues,³ the skeptic's theoretical aloofness from moral affirmation vanishes as soon as he or she confronts the inevitable moral choices in his or her concrete life. Moral biography contradicts moral agnosticism.

Subjectivism. The subjectivist argues: "moral judgments only express personal tastes or preferences."

Logical contradiction. Is this statement, itself a moral judgment, objectively true? If it is, there is at least one exception to this pure subjectivism and the proposition falls. If this statement is only a personal expression of the speaker's personal tastes, the proposition makes no truth-claims and the statement merits no further consideration.

Practical contradiction. (1) By their nature, moral judgments have a universal scope. If I say "Stealing is wrong," I am claiming that all human beings should refrain from this act. If pressed, I should be able to explain **why** this act is wrong: for example, that human beings have a right to the property which they have earned. Theoretically, any reasonable human being should be able to grasp my moral argument. This universality is precisely what distinguishes properly moral judgments from the other practical judgments, such as those of taste or vocation, we make in daily life. The subjectivist simply occludes this universality.

(2) Moral judgments affect the actions of others. If I argue that we have a duty to feed the poor, I am claiming that all human beings have the obligation to act, and not simply to think, in this way. Surely, if I am going to make claims on the actions of others (and this is precisely what moral judgments entail), I need to appeal to a standard more universal than my idiosyncratic feelings or tastes. The subjectivist approach fails to provide me with the broad,

³ Cf. Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of communicative Action*, Vol. I, translated by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1984), 111 ff.

Contradictions and the Refusal of Ethics

objective reasons I would need to justify such claims on the action of others. My claim that “genocide is wrong” is surely built upon broader, more universal reasons than my claim that “Breyer’s chocolate ice cream is tastier than Pepperidge Farms chocolate cookies.”

Relativism. The relativist argues: “The truth or falsehood of a moral judgment is relative to x.” (X is usually a social authority. It might be the opinion of the ruler or the majority or the law or an expert elite.)

Logical contradiction. Is this statement, itself a moral judgment, relative to x? If it, is objectively true (therefore, **not** relative), there is at least one exception to the statement and the proposition destroys itself. If this proposition **is** relative, there is no truth-claim and the proposition may be dismissed a pseudo-proposition.

Practical contradiction. (1) We clearly do criticize the moral beliefs of other societies. How is this possible, if our moral judgments are simply locked into the opinion of the authorities of our own society? In our everyday and political lives, we do not act as if moral judgments were simply the shifting function of a given society’s prejudices. We constantly appeal to a moral standard (goodness or justice) which transcends a given society’s **beliefs** concerning goodness or justice. The two are not identical.

(2) More importantly, we frequently criticize the beliefs of our own society. It is impossible to understand the process of moral and social change, evidenced in a number of contemporary protest movements (civil-rights, feminism, prolife, ecological) without maintaining the distinction between what our society believes to be moral and what, in fact, is moral. Social protest is rooted in appeals to an order of morality which transcends and judges the moral practices of a given society.

Fertile moral interrogation often emerges precisely in the chasm between a society’s beliefs concerning the morality of a given act and the apparent demands of the actual moral order concerning the act.

Although skepticism, subjectivism, and relativism fail to offer an adequate account of the moral life, each approach presents a half-truth

LYCEUM

concerning morality. It is this half-truth which often fuels the seductive power of these refusals of moral philosophy in the popular mind.

The skeptic rightly underscores that people often disagree on the truth of a moral proposition and that moral truths are often less certain than logical or empirical truths. However, many truths are built upon probability rather than certitude. Further, the simple fact that people disagree on a given question, in morality or any other field, does not imply that a correct solution does not exist or that all proposed solutions are equally reasonable.

The subjectivist rightly underlines the subjective dimension of moral responsibility. One must, for example, always follow the dictates of one's conscience, even when the conscience is invincibly erroneous.⁴ The simple fact that one sincerely follows one's conscience in performing a certain action, however, in no way guarantees that the action is morally right. As W.D. Ross effectively argues,⁵ the goodness of the moral agent, rooted in the subjective posture of the agent's will, must be distinguished from the rightness of the moral act, rooted in the objective order of human obligation. The sincere slave-owner in the ante-bellum South might be free from personal guilt if he deals with his slaves according to the demands of his conscience, but the action of treating someone as a piece of property patently violates human dignity. Subjectivity constitutes only one component of moral life and analysis.

The relativist is rightly sensitive to how moral perceptions vary from one society to another. The relativist, however, presupposes precisely the thesis which must be proved: that moral beliefs or perceptions are in fact identical with morality itself. Moral experience, social protest and the phenomenon of moral conversion appear to indicate otherwise. The simple fact that moral perceptions vary from one society to another does not logically entail that morality itself so varies. Moreover, every society exhibits some concern for the core values of the moral life (life, health, integrity, education, affection,

⁴ Cf. Austin Fagothey, 207-223.

⁵ Cf. W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), 1-16, 65-75, for his distinction between 'right' and 'good'.

Contradictions and the Refusal of Ethics

respect), although the interpretation, hierarchizing and practical translation of these values into detailed moral codes often vary. The relativist tends to confuse the social occasions of moral education, where certain authorities clearly teach and enforce ethical values, with the determinants of morality.

Fordham University

Bronx, New York

Ideae Idearum in Spinoza's *Ethics*

by Fred Ablondi

In this article, I wish to examine Spinoza's discussion of *ideae idearum*, or, ideas of ideas. I will not be concentrating on what I believe the implications of this discussion are, viz., a theory of consciousness,¹ but rather I will analyze, as a preliminary to a study of consciousness in Spinoza's psychology, the specific claims being made in his discussion of reflexive ideas, and answer some of the questions which these claims suggest. The propositions in *The Ethics* which directly address the subject of reflexive ideas are E2p20-23.² It is important, I believe, to understand that these propositions should be divided into two sections, as the first two deal with the ideas of ideas as they exist in the infinite substance, or god, while the second two discuss them as they exist in human minds. It should be noted that human minds are not really distinct from god in the sense of being separate substances; rather, they are modes of Thought, an attribute of god.³ Thus perhaps it would be better to think of the two sections as a discussion of the same topic, i.e., reflexive ideas, from different perspectives within the same substance.

Propositions 20 and 21 are considerations of the *ideae idearum* as they are **in god**:

¹ For commentators who argue that Spinoza's theory of reflexive ideas is meant to provide a theory of consciousness, see Lee Rice, "Reflexive Ideas in Spinoza," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 28 (1990): 201-11; and Sylvain Zac, *L'idée de vie dans la philosophie de Spinoza* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), 124-8. I should like to thank Lee Rice for his helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

² Translations from the text of Spinoza are from Samuel Shirley, *The Ethics and Selected Letters* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1982). References to this work are internal. For instance, the reference to E2P11c in note 3 refers to the corollary to proposition 11 of Part 2 of *The Ethics*. Other abbreviations used in this article are dem(-onstration) and s(-cholium).

³ See E2p11c: "Hence it follows that the human mind is part of the infinite intellect of God; and therefore when we say that the human mind perceives this or that, we are saying nothing else but this: that god...has this or that idea."

Ideae Idearum in Spinoza's Ethics

E2p20: There is also in god the idea or knowledge of the human mind, and this follows in god and is related to god in the same way as the idea or knowledge of the human body.

E2p21: This idea of the mind is united to the mind in the same way as the mind is united to the body.

