



A Pragmatist View of Rationality and Cultural Difference

Author(s): Richard Rorty

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 42, No. 4, Mt. Abu Regional East-West Philosophers' Conference, "Culture and Rationality" (Oct., 1992), pp. 581-596

Published by: [University of Hawai'i Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1399670>

Accessed: 26/06/2012 17:56

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of Hawai'i Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Philosophy East and West*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

A PRAGMATIST VIEW OF RATIONALITY AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

Richard Rorty

I shall begin by distinguishing three senses of the term "rationality."

Rationality₁ is the name of an ability which squids have more of than amoebas, which language-using human beings have more of than nonlanguage-using anthropoids, and which human beings armed with modern technology have more of than those not so armed: the ability to cope with the environment by adjusting one's reactions to environmental stimuli in more complex and delicate ways. This is sometimes called "technical reason," and sometimes "skill at survival." It is ethically neutral, in the sense that this ability, by itself, does not help one decide to what species or to what culture it would be best to belong.

Rationality₂ is the name of an extra, added ingredient that human beings have and brutes do not. The presence of this ingredient within us is a reason to describe ourselves in terms different from those we use to describe nonhuman organisms. This presence cannot be reduced to a difference in the degree of our possession of rationality₁. It is distinct because it sets goals other than mere survival; for example, it may tell you that it would be better to be dead than to do certain things. Appeal to rationality₂ establishes an evaluative hierarchy, rather than simply adjusting the means to taken-for-granted ends.

Rationality₃ is roughly synonymous with tolerance—with the ability not to be overly disconcerted by differences from oneself, not to respond aggressively to such differences. This ability goes along with a willingness to alter one's own habits—not only in order to get more of what one previously wanted but also in order to reshape oneself into a different sort of person, one who wants things that are different from what one had before. It also goes along with a reliance on persuasion rather than force, an inclination to talk things over rather than to fight, burn, or banish. It is a virtue which enables individuals and communities to coexist peacefully with other individuals and communities, to live and let live, and to put together new, syncretic, compromise, ways of life. So rationality in this sense is sometimes thought of, as it is by Hegel, as quasi-synonymous with freedom.¹

The Western intellectual tradition has often run these three senses of "rationality" together. It is often suggested that we can only use language, and thus technology, to get what we want—only being as efficient as we are in gratifying our desires—because we have the precious, quasi-divine ingredient, rationality₂, which our brute cousins lack. Equally often, it is assumed that the adaptability signaled by rationality₁ is the same virtue as the tolerance I have labeled rationality₃. That is, it is assumed that the cleverer we get at adapting to circumstances by increasing the range and

University Professor of
Humanities at the
University of Virginia

Philosophy East & West
Volume 42, Number 4
October 1992
581–596

complexity of our responses to stimuli, the more tolerant we shall become of other sorts of human beings. When all three senses of “rationality” are lumped together, it may begin to seem self-evident that humans who are good at arming themselves with technical means for the gratification of their desires will also automatically adopt the right desires—those “in accordance with reason”—and will exhibit tolerance toward those with alternative desires because it will be understood how and why these undesirable desires were acquired. This produces the suggestion that the place where most of the technology comes from—the West—is also the place from which to get one’s moral ideals and one’s social virtues.

There are familiar philosophical as well as political reasons for doubting this assimilation and the consequent suggestion. The philosophical reasons are those shared by old-time American pragmatists like Dewey and the proponents of newfangled poststructuralist ideas like Derrida, and consist mostly of attacks on the very idea of rationality₂. These reasons are the ones produced in the course of the familiar attacks on “rationalism,” “phallogocentrism,” “the metaphysics of presence,” “Platonism,” and so on. The political reasons are those shared by people who believe, as do Roger Garaudy and Ashis Nandy, that “The Western countries are sick”²—and by those, like myself, who believe that the West, although not sick, may have boxed itself, and the rest of the world with it, into a very tight corner. For liberals who are also pragmatists, as I am, questions about rationality and cultural differences boil down to questions about the relation between rationality₁ and rationality₃. We just drop the whole idea of rationality₂.

