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978-1-108-42442-4 — Healthy Conflict in Contemporary American Society
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The Difficulty of Imagining Other Persons, Reimagined

Moral Imagination as a Tool for Transforming Conflict

> To the Serbs, the Muslims are no longer human … Muslim prisoners, lying on the ground in rows, awaiting interrogation, were driven over by a Serb guard in a small delivery van … A Muslim man in Bosansi Petrovac … [was] forced to bite off the penis of a fellow-Muslim … If you say that a man is not human, but the man looks like you and the only way to identify this devil is to make him drop his trousers – Muslim men are circumcised and Serb men are not – then it is probably only a short step, psychologically, to cutting off his prick … There has never been a campaign of ethnic cleansing from which sexual sadism has gone missing.[1]

Many observers think the preceding report from the ethno-nationalist conflict in the former Yugoslavia illustrates the limits of conceptions of "personhood" or "humanity" as abstract moral categories. It illustrates, they point out, the potentially debilitating relativity inherent in such terms. In the case above, Serb soldiers deemed Bosnian Muslims to be lacking the salient features of humanity. Here, in fact, impressions of similarity inspired even greater cruelty. The Serb soldier, who might act honorably in other circumstances – who might be quite humanitarian to those he recognizes as fellow members of "humanity" – instead acts savagely. In this context, to confront the Serb soldier for his in*humanity* – accusing him of violating the basic human rights of his victims – is to introduce a non sequitur. It was not "fellow humans" upon whom he perpetrated violence – these were Muslim Bosniaks.

[1] David Rieff, "Letter from Bosnia," *New Yorker*, November 23, 1992, 82–95, as quoted by Richard Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality," in Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley, eds., *On Human Rights: Oxford Amnesty Lectures, 1993* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 112.

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The refusal to recognize others as persons is a recurring feature of nationalist, ethnic, and religious conflicts. Repeatedly, such conflicts are born out of decisions about who is and is not a candidate for recognition as "someone like myself," and thus who is or is not imaginable as fully human. "For most white people, until very recently, most black people did not so count," wrote Richard Rorty. "For most Christians, until the seventeenth century or so, most heathen did not so count. For the Nazis, Jews did not count." The examples quickly multiply. "For most males in countries in which the average annual income is less than two thousand pounds, most females still do not so count. Whenever tribal and national rivalries become important, members of rival tribes and nations will not so count."[2] In all such instances, the group in question defines itself largely by who (or what) they are not. A nonnegotiable element of the Nazi's identity was that down to the last drop of blood he was not a Jew, the white that he was not black, the Christian that he was not heathen, the Hutu that he was not Tutsi, the straight that he is not gay.

Rorty devoted much of his social criticism to inveighing against conceptions of humanity that were too narrowly circumscribed. At the same time, however, he argued against shortcuts to universal inclusion – appeals to self-evident principles or moral categories that purported to apply themselves. In this he stood at odds with much of modern Western moral philosophy, an intellectual tradition that sought to cure refusals to recognize others as "of one's own kind" by appealing to self-evident bases for including all in the universal category of "humanity."

Rorty agreed that the best hope for expanding the category of "people like us" was to render the basis for those divisions and exclusions increasingly irrelevant. But he was convinced that this change would have to be cultivated first on the ground and in practice, rather than dictated in principle from above. A principle, after all, will always have to be applied in particular times and places. Application will unavoidably involve the applier's understanding of an adequate implementation of the rule. Hence, applications of principles reflect the particular understandings and commitments that characterize the social and cultural context in question. Thus understood, applying a moral principle relies on a historically situated social practice that is itself embedded in wider webs of social practices and understandings that define its context and extend over time. Here, much depends on the ethical life of the group in question. This includes the conceptions the groups share (explicitly or implicitly) of

[2] Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality," 177.

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what it takes to count as a person in the first place – whether, for instance, one can or must be a man, white, a property owner, a citizen, or could be, for example, a corporation. For these reasons, Rorty recognized imagination as central to any ethical and political enterprise.