The first proposition is reminding us that, as it is an idea, and as all ideas exist in the divine substance, the idea of the human mind must also exist in god. P21 tells us that the idea of the idea of an object, which I will, following Bennett,⁴ represent as $I(I(x))$, is related to the idea of x , or $I(x)$, in the same way in which $I(x)$ is related to the object x . In other words, p21 describes an analogy which demonstrates the relation between the idea of an idea and the idea itself by showing its relation (that is, the relation's relation) to the relation between the idea of an object and the object itself. The analogy may be written in this way:

$$I(I(x)) : I(x) :: I(x) : x$$

The implication is that an understanding of the relation between the idea of the mind and the mind can thus be gained through an understanding of the relation between the mind and the object. Spinoza said previously in the *Ethics* that the idea of an object and the object are the same thing, considered from the point of view of the two attributes, Thought and Extension.⁵ It must be then that, in some way, the idea of an idea and the idea itself are also the same. And in E2p21s Spinoza says just this:

⁴ Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1984).

⁵In E2p7s: "Consequently, thinking substance and extended substance are one and the same substance, comprehended now under this attribute, now under that."

LYCEUM

[T]he idea of the mind and the mind itself are one and the same thing, conceived under one and the same attribute, namely, Thought. For in fact the idea of the mind—that is, the idea of an idea—is nothing other than the form (*forma*) of the idea in so far as the idea is considered as a mode of thinking without relation to its object.

But there is a problem here: it was said (in E2p7s) that $I(x)$ and x were the same thing comprehended from two different attributes, Thought and Extension, respectively. But $I(I(x))$ and $I(x)$ are not considered across attributes, **but from within the same attribute**, viz., Thought. As Bennett asks, why doesn't $I(I(x))$ collapse into $I(x)$, since they are both on the same side of the parallelism—what difference is there between them?⁶ The answer lies, I believe, in Spinoza's claim that $I(I(x))$ is "nothing other than the form" of $I(x)$; the idea of an idea and the idea itself share the same **formal** reality, though not the same objective reality.⁷ Following Bennett, we can say that $I(I(x))$ and $I(x)$ pick out the same intrinsic qualities, but not the same representative ones.⁸

There is a second question which arises out of the discussion of reflexive ideas, and it concerns Spinoza's comment in E2p21s:

[A]s soon as anyone knows something, by that very fact he knows that he knows, and at the same time he knows that he knows that he knows, and so on ad infinitum.

⁶ Bennett, 185.

⁷ The formal reality of an idea is its actual reality, viz., a mode or an act of mind; it is an idea as "that which represents." The objective reality of an idea is the representational content of the idea; it is the object "as represented." So for example, if my idea of the Washington Monument represents it as having the property "tallness," then tallness, which formally belongs to the actual monument, is present objectively in my idea.

⁸ Bennett, 187. It should be noted that Bennett claims to have derived this interpretation from Gueroult.

Ideae Idearum in Spinoza's Ethics

The question which this raises is whether I need to know the entire chain (i.e., that I know that I know x, and know that I know that I know x, etc.) before I can know x. I think not—the discussion above explained that while $I(x)$ and $I(I(x))$, or as I will refer to them for the moment, I and I^2 , respectively, have the same formal reality, they differ in their objective reality. In other words, I represents and object, while I^2 represents an idea. Likewise, all $I^x > I^2$ also represent ideas. So we may conclude that, with respect to their objective reality (i.e., the type of thing they represent),

$I^2 = I^{x+1}$, where x is a whole number > 0 , but

$I^2 \neq I$,

for I , and I alone, represents an object.

As was said above, the key to understanding this section of Part Two of *The Ethics* is, I believe, to note the shift in perspective which takes place in the move from propositions 20 and 21, which have just been discussed, to propositions 22 and 23. In the latter propositions, Spinoza begins to discuss ideas of ideas as they relate to the human mind, a particular, finite, **limited** mode of the infinite substance.

E2p22: The human mind perceives not only the affections of the body but also the ideas of these affections.

E2p23: The mind does not know itself except in so far as it perceives ideas of affections of the body.

No longer is the discussion of ideas of ideas from the point of view of how they exist in god; Spinoza has shifted the focus to how they are in human minds.

I have emphasized this shift because after reading p23, a question immediately comes to mind: if the mind is the idea of the body, does it follow

LYCEUM

that each human mind has knowledge of every idea which it contains, that is, ideas of every affection of “its” body? In other words, since for every affection of the body there is a correlative event in the mind, and since, as p23 states, the mind knows itself through knowledge of these affections, does it not follow that a mind has knowledge of all that takes place in the body? To answer “yes” to this question certainly goes against experience in that there seem to be many things which happen to my body of which I am unaware. As Bennett notes, if this is Spinoza’s theory of consciousness, it is indeed too excessive.⁹

It is my contention that in the transition of the discussion of ideas of ideas as they are in god (in propositions 20 and 21) to how they are in human minds (in propositions 22 and 23), Spinoza is saying that there is a change in the degree of understanding of the ideas possessed. Certainly god adequately understands all the ideas contained within god. But Spinoza stresses the point that the human mind, as finite and limited, can only have an understanding of these ideas which is somewhat less than adequate. What is important to note is that something may be true from one perspective, and false from another.¹⁰ For example, any idea x is adequately known from the perspective of the infinite substance, but may be (and most often is) known inadequately from the perspective of a human mind, a limited mode (or subset) of the infinite substance.¹¹

It is also important to understand why the infinite mind is able to understand something adequately which we may not. In E3p1dem Spinoza writes:

⁹ Bennett, 188.

¹⁰ For more on the relation between truth and adequacy, see Lance Richey, “Truth, Adequacy and Being in Spinoza’s *Ethics*,” *Lyceum* vol. V (Spring 1993): 21-36. See also my *A Spinozistic Account of Self-Deception* (Milwaukee: North America Spinoza Society, 1993), 3-10.

¹¹ That the focus of propositions 24 through 27 is on the inadequacy of the mind’s knowledge of the body seems to indicate that this is indeed Spinoza’s view. And in p28 he writes that “the ideas of the affections of the human body, in so far as they are related only to the mind, are not clear and distinct, but confused.”

Ideae Idearum in Spinoza's Ethics

[T]hose ideas that are inadequate in the mind are also adequate in god, not in so far as he contains in himself the essence of that mind only, but in so far as he contains the minds of other things as well.

Spinoza is not saying that god knows our inadequate ideas adequately because god is able to “look inside us” and see them more clearly than we can; rather, it is because the particular idea exists adequately in a finite mind **somewhere**, and **that** mind, as finite, is a mode of the divine substance, which is god. In the terminology of Bennett’s “field-metaphysics” reading of Spinoza (to which I am sympathetic), in the infinite cognitive field (what I have in this paper called the attribute of Thought), ideas of ideas are understood (by god) in one way (i.e., adequately); in a particular mode existing in a particular environment in the infinite field, reflexive ideas can only be know to a lesser degree.

As said, the aim of this article is to clarify the various claims made by Spinoza on reflexive ideas in propositions 20 through 23 of Part Two of the *Ethics*. Only once this has been done has the necessary groundwork been laid for a full development of a theory of consciousness in Spinoza. And as has been shown, the Spinozistic theory of self-consciousness will be in direct contrast to the Cartesian model, for the former, unlike the latter, will be consistent with the view that self-consciousness is not an “all-or-nothing” situation, but always a matter of degree.

Marquette University
Milwaukee, WI

Facing the Political Implications of Existential Choices A Reply to Putnam (and Rorty)¹

by *Michael Donovan*

Hilary Putnam's *Renewing Philosophy*², the publication of his Gifford lectures, concludes with "A Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy." While furthering John Dewey's influence on the recent revival of pragmatism, Putnam's lecture also poses a challenge to its contemporary audience. Claiming Dewey's political writings are insensitive to the role of apolitical existential (i.e., individual defining) choices, Putnam attempts to correct this deficiency. Interestingly, though Putnam's challenge can be read as an implicit critique of Richard Rorty's recent political writings, Rorty's references to the ironic stance of democratic romantics echo much of Putnam's account of apolitical existential choices. Rorty and Putnam share this "existential" challenge to contemporary pragmatism.