Now I would like to turn to the notion of “culture” and, once again, to distinguish three senses of this term.

Culture₁ is simply a set of shared habits of action, those which enable members of a single human community to get along with each other and with the surrounding environment as well as they do. In this sense of the term, every army barracks, academic department, prison, monastery, farming village, scientific laboratory, concentration camp, street market, and business corporation has a culture of its own. Many of us belong to lots of different cultures—to that of our native town, to that of our university, to that of the cosmopolitan intellectuals, to that of the religious tradition in which we were brought up, to those of the various organizations to which we belong or the various groups with which we have dealings. In this sense, “culture” is not the name of a virtue, nor is it necessarily the name of something human beings have and other animals do not. Ethologists talk about the culture of a band of baboons as easily as ethnologists talk about the culture of a human community, and both mean pretty much the same thing by the term. In respect to this neutrality between the nonhuman and the human, and in respect to a lack

of evaluative force, culture₁ resembles rationality₁. There is a difference in complexity and richness between the culture of a farming village and the culture of Buddhism, the same sort of difference as that which separates the rationality₁ of the amoeba from that of the squid, but not a difference of kind.

Culture₂ is the name of a virtue. In this sense, “culture” means something like “high culture.” Prisoners often have little if any of it, but inhabitants of monasteries and universities often have quite a lot. Good indications of the possession of culture₂ are an ability to manipulate abstract ideas for the sheer fun of it, and an ability to discourse at length about the differing values of widely diverse sorts of painting, music, architecture, and writing. Culture₂ can be acquired by education, and is a typical product of the sort of education reserved for the wealthier and more leisured members of a society. It is often associated with rationality₃, as in Matthew Arnold’s suggestion that sweetness and light go together.

Culture₃ is a rough synonym for what is produced by the use of rationality₂. It is what supposedly has steadily gained ground, as history has gone along, over “nature”—over what we share with the brutes. It is the overcoming of the base and irrational and animal by something universally human, something which all persons and cultures are more or less able to recognize and respect. To say that one culture₁ is more “advanced” than another is to say that it has come closer to realizing “the essentially human” than another culture₁, that it is a better expression of what Hegel called “the self-consciousness of Absolute Spirit,” “a better example of culture₃. The universal reign of culture₃ is the goal of history.

It is often suggested these days that any culture₁ is worthy, *ceteris paribus*, of preservation. But this suggestion is usually tempered by the admission that there are some cultures—for example, those of concentration camps, criminal gangs, international conspiracies of bankers, and so on—which we should be better off without. It is sometimes also modified by suggestions, like that cited above, that some very large and prominent culture₁ is “sick” or “decadent.” There is a tension between, on the one hand, the theoretical idea that anything that takes as long to develop and solidify as a culture₁ or a species of living thing is worth keeping around and, on the other, the practical necessity to endanger or exterminate certain cultures (for example, the Mafia, the Thugs, the Nazis) or certain species (for example, the smallpox bacillus, the anopheles mosquito, the fire ant, or the krait).

I doubt that the suggestion that any and every culture₁ is *prima facie* worth preserving would ever have been made if there had not been a certain amount of confusion between the three senses of “culture” which I have distinguished. In particular, this suggestion would not have been made unless we had acquired the habit of seeing various cultures₁ as works of art, automatically worthy of appreciation as examples of the

Richard Rorty

triumph of culture₃ over nature, and thus inferred that the failure to appreciate and cherish any such triumph would count as a failure in culture₂. Such a failure would be philistine, insensitive, a betrayal of both culture₂ and culture₃.

The suggestion that we treat every culture as a work of art, *prima facie* worthy of preservation in the way in which every work of art is so worthy, is a comparatively recent one, but it is very influential among leftist intellectuals in the contemporary West. It goes along with a sense of guilt about "Eurocentrism," and with rage at the suggestion that any culture might be seen as less "valid" than another. To my mind, this set of attitudes is an attempt to preserve the Kantian notion of "human dignity" even after one has given up on rationality₂. It is an attempt to recreate the Kantian distinction between value and dignity by thinking of every human culture, if not of every human individual, as having incommensurable worth—as surrounded by the aura which, for persons who are cultured₂, surrounds works of art.