As Rorty had it, imagining others empathetically and expansively is indispensable for developing the capacity to recognize as like oneself those otherwise understood to be radically different. Imagining becomes a moral task, one pivotal for defusing the kinds of identity oppositions that give rise to ethnic, religious, nationalist, and racist forms of conflict. The central challenge of moral imagination, and one crucial to defusing these oppositions, is to cultivate the capacity and desire to make oneself vulnerable to the experiences and condition of someone that one may be inclined to find repugnant, or perhaps worse, for whom one is utterly unconcerned. These challenges often require imagining the position of those who are despised and oppressed. On this view, the work of moral imagination must begin at home, in the imaginer's proximate vicinity, rather than first presuming an abstract and universally inclusive conception of humanity. Thus, in attending to concrete realities, appeals to moral imagination countervail the predominant currents of modern moral philosophy.

The capacity to imagine others charitably and empathetically has become an increasingly contentious subject in recent years, especially among those who work to transform conflict. On one hand, many theorists and practitioners have come to identify empathetic imagining as indispensable to a more concrete, community-based, and ameliorative conception of justice. Such a conception contrasts with the "blind," impartial, and retributive model of justice that has prevailed throughout most western legal codes.[3] Furthermore, this strand of thinking sees moral imagination and empathy as central to the tasks of transforming conflict. It acknowledges that how parties involved in conflict frame it, and how they understand and imagine one another, powerfully influence which options for conflict transformation are available and viable. From this perspective, empathetic moral imagining is essential for building the conditions for a durable peace that cannot be conceived apart from a simultaneous pursuit of justice.

[3] Dennis Sullivan and Larry Tifft, "What Are the Implications of Restorative Justice for Society and Our Lives?" in H. Zehr and B. Towes, eds., *Critical Issues in Restorative Justice* (Monsey, NY: Criminal Justice Press, 2004), 391–404; cf. John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Peacebuilding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

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At the same time, appeals to cultivating empathy and moral imagination have met with searching criticisms from thinkers who are certain that robust moral foundations and universal principles are necessary for claims about justice to have sufficient gravity to be effective. In Rorty's case, a penchant for rhetorical excess, though motivated by the effort to prod readers out of entrenched ways of thinking, has fueled the confusions surrounding these debates. In fact, Rorty's rhetorical strategies have often provoked his critics to characterize their disagreements with his position as fundamental and irreconcilable.[4]

My aim in this chapter is to examine as charitably as possible debates over the place of moral imagination in reframing and transforming conflict. I do so in light of a broader concern for effective democratic social transformation. The account of moral imagination that I develop here will remain pivotal to the concept of "healthy conflict" that emerges over the course of this book. In this chapter, I sift through recent debates among philosophers, social critics, and literary theorists about the effectiveness of appealing to sentimental and literary forms of moral imagination. I weave together insights from these exchanges to arrive at a concretely engaged account of moral imagination. In particular, Rorty's appeal to moral imagination brings to light a range of pragmatist resources on which I draw, in concert with recent work in conflict transformation, to propose an understanding of "moral imagination" as a practice – a set of skills requiring cultivation, discipline, practical wisdom, and critical self-reflection.

One reason the appeal to moral imagination is essential for democratic social transformation is that it sidesteps the metaphysical appeals and foundationalist dogmas to which many prominent strands of human rights discourse are prone.[5] At the same time, it avoids the terminal

[4] For example, Michael J. Perry, *The Idea of Human Rights: Four Inquiries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), chap. 2.