Yet a reconsideration of Dewey's political themes emphasizes at least two points. First, his political writings are not, as Putnam's lecture claims, insensitive to the existential pursuits of individuals. Further, existential concerns for individuality are never, contrary to Putnam and Rorty, apolitical. Drawing out support for as well as some of the consequences of these two points, this paper recognizes the importance of Rorty's and Putnam's challenges, while questioning their apolitical directions.
a reconsideration of Deweyan democracy

It is important that Putnam notes the significance of Dewey's social philosophy to democracy. For Deweyan democracy is not simply a form of

¹ I'd like to thank Lawrence Cahoon for his thorough comments on an earlier draft of this paper. This paper was written while I was a Junior Fellow at the Institute For Human Sciences, in Vienna, Austria. I am very appreciative of the opportunity this fellowship provided, without which my paper's completion would certainly have been much more ponderous and unlikely. Furthermore, the fellowship provided me the opportunity to discuss this paper with Richard Rorty, whose fellowship overlapped mine. I'm very grateful for the time and helpful comments he gave.

² Hilary Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); hereafter cited as *Renewing*.

Facing the Political Implications of Existential Choices

government; it's a society thriving as a society, humans flourishing as social beings. "Democracy is," to quote Dewey, "the very idea of community life itself." This is partially why Dewey associated his writings with those of Thomas Jefferson. Both men avoid an overly legalistic approach to politics, which takes government legislation and enforcement as its fundamental concerns. Government is a contributing part, but **only** a part, of our attempts to excel politically³. While offering a narrow interpretation, Putnam insightfully orients his lecture toward an evaluation of a "social/political" pursuit.

Having focused on this social/political task, Putnam doesn't challenge Dewey's themes *qua* social policy (" . . . Dewey's social philosophy is overwhelmingly right, as far as it goes"). Rather Dewey is insensitive to the limits of social achievements. Taking Sartre's famous example of a student facing an undecidable choice in his life, Putnam takes this dilemma not to be a political matter, the "look for a policy;" rather "individuality is at stake."⁴ Some concerns for individuality are addressed by Deweyan policy questions (e.g., remaining on unemployment rather than accepting a job offer because being an unemployed "artist" is a valued life-style); but Putnam claims that not all existential choices are political.

Some are, not the same thing as wanting to follow the "optimal policy;" or perhaps it is—perhaps the optimal policy in such a case is, in fact, to become who you already are. But doing that is not something that the advice to use the "scientific method" can help you very much with, even if your

³ Richard Bernstein is a contemporary philosopher who—with his attempt to recover a theory of praxis—has endorsed the idea that politics is not merely a legislative matter. Of particular interest is his challenge of Hannah Arendt's distinction between the social and political. See *Philosophical Profiles* (Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 238-259.

⁴ *Renewing*, 190-191.

LYCEUM

conception of the scientific method is as generous as Dewey's.⁵

Putnam notes that this apolitical existential vacancy may seem to be filled by Dewey's aesthetic writings, which complement his social/political themes with a simultaneous commitment to individuality as an aesthetic task. But Putnam is critical of Dewey's apparent bifurcation of human goods into the aesthetic and the social, which neglects the relation of the two. Concern for individuality is not simply a unique task, unrelated to our social pursuits. Rather, echoing an insight dramatically given in Soren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*⁶, individuality is a concern because of recognizable "**limits** of intelligence as a guide to life."⁷ As Kierkegaard encouraged a "suspension of the ethical"—a suspension of the exhaustive authority of rational ethical rules—Putnam is proposing a type of "suspension of the political": i.e., a suspension of the exhaustive authority of intelligible political policies.

Finally, Putnam's lecture can read as an implicit challenge to Richard Rorty's recent political writings. While Rorty proposes that contemporary philosophy needs to be reconstructed in hope of making it more democratic, Putnam takes Dewey to have done the reverse. Rather than giving priority to democracy over philosophy, Dewey offers an "epistemological justification of democracy."⁸ Rorty admits that Dewey articulated a philosophical complement to democracy; but Putnam's endorsement of an epistemological justification challenges Rorty on at least two fronts. Not only is a neopragmatic politics apparently **justified** by philosophy, but democracy's justification is **epistemological**. Further, Putnam's contemporary challenge, with its charge that Dewey has a **bifurcated** account of human goods, might be taken as an

⁵ *Renewing*, 191.

⁶ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973).

⁷ *Renewing*, 196.

⁸ *Renewing*, 180.

Facing the Political Implications of Existential Choices

implicit criticism of Rorty. Committing both to a public pragmatic social task and a private romantic concern for individuality, Rorty seems mistakenly to adopt Dewey's dualism, leaving himself open to the criticism that he is insensitive both to the limits of liberalism and the need for a "suspension of the political."

I

A Preliminary Reply to Putnam

Putnam's challenge presupposes a common interpretation of Dewey. We can claim that existential concerns for individuality are not appreciated by pragmatic politics if we associate pragmatism with an analogy such as the one Robert Westbrook's *John Dewey and American Democracy*⁹ recently evoked:

If anything, [for Dewey] a society was more like a track team in which every individual participated in a different event, or, better yet (if I may provide my own favorite analogy), like a basketball team in which the different skills of the members of a team worked together for a common end.¹⁰

Such societies not only can **not** account for, but actually restrict, some of our concerns for individuality. What if a basketball player wants to throw the ball through the basket in an adjacent court? What if she wants to throw the ball in the opponent's basket? What if she doesn't want to throw it in any basket at all; she wants to stop playing basketball? Some existential choices might be analogous to a player throwing the ball through the basket in an adjacent court. If these people maintain that they are still playing the game of basketball we might say something like "they can't tell the difference between reality and

⁹ Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithica NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

¹⁰ Westbrook, 166.

LYCEUM

fantasy.” We’re tempted to call such people some pejorative like “crazy” or “mad.” Some choices might be analogous to a player throwing the ball through the opponent’s basket. If these people seem to know that they are breaking our basic rules we tend to call them some pejorative like “criminal.” In fact, noting that she assisted an opposing team (i.e., society) we might call this “treason.”

I’m not suggesting that all these social restrictions are inappropriate. In many cases, they may be beneficial to both society and the individual. However, while some restrictions may seem perfectly acceptable, others are questionable. We mustn’t forget that some societies regularly keep some of their participants on “the bench”—i.e., outside society in some sense—for reasons like (1) “not fitting into the game plan” (i.e., not being useful for society’s single end) (2), “not being a **team** player” (i.e., not shaping your pursuits to complement others’ pursuits, jointly working toward society’s common end), or (3) “not accepting the basic rules” (i.e., not wanting to play “the game,” to pursue society’s common end). In such cases many people believe these restrictions are not acceptable, that they are contrived and dependent upon various forms of power.

But Putnam doesn’t address this complex web of issues. He adds yet another. He notes some existential choices might not pertain to our social concerns at all. Such choices follow the basic rules or policies of society, but also are not relevant to these social commitments. For example, one might be a Christian one day, a Buddhist the next; and this choice might not affect one’s role in society. When facing such choices, we run up against the **limits** of society’s basic rules (i.e., policies). If, as Westbrook’s analogy implies, society has a single end, an end **functioning to define our individuality within society**, then our political tasks are restricted to the policies suited for this end¹¹;

¹¹ Even given Westbrook’s analogy, Deweyan democracy needn’t entail an expectation that there are fixed cook-book rules in politics. In recent writings, Jaakko Hintikka has argued for the need for both definitory and strategic rules. Taking basketball as an example, the “rule” that a player cannot dribble, stop, and then simply start dribbling again is a definitory rule, defining the basic rules to follow in order for the game simply to function; while it is a “strategic rule” that, if a team is leading by three points near the end of a game, they should defend against the three-point

Facing the Political Implications of Existential Choices

and some existential concerns for individuality will not pertain to our social roles at all; and we will, while facing these apolitical choices, need to suspend our political pursuits.