This nonrationalist version of Kantianism, however, often tries to combine the claim that every culture is as valid as every other with the claim that some cultures₁—or at least one, that of the modern West—are "sick" or "sterile" or "violent" or "empty"—empty of whatever it is that gives all other cultures₁ their "validity." Susan Sontag, for example, has urged that "the white race is the cancer of the planet"—a metaphor which suggests the need for radical surgery, for extirpation, the same sort of need as we feel in regard to the plague bacillus and the krait.

In the discourse of some contemporary leftist intellectuals, it sometimes seems as if only *oppressed* cultures counted as "real" or "valid" cultures₁.³ Analogously, there has been a tendency among modern Europeans who pride themselves on their culture₂ to think that only "difficult" and "different" works of art—preferably produced in garrets by rejected, marginalized artists—are "real" or "valid" instances of artistic creativity. This is accompanied by the suggestion that easily understood paintings by well-fed members of the Royal Academy, or much-watched soap operas produced by handsomely compensated hacks, fall short of the status of "art." To be cultured₂, among leftist intellectuals of the present day, is to be able to see all oppressed cultures— all victims of colonialism and economic imperialism—as more valuable than anything done by or in the contemporary West.

This exaltation of the non-Western and the oppressed seems to me just as dubious as the Western imperialists' assurance that all other forms of life are "childish" in comparison to modern Europe. The latter assurance depends upon the idea that one's own power to suppress other forms of life is an indication of the value of one's own form. The former exaltation depends upon a bad inference, from the premise that what makes cultures valuable has nothing to do with power, to the con-

clusion that powerlessness, like poverty, is an index of worth, and indeed of something auratic, something like holiness. I shall try, in the next section of this essay, to sketch a pragmatist view of cultural difference which avoids both ideas.

In the form it took in the works of its most important exponent, John Dewey, American pragmatism was an attempt to make the categories of moral and political thought continuous with those used in a Darwinian-Mendelian account of biological evolution. Dewey tied Hegel and Darwin together. He blended Hegel's conception of history as the story of increasing human freedom with Darwin's account of evolution, in order to get rid of the universalism common to Plato and Kant and of Hegel's sense of immanent teleology, the Hegelian idea that "the real is the rational and the rational is the real." Dewey dropped the notion of an ahistorical human nature and substituted the idea that certain mammals had recently become able to create a new environment for themselves, rather than simply react to environmental exigencies.

I find it useful, in restating Dewey's adaptation of Darwin, to use the term "meme"—a term recently popularized by Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett. A meme is the cultural counterpart of a gene. Words of moral approbation, musical phrases, political slogans, stereotypical images, and abusive epithets are all examples of memes. Just as the triumph of one species over another—its ability to usurp the space previously occupied by the other— can be viewed as a triumph of a set of genes, so the triumph of one culture over another can be viewed as the triumph of a set of memes. From a Deweyan point of view, neither sort of triumph is an indication of any special virtue—for example, of a "right" to triumph or of a proximity to the goal of Nature or of History. Both are just the outcomes of concatenations of contingent circumstances. For Dewey, to speak of the "survival of the fittest" is merely to say, tautologously, that what survives survives. It is not to suggest that there is something outside the struggles of genes and memes which provides a criterion by which to sort out good outcomes from bad outcomes. The process of evolution has nothing to do with evaluative hierarchies, nor, pace Hegel, do the factors which determine the survival of memes. When a Deweyan describes history as the story of increasing human freedom, she is not saying that there is a power—rationality₂—which somehow favors such freedom. She is merely saying that, given the evaluative hierarchy provided by *our* memes—the contingent historical outlook of a particular culture₁—past events and future possibilities are usefully connected by a dramatic narrative of increasing freedom, increasing rationality₃.