[5] While Rorty's thinking about human rights developed considerably over the last two decades of his life, nowhere did he discuss rights as justification for coercive intervention in situations of mass atrocity in international contexts. If he had written explicitly of it at the end of his life, in my judgment, his position would have looked something like a mix between Michael Walzer's account of rights in *Thick and Thin* (which Rorty endorsed explicitly in his late writings) and Michael Ignatieff's characterization of rights as a cultural and political discourse. See Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994); Michael Ignatieff, *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

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suspicion and even rejection of human rights discourse that typify some excessive forms of cultural theory and power analysis.[6] Hence, Rorty's account proves an instructive point from which to intervene in debates about moral imagination and conflict transformation. Even its deficiencies are instructive. As we shall see, Rorty's deep skepticism about cultural theory and critique, coupled with his enchantment with utopian enlightenment visions, leads to an account of moral imagination that is too therapeutic, at moments even glibly optimistic, satisfied to achieve what amounts to cosmetic forms of tolerance. Thus, as potentially transformative as Rorty's focus upon moral imagination is, it ultimately suffers from two related shortcomings. It fails to cut to the structural roots and cultural hold of injustice, on one hand, and fails to conceptualize the depth and persistence – indeed the inevitability – of conflict and opposition, on the other.

Yet might appeals to moral imagination avoid degenerating into glib optimism, or therapeutic or voyeuristic sentimentality? Might they take with sufficient seriousness the ways that injustices and differentials of power become inscribed in social and political structures and cultural practices and understandings? I argue in the chapters that follow that the cultivation of moral sentiments and moral imagination are just as crucial to healthy conflict as are theoretical critique and organized democratic action. In this chapter I demonstrate, however, that empathetic imagining – when deployed apart from sustained critique of structural and cultural forms of violence, and without being interwoven with critically self-reflexive practical engagement – risks degenerating into therapeutic voyeurism. That is, it quickly devolves into emotionally self-gratifying interloping in the sufferings of others.

The History and Character of Moral Progress

Modern philosophy's quest for universal inclusion is littered with narrow applications of theoretically broad principles. Thus Thomas Jefferson declared the self-evidence of the claim that "all men are created equal," even though he owned slaves. Many of the shared understandings, institutions, and practices that suffused Jefferson's historical context posited slaves as only approximating the full human personhood to which the

[6] For a representative example, see Slavoj Zizek, "Human Rights and Its Discontents" (lecture, Bard College, November 15, 1999), www.lacan.com/zizek-human.htm.

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principles of equality and liberty applied.[7] Likewise, Immanuel Kant predicated his account of universal law upon the distinctively human rational application of the categorical imperative. Of course, in his view, that rational capacity was not available to women, children, and non-European races. Examples such as these quickly multiply.

With the advantage of hindsight, we twenty-first-century cosmopolitans now know those views of Jefferson and Kant to be false. Some argue that to hold our blinkered intellectual forebears like Kant and Jefferson accountable to the standard of "universal inclusion" as we know it today would be anachronistic. But this requires accounting for the parochialism that skewed Kant's application of the categorical imperative and the tragically far-too-narrow scope of Jefferson's phrase "all men" in the opening lines of the Declaration of Independence – and asking our successors to understand our own blind spots.

The forms of parochialism that we congratulate ourselves as having overcome teach an important cautionary lesson. Self-congratulation for reaching a universal codification and application of such principles risks blinding ourselves to the complexity of applying these principles in the particularities of culture and history. For instance, it is imperative to understand how "human rights culture" – recognized as a contingent and fragile achievement, and a still-unfolding bundle of debates, revisable documents, and contested conventions – progressed to expand the scope and fill in the content of formally universal principles such as Jefferson set forth. It is just as important to grasp how these evolving understandings gradually came to inform the moral intuitions and dispositions of persons that human rights-oriented cultures produce.

To speak of human rights culture as *fragile* is to say that the idea of human rights was not an inevitable discovery waiting to happen. Rather, it is an achievement that emerged and evolved through a range of contingent, and at times precarious, historical developments. Without sufficient vigilance, human rights may become subject to misdirection, co-opted, or perhaps altogether compromised. Their fragility makes it even more pressing to remain vigilant against contemporary exclusions analogous

[7] Jefferson himself explained that slaves' existence reflected much more "sensation than reflection," as their bodies were inclined toward sleep when not occupied with labor or some other diversion. Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on Virginia," in Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert Ellery Bergh, eds., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (Washington, DC: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1905), 1: 194.

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to those of Kant and Jefferson, and to guard against blind spots to which human rights frameworks may be predisposed.