This basketball analogy also might explain why Putnam claims that Dewey offers an epistemological justification of democracy. As Rorty notes,

epistemology views [conversation's] participants in what Oakeshott calls an *universitas*—a group united by mutual interests in achieving a common end.¹²

An epistemological-centered, essentialist, social philosophy will take society to be, firstly, fundamentally, united by a common end; and politics will give priority to this end. Taking this *universitas* to be Dewey's view of society, one can propose that our politics is justified by our epistemology; for a prior ability to know accurately a society's common end—as well as the ability to know what it means to know accurately a society's common end (i.e., to be something like what Rorty has called a “tribunal of pure reason”) legitimizes our politics¹³.

Whether or not Putnam does believe Dewey proposes this *universitas* (with its single end determining our individuality within society) and whether or not this is why Putnam believes Dewey offers an epistemological justification of

shot, letting the other team have a two point shot. If we are to call definitory rules and strategic rules “policy,” then (at least some of) these tasks' limitations can be noted.

¹² Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 318; hereafter cited as *Mirror*.

¹³ Putnam notes that Dewey doesn't rest democracy upon such “expert opinion.” But Putnam's Deweyan democracy reduces politics to the public policy matters that are best suited for society's single common good. While Putnam promotes open discourse as the democratic means to these rules, the solution to this discourse would still be the policy best suited for our single end. While not relying on the expert's opinion, it depends upon an opinion being expert. Thus, while distinguishing himself from, for example, MacIntyre (whose “doctrines tend to immunize institutionalized oppression from criticism”)—Putnam is still endorsing a democratized “tribunal.”

LYCEUM

democracy, is not clear from his lecture¹⁴. I offer this possibility as a way to explain why we might accept Putnam's conclusions and criticisms. But if one believes, as I do, that Dewey neither proposed an epistemological justification of democracy, nor is Deweyan democracy insensitive to our concerns for individuality, then we need an alternative reconsideration. Before facing this reading, however, let's turn to Richard Rorty's account of liberal society. For, despite the fact one might take Putnam's lecture as an implicit response to Rorty, a closer reading of Rorty offers complementary reasons for Putnam's "suspension of the political." If this proposed suspension conflicts, as I believe it does, with Dewey's liberalism, then contemporary pragmatists are left choosing between Dewey, on the one hand, and Putnam's and Rorty's neopragmatisms.

II

Rorty's liberalism

Renewing the challenge of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty's recent political writings have abandoned the claim that a society **needs** a philosophical justification. While eventually disassociating from Lyotard's use of "postmodern" to mark this point, his writings continue a postmodern distrust of any metanarrative, a fundamentally first narrative that justifies and provides the guidelines for all other discourse¹⁵. Taking Thomas Jefferson's attempt to

¹⁴ But it is suggested when an epistemological justification of democracy is defined this way: "The claim, then, is this: Democracy is not just one form of social life among other workable forms of social life; it is the **precondition** for the full application of intelligence to the solution of social problems." (*Renewing*, 180. My emphasis.) Taking "the application of intelligence" as a common end, Putnam's Dewey takes democracy to be a necessary first step toward this end. But, rather than being a **precondition** of the application of intelligence, my Dewey proposes that democracy **is** the application of intelligence. Further, my Dewey proposes that this task neither has, nor is, a **single end** or telos.

¹⁵ *Essays on Heidegger and Others'* introduction reads, "Heidegger and Derrida are sometimes referred to as 'postmodern' philosophers. I have sometimes used the term myself, in the narrow sense defined by Lyotard as 'distrust of metanarratives.'" But I now wish that I had not. The

Facing the Political Implications of Existential Choices

give priority to democracy over theological concerns as a clue, Rorty encourages a reconstructed philosophy that admits democracy's priority:

As citizens and social theorists, we can be as indifferent to philosophical disagreements about the nature of the self as Jefferson was to theological differences about the nature of God.¹⁶

Rorty admits that his writings might be post-philosophical in so far as philosophy is considered a metanarrative¹⁷. But he doesn't abandon philosophy! He does not find all philosophical discussion meaningless or absurd. For example, proposing we take the self to be like a "centerless web"—i.e., "as random assemblages of contingent and idiosyncratic needs, rather than as more or less adequate exemplifications of a common human essence"—he writes:

Such a theory does not offer liberal society a basis. If one **wants** a model of the human self, then this picture of a centerless web will fill the need. But for purposes of liberal society, one can do without such a model.¹⁸

term has been over used and it is causing more trouble than it is worth." (p. 1) See Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (New York NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991); hereafter cited as *Heidegger*.

¹⁶ Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (New York NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 182; hereafter cited as *Objectivity*.

¹⁷ However "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity" notes that: "In short, by telling a story about Kant as the beginning of modern philosophy . . . one might make the kind of fervent end-of-philosophy writings Habermas deplors look both **more plausible** and **less interesting**. What links Habermas to the French thinkers he criticizes is the conviction that the story of modern philosophy (as successive reactions to Kant's diremptions) is an important part of the story of the democratic societies' attempts at self-reassurance." (*Heidegger*, 171; my emphasis.)

¹⁸ *Objectivity*, 192.

LYCEUM

While liberal societies can be complemented by philosophical narratives, they are not dependent upon them.

The directions of Rorty's efforts—his challenging philosophy's status as a "tribunal of pure reason" (i.e., as a first and fundamental metanarrative that solely justifies society)—are multifarious. I'll focus on a few relevant themes.

First, Rorty implicitly challenges Westbrook's basketball analogy. As I see it, a metanarrative is needed unless we also drop the idea that society has a single end defining our social roles. If the end is fixed, ahistorical, then we need a fixed metanarrative; if the end is historical, then we need a historical metanarrative; but a prior attempt to know accurately a society's single common end is legitimate if there is such end. Yet if, as Rorty proposes, liberal society is not dependent upon a metanarrative, then society has no such common end. Society, too, is more like a centerless web.

Second, while giving rhetorical priority to liberal politics over philosophical concerns, Rorty doesn't blindly accept liberalism. "Unger, Castoriadis, and a National Future,"¹⁹ for example, reads as a confessional of someone bothered by his part in the "rich, polished, critical, and self-critical but also down-beat and Alexandrian culture of social and historical thought that now flourishes in the North American Democracies."²⁰ Admitting that the northern hemisphere's best hope may be more democracy in the southern hemisphere, he concedes to an ambivalent reaction to the north's "school of resentment," who

. . . tend to accept some version of the story of the West as a long slide downhill from better days (the time of "organic community" or "the polis" or some such—a time before "structures of power" started scrawling all over us). They see

¹⁹ *Heidegger*, 177-192.

²⁰ *Heidegger*, 179.

Facing the Political Implications of Existential Choices

no redeeming features in the present, except perhaps for their own helpless rage.²¹

Despite his ambivalence, he tries to maintain some social hope, insightfully emphasizing that without such hope we become “inevitably retrospective, and thus biased towards conservatism.”²² Conceding that we are “tragic liberals,” more likely to giggle at social hope, the article is true to his attitude toward metanarratives. It concedes that “only some actual event, the actual success of some political move made in some actual country, is likely to help.”²³

Third, this hardened stance toward contemporary liberal society is complicated by Rorty’s account of our “romantic” concerns for individuality. Nancy Fraser has offered a detailed study of the development of this theme²⁴. She finds Rorty “at pains” to avoid the utopian dream/nightmare of an aestheticized culture, justified by its ability to make life easier for romantic attempts at personal perfection. She notes three stages in Rorty’s changing response to this problem. First, he maintains that romantic politics need not elevate personal liberty over democratic equality; then concedes that romanticism and concerns for equality don’t mix, offering their either/or as the alternative to traditional politics. Finally, he settles into the irony of *Contingency, irony, solidarity* and recent essays²⁵. Having both a public commitment to liberal democracy and a private commitment to personal perfection, romantic intellectuals need a bifurcated final vocabulary. Yet our private attempts of perfection and our pursuit of democratic equality are not merely distinct. They are **conflicting** impulses! We are both egalitarian democrats and elitist romantics.