Before Dewey, Spencer had attempted to assimilate a triumphalist story of cultural development to a Darwinian story about biological

Richard Rorty

evolution. But Spencer tried to hold on to something like rationality₂ and something like culture₃. That is, he tried to hold on to the idea of an immanent teleology, one which provided a universalistic criterion of the “health” or “goodness” of an evolutionary or cultural development. As Dewey said in a 1904 essay on Spencer, Spencer’s notion of “environment” was “but the translation of the ‘nature’ of the metaphysicians,” and so for him evolution still tends to “‘a single, far-off, divine, event’—to a finality, a fixity.”⁴ Spencer, Dewey said, believed “in nature as a mighty force, and in reason as having only to cooperate with nature, instead of thwarting it with its own petty, voluntary devices, in order to usher in the era of unbridled progress.”⁵ For Dewey, by contrast, “Nature” was not the name of a force, but simply of the results of a series of chances. “Reason” was the name neither of an extra, added ingredient nor of what was “natural” and “essential” to our species. The term denotes nothing more than a high degree of rationality₁.

For Dewey, there was a connection, but not a necessary or unbreakable one, between the increase in rationality₁ which comes with modern science and technology and rationality₃—between efficiency and tolerance. As we became more and more emancipated from custom—more and more willing to do things differently than our ancestors did for the sake of coping with our environment more efficiently and successfully—we became more and more receptive to the idea that good ideas might come from anywhere, that they are not the prerogative of an elite, and not associated with any particular locus of authority. In particular, the rise of technology helped break down the traditional distinction between the “high” wisdom of the priests and theorists and the “low” cleverness of the artisan—thus contributing to the plausibility of a democratic system of government.

For Dewey, the New Science of the seventeenth century, and the new technology and the liberal reforms of the eighteenth and nineteenth, did not arise out of rationality₂, and thus were not examples—as they were for Spencer—of human beings realizing their “natural” or “essentially human” abilities to better effect. They were simply exemplifications of a new flexibility and adaptability which some human communities had come to exhibit. This increasing flexibility led to profound social changes—the overthrow of feudal institutions, industrial capitalism, parliamentary government, colonialist expansion for the sake of cheap labor and new markets, female suffrage, two World Wars, mass literacy, the possibility of environmental catastrophe and of nuclear holocaust, and a lot of other recent developments. The very mixed bag of results produced by this new flexibility—this increased ability to alter the environment rather than simply fend off its blows—meant, in Dewey’s eyes, that we typically solve old problems at the cost of creating new problems for

ourselves. (For example, we eliminate old forms of cruelty and intolerance only to find that we have erected new, more insidious, forms thereof.) He had no wholesale solution to offer to the new problems which we had created, only the hope that the same experimental daring which had created the new problems as by-products might, if combined with a will to decrease suffering, eventually produce piecemeal solutions to these new problems.

Obviously, increasing flexibility and efficiency can as easily be used to oppress as to free—to increase suffering as to decrease it, to decrease rationality₃ as to increase it. So there is nothing *intrinsically* emancipatory about a greater degree of rationality₁. There is no a priori reason why it should produce a greater degree of rationality₃. But, in fact, for various historically specific reasons, it has sometimes done so. One such reason was the prevalence of Christian rhetoric—a rhetoric of human brotherhood—in the communities which were the first to develop modern technology. Another was the fact that religious tolerance—thanks to the role of refugees from religious persecution in the founding of the United States and the compromises effected in various European countries in the wake of the wars of religion—became part of the public rhetoric of some of the great imperialist and colonialist powers. Religious tolerance—tolerance concerning matters of ultimate importance—often paves the way for tolerance of other forms of difference.⁶

Unlike Kant, Hegel, and Spencer, Dewey had no arguments, based on claims about the nature of rationality₂, to show that the rhetorics of human brotherhood and of tolerance of different opinions and styles of life are good rhetorics to have—rhetorics which pick out the right goals. He did not think it the function of philosophy to provide argumentative backup, firm foundations, for evaluative hierarchies.⁷ He simply took the rhetorics and goals of the social democratic movement of the turn of the century for granted, and asked what philosophy might do to further them. His answer was that it could try to change our self-image so that we would drop the whole idea of rationality₂ and come to think of ourselves as continuous with the amoebas and the squids, although also continuous with those for more flexible, free, and imaginative humanoids who may be our descendants. These descendants would inhabit a social democratic utopia in which humans caused each other far less suffering than they presently do—a utopia in which human brotherhood was realized in ways we can now barely imagine. The unifying social ideal of this utopia would be a balance between the minimizing of suffering and the maximizing of rationality₃—a balance between pressure not to hurt others and tolerance of different ways of living, between vigilance against cruelty and reluctance to set up a panoptic state. As good pragmatists, inhabitants of this utopia would not think of themselves as realizing the