Rorty endorsed the moral aim and encompassing scope of Jefferson's principle of equality. He argued that the limitations of Jefferson's account were offset by it being embedded in a self-correcting and expandable social and political enterprise, namely, liberal democracy. A liberal-democratic enterprise is characterized by discursive exchange based upon mutual recognition and reciprocal accountability among the participants.[8] Rorty considered these features to be conditions of the very possibility of democracy's experimental success. Mutual recognition and reciprocal accountability provide the grounds for hope in the progressive realization of principles of equality and justice over time. This positions democracy as a set of social practices and associational forms in relation to which democratic state theories and institutions, while indispensable, are secondary. The latter depend upon the former. In this scheme, Rorty followed John Dewey's account in his 1888 essay "The Ethics of Democracy." For Dewey, democracy can be a form of government only because it is more basically a mode of spiritual and moral association among particular persons and groups.[9] Democracy is first a tradition of mutual accountability, nondomination, and shared deliberation through discursive exchange.[10]

Rorty never shied away from asserting the possibility of moral progress. Indeed, he claimed that modern, liberal-democratic societies had achieved remarkable moral progress over earlier epochs, and are thus superior to their contemporary competitors. Nor did he hesitate to admit that his account of the direction that moral progress has taken, and ought to take, was marked by his own ethnocentrism. Rorty advocated

[8] Rorty's vision of liberal democracy was thoroughly historicist, contingent, and open-ended, as articulated perhaps most succinctly in his essay "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism," in *Objectivity, Solidarity, Truth: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 197–202.

[9] Louis Menand, ed., *Pragmatism: A Reader* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 196. For enlightening exposition of the centrality of this essay to Dewey's broader political thought – and its role as an early precursor to Dewey's crowning work *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) – see Melvin L. Rogers, "Dewey and His Vision of Democracy," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 7, no. 1 (June 2010): 69–91.

[10] Rorty describes himself as building upon the legacies of Dewey and Walt Whitman in conceptualizing democracy in this way. See Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), chap. 1.

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for "justice as a larger loyalty" – the persistent "expansion of the circle of beings who count as 'us.' "[11] He asked his critics to adduce an example of some proposed remedy for the problems of exclusion, inequality, cruelty, and injustice that is not, itself, similarly ethnocentric (including appeals to abstract, putatively self-evident, universal principles). Evident here is Rorty's particular brand of democratic faith and social hope. He unapologetically identified his range of democratic preferences as contingent. But this did not stop him from asserting their experimental superiority.[12] As experimental enterprises, liberal-democratic societies had encountered greater successes than their antecedents and chief competitors. Indeed, Rorty asked to be shown some mode of political association that has been more effective than liberal democracy in diminishing human suffering, in facilitating the expansion of private forms of self-invention and innovation, and in instilling dispositions to tolerate the choices and fantasies of other people. The success of liberal-democratic societies is evident in their having opened up greater opportunities for private self-cultivation than their competitors.[13]

And yet, the dual task of enriching the content and expanding the parameters of principles of justice and equality such that they encompass long-excluded people is intrinsically challenging. Any celebration of moral progress must be tempered by contemplation of the often grave, sometimes tragic realities its accomplishment required. In the case of the US, the sometimes excruciatingly slow expansion of democratic practices and principles of inclusion has required, among many other challenges, a civil war; political and religious movements for the abolition of slavery and women's suffrage and basic equality; a series of labor rights movements; and civil rights movements for African Americans and – more recently – gays, lesbians, and transgender people. Climbing up the moral promontory from which contemporary people identify the deficiencies of the abstract universals set forth by the likes of Jefferson and Kant has been painful and, at times, treacherous. And those of us who benefit from the moral progress achieved in previous epochs are not

[11] Richard Rorty, "Justice as a Larger Loyalty," in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 4* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 45n3.

[12] Richard Rorty, "Afterword: Pragmatism, Pluralism and Postmodernism," in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 273.

[13] Richard Rorty, "Dewey and Posner on Pragmatism and Moral Progress," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 74, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 915–927.