²¹ *Heidegger*, 184.

²² *Heidegger*, 188.

²³ *Heidegger*, 192.

²⁴ Alan Malachowski, ed., *Reading Rorty* (Cambridge MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990); 303-321.

²⁵ Also see “Freud and moral reflection” and “Moral identity and private autonomy: The case of Foucault;” both found in *Heidegger*.

LYCEUM

Without further detail, Putnam's criticism of Dewey's "bifurcated view of human goods" doesn't work as a criticism against Rorty. Rorty does not propose that one's private redescriptions are simply unrelated to one's politics. Partially because they conflict, the democratic romantic's dual commitments must remain ambiguous. However, Rorty still does maintain a kind of bifurcation. He restricts the democratic romantic's **romantic** impulse to the private; while her **democratic** impulse is both public and private. Her ambiguity is how she relates to herself, to her private self-description. Her public politics remain unambiguously democratic. Thus one needn't be a romantic to be a liberal. While liberal societies allow for romantic attempts at individual perfection, they don't depend upon romantics as a "model for other human beings."²⁶ In fact, such models are anti-liberal. Liberal societies, at their best, leave people alone "to be as self-inventive or as banal"²⁷ as they like. Romantic projects are but **some** people's private concerns for personal perfection.

Rorty's proposed bifurcation is closer to the view Putnam offers than that which he criticizes. The details of Rorty's suspension are simply more complex than Putnam's lecture. For Rorty, one's **personal** identity as a liberal conflicts with one's **personal** identity as an elitist romantic. But one's personal romantic pursuits do not conflict with her public political deeds. As Rorty writes:

Whereas Habermas sees the line of **ironist** thinking which runs from Hegel through Foucault and Derrida as destructive of social hope, I see this line of thought as largely **irrelevant** to public life and to political questions.²⁸

²⁶ *Heidegger*, 194

²⁷ *Heidegger*, 194.

²⁸ *Contingency*, 83; my emphasis.

Facing the Political Implications of Existential Choices

Just as with Putnam's individual-defining existential choices, Rorty's romanticism involves a type of "suspension of the political." Though he doesn't endorse the epistemological justification Putnam finds in Dewey, Rorty shares Putnam's sensitivity toward the limits of liberal society. Rorty accounts for the fragility of social hope, the hope that liberal democracies can successfully pursue their social tasks *qua* social tasks. And while applauding liberal societies for allowing pursuits of personal perfection, he calls these concerns private and apolitical.

III

A Preliminary Reply to Rorty

I endorse both Rorty's reminders that our politics do not need a philosophical metanarrative and his openness to the limitations of liberal democracies. I also believe that his attitude toward the romantic impulse—i.e., his insisting that such concerns are private—is an appropriate response to his account of romanticism. According to Rorty, romantic redescrptions impose themselves on nonromantic nonintellectuals.

This view stems from *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*'s edifying alternative to foundational epistemology. Calling discourse that accepts society's common beliefs "normal discourse," Rorty portrays an edifying philosophy as an attempt to incorporate the abnormal into our accepted webs of belief. Yet this task is always derivative of normal discourse. It is always a "protest"²⁹ against established beliefs. And hermeneutical redescrptions "can **only** be reactive."³⁰ The theme is expanded in many essays from the 1980s. For example, the 1989 lecture "DeMan and the American Cultural Left" states:

The intellectuals are people whose talents suit them for the sake of redescription—the task of finding new metaphors,

²⁹ *Mirror*, 377.

³⁰ *Mirror*, 378, Rorty's emphasis.

LYCEUM

words in which to formulate new beliefs and desires. They are the people who are not content with the vocabulary into which they were socialized, and who are able to invent a new one. They are self-creators, in the sense that they can escape from the moral and political vocabulary into which they were socialized and become new people by reshaping their self-image. But just insofar as they retain a sense of the needs of other human beings, they feel alienated from these others—all those who do not speak the new language which the intellectual invented in the course of reinventing herself. They also feel guilty insofar as they cannot relate their own projection of self-invention to the needs of those less capable of redescription and reinvention.³¹

As a reaction against “the vocabulary into which they were socialized,” the intellectual’s edifying redescription is always and only a **secondary** reaction **against** a society’s beliefs (i.e., a society of nonromantic nonintellectuals).

Thus the article “Freud and moral reflection” notes Freud’s “centerless,” “egalitarian” account of the self, which complements Rorty’s account of the intellectual’s redescriptions as playful exchanges between her various identities; yet the article also emphasizes that these redescriptions are to be private. And *Contingency, irony, solidarity* not only claims that the democratic intellectual ambiguously commits to democracy and elitist ironist romanticism³²; it also proposes that “in the ideal liberal society, the intellectuals would still be ironists, although the nonintellectuals would not.”³³ These are reasonable consequences of the account of redescription stemming from *Mirror*.

Yet we lack reason to claim that redescription must be the one-way gesture that Rorty portrays. Some individuals may seem less intellectual and

³¹ *Heidegger*, 136.

³² See *Contingency* 73-74 for Rorty’s precise definition of “ironists.”

³³ *Contingency*, 87.

Facing the Political Implications of Existential Choices

romantic than others—i.e., may seem less open to the existential concerns both Rorty and Putnam raises—but our interactions are much more mutual and interdependent than Rorty suggests. Further, our romantic re-descriptions do not always impose “our” language-game upon an other; they can involve redefining ourselves to include a previously unfamiliar person. Some re-descriptions are not the anti-social, alienating, gestures against which Rorty’s anti-intellectualism reacts; and these romantic pursuits not only are part of liberal society’s “normal discourse,” they demand that liberal citizens partake in **some acts of self redescription**³⁴. A participating citizen of liberal society takes part in romantic/existential matters.

While Rorty (at times) denies this, Putnam does not. Of course Rorty might concede this point yet maintain—with Putnam—that there are **some** concerns individuals face that are **solely** romantic or existential and **these** re-descriptions involve a type of “suspension of the political.” Yet a reconsideration of Deweyan democracy helps us understand that, contrary to Putnam and Rorty, even this claim is highly questionable. All existential choices have political implications!

IV

A Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy

I will now provide a sketch of some related themes in John Dewey’s writings. In doing so, I will propose that we can **not** claim that **any** existential/romantic re-descriptions are apolitical. I’ll propose that Dewey’s

³⁴ This tension can also be found between quotes in “Moral Identity and Private Autonomy” and “Unger, Castoriados, and a National Future,” both found in *Heidegger*. The first states: “The Romantic intellectual’s goal of self-overcoming and self-invention seems to me a good model (one among other good models) for an individual human being, but a very bad model for a society.” (*Heidegger*, 196) While “Unger, Castoriados, and a National Future” states: “In other words, if there is social hope it lies in the **imagination**—in the people **describing** a future in terms which the past did not use.” (*Heidegger*, 186; my emphasis.)

LYCEUM

reconstructed “organic” count of the relationship between individuals and societies implies that **all** existential/ romantic pursuits are political.

To begin, I’ll turn to the very difficult question of the relationships between individuals and societies. *Reconstruction in Philosophy*³⁵ contends we err if we refer to **the** identity of society and **the** identity of the individual in the abstract. In good pragmatic fashion, it maintains that abstract accounts neglect specific characteristics of actual societies and individuals. Thus who I, Michael Donovan, am, for example, involves (among other things) such specifics as my being a philosopher, as well as someone who has studied at Boston University; I enjoy playing and watching baseball; for a short while I lived within and learned from the city of Berkeley, CA, etc.