Richard Rorty

true nature of humanity, living in accordance with rationality₂, but simply as being happier and freer, leading richer lives, than the inhabitants of previous human communities.

What happens when the topic of cultural differences is seen from this Deweyan angle? When we try to do so, the following questions become salient: Would this Deweyan utopia preserve the geographically bounded cultural differences which are presently in place today—for example, the differences between Buddhist and Hindu, Chinese and Japanese, Islamic and Christian cultures—or would it throw all or most of these into a blender? If the latter, would that be a mistake? Would something very important have been irretrievably lost? Or would new cultural differences—the differences between the new cultures₁ that would spontaneously form within such a tolerant utopia—compensate for the loss of the old differences?

When the question is posed in that way, the only plausible answer seems to be: nobody knows, but there seems to be no particular reason to hope for immortality for any one contemporary set of cultural differences, as opposed to hoping that it may eventually be supplanted by a new and more interesting set. In modern Europe, we do not much miss the culture of Ur of the Chaldees or of pagan Carthage. Presumably modern Indians do not miss the cultures that were displaced and gradually extirpated as the Aryan-speaking peoples descended from the North. In both cases, there is the feeling that we have lots of cultural diversity now, maybe all we need, and that the loss of Ur and Harapa are no more to be regretted than the loss of the eohippus, the mammoth, and the saber-toothed tiger. Given seven thousand species of birds, nobody mourns the archaeopteryx. Given the rich pluralism of modern Europe nobody cares much whether the last Gaelic or Breton speakers—or the last strict-rhyme-scheme poets or Palladian architects—die out. We regret the imminent loss of the birds of paradise and the great whales because we know that it will take ten million years for new species of equal grandeur to evolve, but when it comes to Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and the secular humanism of the modern West, we suspect that—given peace, wealth, luck, and utopian rationality₃—these cultures₁ will only be extirpated when new cultures, of at least equal grandeur, are available to take their places.

The rather facile answer given above suggests that I have picked up the topic of cultural difference by the wrong handle. For this topic is a live one today because of the suspicion that what I blithely refer to as “the secular humanism of the modern West” is a sort of omnivorous monster, one which swallows up all other cultures₁ and is incapable of producing diversity from within itself. This suspicion is linked to the further suspicion that the Deweyan views I hold—those which make up what Ashis Nandy

calls an “evolutionist, technocratic, pragmatism”⁸—already beg all the important questions. For, in the eyes of Nandy and many others, Dewey himself is simply one more representative of a nonself-critical culture, which, even as it prides itself on kindness and tolerance, is engaged in destroying all possible cultural difference—a culture₁ which is, at bottom, philistine, sterile, and violent, intrinsically opposed to the pursuit of culture₂ and to the development of rationality₃.

From Nandy’s point of view, if I understand it, tolerance and pragmatism—rationality₃ and the view that rationality₂ does not exist—are like oil and water. Nandy would say that the pragmatic insistence on seeing a human being as simply one more organism, and human cultures as bearers of memes none of which are more closely related to something transhistorical (such as Nature or God) than others, is incompatible with the sort of tolerance of cultural differences which would allow a place for what is important in the Indian tradition. Nandy, I gather, accepts the views which, in the following passage, he describes Gandhi as holding:

Gandhi rejected the modern West primarily because of its secular scientific worldview. To him a culture which did not have a theory of transcendence could not be morally or cognitively acceptable. He knew that the ideological core of the modern world was post-Galilean science which prided itself on being the only fully secular area of knowledge. He also knew that legitimation of the modern West as a superior culture came from an ideology which viewed secularized societies as superior to non-secular ones; once one accepted the ideology, the superiority of the West became an objective evaluation.⁹