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exempt from falling prey to equally vicious forms of shortsightedness in the present.

The moral and epistemic foundationalism invoked by many moral philosophers and human rights theorists aims to justify human rights and protect those rights from the contingencies of history and context. Yet they risk forgetting the often tragic difficulties by which progress has been achieved, and the challenges in light of which further progress must be pursued. Moral foundationalism has been unable or unwilling to recognize itself as a socially embodied, historically extended, and contingent range of arguments. Promoting this self-recognition is the best hope for overcoming the tradition's limitations. Then one might invite human rights foundationalists into a shared project of democratic self-creation within which the emergence of human rights discourse, historically situated, is a vital component.[14]

Once we take the contingencies of history seriously, we realize that recognizing others as "like myself" – as deserving protection from harm and arbitrary treatment – is not something that comes naturally if only we will take the time to look at other people carefully enough. Appeals to the moral law within, history- and culture-transcending reason or intuition, or the image of God in each person cannot be presumed to suffice as de facto guarantors (because self-evident and self-applying) for the mutual recognition of shared humanity. *Looking*, rather, must be accompanied by *seeing*.

Seeing some other as one who has a moral claim upon me is a capacity that takes practice. It might become immediate – intuitive, second-nature, so habitually ingrained as to determine everyday perception. It might even attain "universal reach."[15] Nonetheless, it is a skill that must be acquired. As such, it is subject to adjustment and enrichment over time. It can be implemented in better and worse ways. Thus, hope that the moral

[14] Rorty attributes the concept of "tradition" that he has in mind to Alasdair MacIntyre. He endorsed MacIntyre's pivotal claim in *After Virtue* that all reasoning is "tradition-bound." See Richard Rorty, "Universality and Truth," in Robert Brandom, ed., *Rorty and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 1–30 (here 20); and Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 207. There MacIntyre defined a "living tradition" as "an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods that constitute that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes through many generations."

[15] Rorty, "Justice as a Larger Loyalty," in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 50.

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imagination will help overcome divisions that motivate conflict depends on the capacity to see others as like oneself. It requires the cultivation of empathetic perception and normative attitudes and intuitions that make such perception habitual.[16]

Expanding the capacities for moral imagination calls on the parties involved in some conflict to maximize their sense of others as being "like us." This positions the other party to the conflict as a person who feels and cares much as I do. On this understanding, "moral progress" is the movement toward a broader account of who ought to qualify as candidates for respect, care, and protection from arbitrary treatment – as creatures to whom some things ought never be done. Indeed, the possibility of moral progress is driven, in part, by the hope that it is possible to generate and sustain sentimental *antipathy* for – even intuitive revulsion at – certain actions, attitudes, and dispositions. Just as interning Jews for extermination, branding and whipping one's slave, and relegating black people to "colored only" lunch counters and toilets have become repugnant to the moral sensibilities of most contemporary North Atlantic societies, so might other actions in the future. A central challenge of moral imagination then becomes *how* to cultivate the conditions, capacities, and sensibilities that would make, for instance, misogyny, gay-bashing, mass incarceration of people of color, and exploitation of the poor obviously shameful and intolerable.

On this account of moral imagination, broadening the compass of the word "humanity" falls on educators, artists, social visionaries, and activists more than on philosophers or social theorists. In fact, educating the moral imagination and widening habits of empathy require sidestepping as much as possible the philosopher's scholastic rehearsal of abstract questions: "Do moral absolutes exist?" "If so, how can we access them?" "Why should I be moral?"

Rorty's skepticism about the inadequacies of abstract philosophical argument is matched by his skepticism about the usefulness of critical social and cultural theory for democratic social transformation. For instance, the work of unmasking the pervasive dynamics of sadism

[16] This was a pivotal insight that Rorty spent much of his career developing. For an especially early articulation of it, see Rorty's entry on "Intuition," in Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 4 (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1967), 204–212; for an account of the moral and social-critical implications of perceptual acquisition and cultivation of democratic normative attitudes, see Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), chap. 9.

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