There is also an intimate **interdependence** of individual and social identity. Individual philosophers, for example, live in societies that are, to some extent, philosophical; societies that are, in any way, philosophical include philosophers. Individual identity is never divorced from social identity; nor is social identity ever separate from its individuals’. They are always mutual and interdependent. They have a type of “organic” interrelation.

The insight that individual identity and social identity are interdependent has often been associated with a view of society as homogeneous, taking individual identity to be fundamentally that which is common with the homogeneous identity of a society. But Dewey proposes that both individual and social identity are complex and plural. To quote

Reconstruction:

Just as “individual” is not one thing, but is a blanket term for the immense variety of specific reactions, habits, dispositions and powers of human nature that are evoked, and confirmed under the influences of associated life, so with the term “social.” Society is one word, but infinitely many things. It

³⁵ John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1920), see 187-213; hereafter cited as *Reconstruction*.

Facing the Political Implications of Existential Choices

covers all the ways in which by associating together men share their experiences, and build up common interests and aims; street gangs, schools for burglary, clans, social cliques, trade unions, joint stock corporations, villages and international alliances.³⁶

Understanding some of ways how individuals and societies are plural can help us appreciate that our existential choices always face political implications.

First, remember that we need not reduce politics to Putnam's policy concerns. Rather than **simply** a matter for legislation or policy reform, it is closer to the rhetorical task John Stuart Mill endorsed in *On Liberty*³⁷. Dewey proposes that the social/political tasks that determine individual and social identities are sustained through communication. A thorough analysis would, among others things, account for the development of Dewey's language studies—pointing to differences between 1925's *Experience and Nature* and 1938's *Logic: a Theory of Inquiry*—but it is important to note at least two points. First, this “tool of tools”—i.e., language—is that with which social/political reform is achieved. Quoting *Democracy and Education*,

a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated life, of conjoint communicated experience.³⁸

Second, political dialogue is not merely rhetorical in the sense of being a debate, the attempt to justify one of many competing beliefs. Rather democracy's discourse involves something like Rorty's ongoing attempt to describe ourselves, our relations with others, and—when needed—**re**describe both.

³⁶ *Reconstruction*, 199-200.

³⁷ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York NY: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

³⁸ John Dewey, *Middle Works, Volume 9: Democracy and Education* (Carbondale IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980); hereafter cited as *Democracy and Education*.

LYCEUM

In her critique of Rorty's romanticism, Nancy Fraser correctly points out the possibility that a society can entail conflicting descriptions. Though this is an important point, with considerable political implications, it is also noteworthy that this does not imply her image of a society as unique pockets of competing descriptions. First, this image risks overemphasizing differences. Conflict need not imply unique pockets, isolated from each other, competing to be the one accepted by society. While societies can (and do) have conflicting descriptions, the fact they are conflicting implies some sense of shared descriptions between these variants. Completely unfamiliar descriptions would not conflict. A society can have conflicts, but they remain **partial** conflicts, never completely isolating its variants. Societies have common shared descriptions. Second, democracies' ongoing attempt to eliminate conflict needn't involve the exclusion of differences. Fraser does not openly endorse such a stance, but taking society to be a collection of competing pockets can confuse differences with conflicts, which is a slippery slope to the exclusion of differences as the only way to end conflict. In contrast, while Dewey notes that societies have common descriptions, he also emphasizes social differences. Democracy needn't deny the common to allow for differences; it need only not maintain that society is **first and primarily** these common descriptions. At its best, it gives equal footing to the common and the different. Rather than referring to unrelated pockets, it is more helpful to maintain the old, but reliable pragmatic reference to interrelated **webs**. Or, we might speak of interweaving **fabrics**, some of which are wider (i.e., more common) than others; yet all of which make up society. Metaphors aside, rather than alleviate differences between conflicting pockets, democracy attempts to achieve harmonious interrelationships between **various interrelated descriptions**³⁹.

So far I have emphasized four themes: (1) the **always** intimate interrelation-ship of individual and social identities, (2) the pluralistic character

³⁹ In proposing this, I wish to maintain an **egalitarian** account of an individual's plural identities, which Rorty finds in certain passages of Freud's. See Rorty's "Freud and Moral Reflection" in *Heidegger*, 143-163.

Facing the Political Implications of Existential Choices

of both social and individual identities, (3) pluralism need neither deny a sense of the shared within society nor confuse differences for conflicts, and (4) political discourse includes the attempt to describe ourselves, our relationships with others; and—when needed—it redescribes both. We now can address the relationship of ethics to politics in Dewey’s writings. Not only will this provide a contrast to both Putnam’s account of Dewey (which takes democracy to be solely policy concerns) and Rorty’s privatization of the romantic impulse; but it will imply, I believe, that all existential choices face political implications.

With Dewey endorsing a type of character ethic, our attempt to develop a character involves the attempt to harmonize webs of various descriptions. It entails our defining who we each are. Being interdependent with social roles, personal identities are achieved by harmonizing social discords. To alleviate conflict between one’s role in business and one’s role in family, for example, is to redefine both our business and family lives. Ethical change always implies social change⁴⁰. Further social harmony isn’t achieved without also harmonizing one’s personal identities. Family life can not be redefined without members of the family redefining their identities within the family, without redefining their characters. Social change always implies ethical change. Taking politics to be concerned not with simply governmental policy matters, but social flourishing as the resolution of conflicting descriptions, Dewey redefines social concerns and, thus, politics. With social and individual identities, politics & ethics are **always**, in some sense, interdependent: “The old-time separation between politics and morals is abolished at its root.”⁴¹

The implications of this insight are important. *Democracy and Education*’s chapter “The Individual and the World” proposes the following:

⁴⁰ Thus Dewey would not have accepted Rorty’s distinction between “private morality” and “public morality” found in “Freud and Moral Reflection” in *Heidegger*, 143-163. While allowing for some personal ethical matters to be social matters, Rorty maintains that our personal pursuits of perfection (i.e., our “private morality”) are not simultaneously social matters.

⁴¹ *Reconstruction*, 197.

LYCEUM

The state of affairs suggests a definition of the role of the individual, or the self, in knowledge; namely the redirection, or reconstruction of accepted beliefs. Every new idea, every conception of things differing from that authorized by current belief, must have its origin in an individual.⁴²

Twenty-five years later, 1939's "What I believe" adds a new emphasis:

I have not changed my faith in experience nor my belief that individuality is its **centre** and consummation. But there has been a change in emphasis. I should now wish to emphasize more than I formerly did that individuals are finally the **decisive factors of the nature and movement of associated life.**⁴³

Rorty's writings suggest he'd accept the first quote, but the second emphasizes a crucial difference between these two pragmatists. For Dewey, individuals are the foci through which all political reform is achieved. This implies the following: rather than individual redescription necessarily being **only** a "reaction against" society (as Rorty writes), it is **only** a reaction against societies when they are not democratic (i.e., when they are not open to the "movement of associated life"). Individual redescriptions are, Dewey proposes, also the "decisive factors" of democracies' descriptions.

Furthermore, the ethical character of our social/political pursuits accounts for the fact that our individuality **can** place social/political burdens upon us. For example, some people need to face, among other things, their alcoholism and its effects upon both themselves and society; and other people may need to address their habitual tendency to use institutions to exploit others

⁴² *Democracy and Education*, 305.

⁴³ See John Dewey, *Later Works, Volume 14: Essays, Reviews, and Miscellany* (Carbondale IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 91.

Facing the Political Implications of Existential Choices

economically. Some must face both; and I, along with every person with whose confessions I have been honored, have faced and continue to face a complex web of such tasks. But, despite involving a pursuit of a type of positive freedom, the kind of freedom that is achieved through a romantic concern for individuality, politics need not assume any variation of the premise that Isaiah Berlin criticizes at the end of his “Two Concepts of Liberty.”⁴⁴ It need not claim that all humans pursue a common good. Positive freedom involves such a claim if society is a type of *universitas*, if society restricts our individuality to our relation to a common end. While demanding that we each face both (1) the social implications of the type(s) of person we are and (2) that this demands redescription, positive freedom need not be—oxymoronically—a submission to society’s common telos. We need not all, for example, read philosophy! We need to use whatever means help us address the ethical/political implications of who we each are.

Finally, while our existential choices don’t always place political choices upon us, our existential/ romantic choices always have political implications. Our existential choices are never apolitical (i.e., about which one can’t ask a political question). I believe this follows from Dewey’s reconstructed “organic” account of the relationships between societies and individuals. The simple act of buying cereal at a local market can evoke questions about whether the cereal company has (1) invested in organizations on either side of the abortion issue or (2) does or does not hire union labor. The fact such questions are always asked doesn’t mean the act is apolitical. It means the political implications are not a concern at that moment. This might be because the person has already seriously considered such questions and knows of no reason to doubt her beliefs. Or she might be ignorant of the political implications of her choice. Or she might have deliberately chosen to ignore the political implications of her choice. The first person is performing an implicit political act. The second is acting out of political ignorance. While the third person is acting out of denial. Yet all three acts are political. While this does

⁴⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969)

LYCEUM

not exhaust the possibilities (e.g., one might suspend judgment until more evidence is available), it emphasizes the following Deweyan point: no matter what reasons we may have for not addressing the ethical/ political implications of are choices, there are these implications. Because individuals do not live and act in a social vacuum, but have a type of organic—interdependent—relationship with their social environment, their actions will always have political implications. Even the “romantic” painter who abandons a society to live on a desert island by herself is performing a political act. Not only is she (in some sense) claiming this island as **only** hers, but she is abandoning her society and withdrawing whatever presence (good or bad) she may have had. This is not to suggest that going to a desert island is never appropriate. It’s just to note its political implications. As Dewey writes:

when self-hood is perceived to be an active process it is also seen that social modifications are the *only means of the creation of changed personalities*⁴⁵

V

Concluding Comments

Dewey would, I contend, discourage both Putnam’s claim that some existential choices are apolitical and Rorty’s claim that romantic concerns for personal redescription are separate from our political commitments. Having pointed out that one’s politics are not simply policy matters, a Deweyan democrat can respond to Putnam by pointing out the political implications of his existential choice(s). And a Deweyan democrat might respond to Rorty by saying that his Deweyan democratic themes are attractive, but redescriptions needn’t be **only** reactions against society. Since romantic redescription is not only a reaction against society, there is no need to restrict it to the private. In

⁴⁵ *Reconstruction*, 196; my emphasis.

Facing the Political Implications of Existential Choices

fact, such restrictions hinder a democratic society's attempt to redescribe herself. Those existential choices that do not raise political questions simply are, for whatever reason, not an issue at that moment. You still can always pursue political questions. If, when, and how one does so is, itself, an **ethical/political concern**.

Importantly, this need not obliterate the private/public distinction. 1927's *The Public and Its Problems*⁴⁶ explores Dewey's account of the private/public distinction. While not examining this text, I'll emphasize a consequence of it. As I see it, there are no choices that are **unquestionably private**. The choice to call a certain act private is, itself, the answer to a social/political question. Thus, we in the U.S.A. maintain that a citizen does not have to disclose how she voted in an election. She may keep this private. But this is a **contingent privacy**, always questionable and justifiable on political grounds.

While I've proposed that there are always ethical/social/political implications to our existential concerns, this need not mean that there is never a "suspension of the political." All choices having social expression, no choices are pre-given as apolitical. Yet one may choose to suspend her politics in a particular case. This does not mean that the person's existential commitment gets her off the ethical-political hook. She remains responsible for the political implications of her deed. This possibility is explored in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. Unlike Putnam and Rorty, Kierkegaard doesn't take these choices to be irrelevant to our ethical-political concerns. They conflict with the ethical-political concerns to which we absurdly simultaneously remain committed. Did Dewey neglect this possibility? Possibly. Yet I propose that Deweyan democracy denies the inevitability of a Kierkegaardian suspension. If we, at times, suspend our politics when making a particular existential choice, this suspension is a break-down of our ethical-democratic pursuits. Democratic hope involves, for a Deweyan, the hope that such break-downs need not be inevitable.

⁴⁶ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*.

LYCEUM

Someone might object that, while I have offered a sufficient alternative to Putnam's portrayal of Dewey, and possibly challenged both Putnam's and Rorty's "suspension of the political," there remains this new Kierkegaardian possibility, and—as has been declared so many times before—Dewey's democratic hope may be too optimistic. This is an important issue. I confess that part of my attraction to Dewey's writings is an admiration of his hope. Like Rorty, I think some social hope is needed to avoid becoming "inevitably retrospective, and thus biased towards conservatism." While unable, here, to offer a sufficient response to this Kierkegaardian challenge, I'll emphasize one point as a final gesture.⁴⁷

Deweyan appeals to democratic discourse need not deny the various conflicts that burden our ethical-political pursuits. As I've argued elsewhere⁴⁸, Deweyan democratic hope need not even deny the threat of violence that our social ordeals introduce. Marking what Sidney Hook called the "tragic sense of life," Dewey insists that the use of discourse springs from **ongoing** conflicts of goods. In fact, while challenging the view that our habitual descriptions are unrelated to each other—i.e., that they are like fixed grooves—*Experience and Nature* proposes,

By a seeming paradox, increased power of forming habits means increased susceptibility, sensitiveness, responsiveness. Thus even if we think of habits as so many grooves, the power to acquire many and varied grooves denotes high sensitivity, explosiveness. Thereby an old habit, a fixed groove if one wishes to exaggerate, gets in the way of the process forming a new habit while the tendency to form a new one cuts across

⁴⁷ For an intriguing account of Abraham's dilemma, see Edward Mooney's *Knights of Faith and Resignation* (Albany: NY; S.U.N.Y., 1990). Mooney explores some of the relationships between Kierkegaard and the writings of, among others, Putnam, Martha Nussbaum, Thomas Nagel, and Bernard Williams.

⁴⁸ See my "Pursuing Democracy as a Moral Task," *International Studies in Philosophy*, forth-coming Winter 1994.

Facing the Political Implications of Existential Choices

some old habit. Hence, instability, novelty, emergence of unexpected and unpredictable, combinations. The more an organism learns—the more, that is, the former terms of a historic process are retained and integrated in this present phase—the more it has to learn, in order to keep itself going; otherwise death and catastrophe.⁴⁹

Rather than eliminating the problematic situations that can threaten both social hope and our very lives, this passage suggests that the **burden** of these conflicts grows. Social hope needn't be a denial of our social troubles, nor the expectation that we will ever eliminate all of them—i.e., that there will be a “democratic convergence”—but the ongoing hope that we **can** face whatever problems arise. Rather than a hope that a utopia (free-of-ordeals) will be achieved, it might be the hope that we can continue to face an ongoing onslaught of ordeals while **remaining democratic** (i.e., not suspending our democratic politics)⁵⁰. It isn't the loftiest of expectations; but it's one that I believe we have yet to achieve.

⁴⁹ John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York NY: Dover Publications, 1958), 281.

⁵⁰ The topic deserves an independent discussion—which I hope to pursue in a forthcoming paper—but it's worth noting that Dewey associates this democratic hope with religious faith. *Reconstruction in Philosophy* proposes that, once we commit to **pursuing** democracy, once it becomes “a spontaneous way of envisaging life,” democracy “will take on religious value.” See *Reconstruction*, 210.

LYCEUM

Note on a Contentious Conditional

Timothy Chambers

Bear with me—I wish to raise the question one last time: does a beginningless universe imply an actual infinity of events?

Ever since Fr. Tacelli raised this intriguing question in these pages, there had been no end to the correspondence it has generated.¹ Subsequent commentators racked their minds to the limit, consulting such high-brow fields as set theory, and the notions of potential and actual infinities. It all made for interesting reading, but I fear that this detour was a mistake. I wholeheartedly agree with Mr. Larmer: “Unfortunately, this focus on the issue of whether an actual infinity of past events is impossible, has obscured the question of whether a beginningless universe does, in fact, entail an actual infinity of past events.”² So let us return to Tacelli’s conditional and see what we can sort out.³

Obviously the way to refute a conditional is to produce a counterexample: A logically possible way that the statement’s antecedent could be true and the consequent false, simultaneously. I think I have such a counterexample to Tacelli’s conditional: a way that the universe might lack a beginning, but still have a finite number of past events. What makes this example particularly gripping is that it’s a model today’s cosmologists are toying with in their quest to account for the evolution of our own Universe.

¹ R.K. Tacelli, “Does the Eternity of the World Entail an Actual Infinite,” *Lyceum* (Spring 1991), pp. 15-22; K.M. Staley, “Infinity and Proofs for the Existence of God,” *Lyceum* 3 (Fall 1991), pp. 15-26; S. Baldner, “The Past Just Ain’t What It Used to Be: A Response to Kevin Staley and Ronald Tacelli, S.J.,” *Lyceum* 4 (Fall 1992), pp. 1-4; R.K. Tacelli, “Whichever Way You Slice It: A Response to Baldner and Staley,” *Lyceum* 5 (Fall 1993), pp. 1-9; R.A. Larmer, “Does a Beginningless Universe Imply an Actual Infinity of Past Events,” *Lyceum* 5 (Fall 1993), pp. 11-18.

² Larmer, p. 11.

³ At points in Tacelli’s arguments, he substitutes “eternal,” or “everlasting,” for “beginningless”—implying that these words are synonymous, or near-enough-synonymous. I do not agree with these substitutions at all. To suggest that the conditional’s antecedent can be so-modified is, so far as I can see, question-begging. Hence, I must insist on the neutral adjective, “beginningless.” (Luckily, this slip of the pen does not carry over into the substance of Tacelli’s argument.)

LYCEUM

We could launch right away into my example, and why it represents a challenge to Tacelli's conditional. But I'd rather not. Instead, I suggest we begin at a more elementary level—to kick the dispute down a couple of dimensions, so to speak. Rather than discussing our four-dimensional universe straight off, let's ponder a two-dimensional version of Tacelli's conditional. Perhaps the insights we gain on this lower level will be helpful when we return to the four-dimensional case of the spatio-temporal universe.

The two-dimensional version I wish to consider is this: does a beginningless road entail an infinite number of mile markers?

Now, our answer to **this** question ought to be, "Gee, I don't know. It depends." The reason for this is quite clear: Resolving the issue depends on whether the road in question is linear or circular. If the road is linear, then I don't see how the conclusion can be avoided. But if the road is circular, like a race track, then it's a different story. On one hand, we cannot locate a point (except arbitrarily) at which the road "begins." But the circumference of the track is finite; thus, a finite set of (unnumbered) mile markers would suffice to, say, divide a three-mile track into thirds.

Notice, then, that this example is a foil to the planar version of Tacelli's conditional. Given a circular track, does every marker have a marker preceding it? Yes. Does that mean there are an infinite number of markers? No. So Tacelli's claim does not hold for a two-dimensional case. Moreover, we ought to note **why** it fails to hold: the conditional places no constraint on the road's **shape**. And in this case, the shape of the road is a non-trivial point.

Let's now return to the four-dimensional case. Does a beginningless universe entail an infinite number of events, or "minute markers"?

What I wish to suggest is that Tacelli's conditional suffers from the same malady as our two-dimensional analog: it buckles when we consider the vastly diverse possible "shapes" of a four-dimensional universe. Once we suggest the right model, we will have our counterexample.

Note on a Contentious Conditional

We need not think very hard to find such a case—happily, the physicists have already done the searching for us. In particular, the model we will explore is Jim Hartle and Stephen Hawking’s “no-boundary proposal.”

Richard Morris succinctly describes this model as follows. In Hartle and Hawking’s theory, he writes,

Time becomes something resembling a spatial dimension at very early “times.” Thus the universe has no real beginning for the simple reason that, if one goes back far enough, there are no longer three dimensions of space and one of time, but only four spacelike dimensions

It is easier to visualize such a situation than one might think. If general relativity held, the classical universe could be considered analogous to a cone, with the current universe represented by the fat end of the cone and the universe at its beginning represented by the point of the cone. . . . In the Hartle-Hawking theory, on the other hand, the cone would have a rounded cap. Time does not “keep on going,” but instead becomes something other than time when one projects back into the past. Instead it cooperates with the three spatial dimensions to create a four-dimensional “sphere.”⁴

We, therefore, have our refuting example. Is the Hartle-Hawking universe beginningless? Yes: there is “nowhere” we can say it “begins” (except arbitrarily). Does it have an infinite sequence of past events? No: once time has deformed itself sufficiently, there is no longer anything we can meaningfully call an “event.”

⁴ Richard Morris, *Cosmic Questions* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1993), pp. 138-139. See also Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), pp. 134-141.

LYCEUM

While the model I have just presented is a sufficient counterexample, there is one further point I wish to explore briefly. As of this writing, the Hartle-Hawking proposal is just that—a **proposal**. It is not (yet) part of the Cosmologists' Gospel, so to speak.⁵ So, what happens if the Hartle-Hawking model ultimately ends up in the theoreticians' trash can?

My response: it simply does not matter. To see why this is so, let's remember the terms of our challenge. We had to produce a way, or interpretation, such that Tacelli's conditional had a true antecedent and false consequent. This model need only be **logically possible**—it need not be the case. (The fact that the Hartle-Hawking model is being entertained, in scientific circles, as "physically true" only makes the model sweeter). All that matters for my purposes is that physicists can present the idea with a straight face—i.e. it is a model sanctioned as **mathematically**, and thus, logically possible.

"Some philosophers," J.A. Fodor once observed, ". . . hold that philosophy is what you do to a problem until its clear enough to solve it by doing science."⁶ I think this remark, even if not wholly true, is nonetheless a fair characterization of **this** issue, that of the Tacelli conditional. Once upon a time, philosophers were the only thinkers in a position to suggest possible models of our universe. But times have changed. Today, many a cosmologist makes her bread-and-butter by suggesting possible universes. What's more, the physicist can back up her speculations with mathematics: a sufficient condition for a model-universe to be logically possible is that it be mathematically viable. **Her** domain of inquiry is, therefore, not only the structures describable in **words** (the limiting medium of the Metaphysicist's search) but also esoteric mathematical structures which, though entirely **possible**, are downright baffling for human imaginations fueled by natural language alone.

⁵ Hawking is quite emphatic on this point: "I'd like to emphasize that this idea . . . is just a proposal: it cannot be deduced from some other principle. Like any other scientific theory, it may initially be put forward for aesthetic or metaphysical reasons, but the real test is whether it makes predictions that agree with observation." (pp. 136-137).

⁶ J.A. Fodor, "Propositional Attitudes," *The Monist*, 4 (October 1978), p. 501.

Note on a Contentious Conditional

The cosmologist's range of inquiry into this subject is, in important respects, a proper superset of traditional philosophical ruminations. As the fate of this entire discussion shows, we ignore the scientists' explorations at our own peril.

Tufts University
Boston, Massachusetts