Dewey would deny that there could be an objective evaluation of the West as superior *tout court*. For superiority is, for a pragmatist, always relative to the purpose something is being asked to serve. But he would insist on three points. First, *some* of the West’s achievements—controlling epidemics, increasing literacy, improving transportation and communication, standardizing the quality of commodities, and so on—are not likely to be despised by anybody who has had experience of them. Second, the West is better than any other known culture at referring questions of social policy to the results of future experimentation, rather than to principles and traditions taken over from the past. Third, the West’s willingness to go secular, to give up on transcendence, has done a lot to make this second achievement possible. For reasons I have already sketched, Dewey saw secularization as one of the forces which helped make a social democratic utopia plausible.

Dewey thought it unlikely that the West’s achievements could be made compatible with any religious culture, any pursuit of transcendence, more specific and less vague than that suggested in his *A Common Faith*. That book attempted to bring Darwin and religion together by

Richard Rorty

seeing the pragmatist denial of rationality₂ as a way of uniting the human and the rest of nature, in the manner of Spinoza and Wordsworth. For Dewey, “the essentially irreligious attitude” is

that which attributes human achievement and purpose to man in isolation from the world of physical nature and his fellows. Our successes are dependent upon the cooperation of nature. The sense of the dignity of human nature is as religious as is the sense of awe and reverence when it rests upon a sense of human nature as a cooperating part of a larger whole.¹⁰

Dewey wanted us to secularize nature by seeing it as nonteleological, as having no evaluative hierarchies of its own. But he wanted us to keep something vaguely like a sense of transcendence by seeing ourselves as just one more product of evolutionary contingencies, as having only (although to a much greater degree) the same sorts of abilities as the squids and the amoebas. Such a sense makes us receptive to the possibility that our descendants may transcend us, just as we have transcended the squids and the apes. Dewey had no sense of Wordsworth’s “something far more deeply interfused,” but he thought that “militant atheism” showed a lack of Wordsworthian “natural piety.”¹¹ Dewey did not have what Nandy called “a theory of transcendence,” except in the sense that he saw a utopia pervaded by rationality₃ as the sort of goal which makes possible what he called “the unification of the self through allegiance to inclusive ideal ends”—a phrase which was his highly secularized definition of “faith.”¹²

How does one decide between Dewey and Nandy? As I see it, the conflict between them is a straightforward conflict of empirical predictions—predictions of what is likely to happen if “an evolutionist, technocratic pragmatism,” even when combined with something like a Wordsworthian sense of community with nature, becomes dominant in a politically unified global community. Nandy thinks that this will lead to bad results, and Dewey thought that it would lead to good results—where “good results” means a utopia characterized by maximal rationality₃ and maximal elimination of what Nandy calls “man-made suffering.”

Dewey would entirely agree with Nandy that “only by retaining a feel for the immediacy of man-made suffering can a utopia sustain a permanently critical attitude toward itself and other utopias.”¹³ But he would argue that the West is likely to be, relatively speaking and despite its manifest cruelties, pretty good at retaining such a feel. He would base his argument on the fact that the West has developed a culture₁ of hope—a hope of a better world as attainable here below by social effort—as opposed to the cultures₁ of resignation characteristic of the East. The Romantic social idealism which has pervaded European and American thought since the French Revolution is obviously not the whole story

about the culture of the West, but neither is it to be neglected. Nandy, it seems to me, largely neglects this romantic strain.¹⁴

In a passage Dewey would have liked, Nandy writes:

[H]uman civilization is constantly trying to alter or expand its awareness of exploitation and oppression. Who, before the socialists, had thought of class as a unit of repression? How many, before Freud, had sensed that children needed to be protected against their own parents? How many believed, before Gandhi's rebirth after the environmental crisis in the West, that modern technology, the supposed liberator of man, had become his most powerful oppressor?¹⁵

Dewey, however, would pick up on the examples of the socialists and Freud to claim that the West had taken the lead in such an expansion of awareness of exploitation and oppression—and in particular that psychoanalysis and the Socialist International were as representative of the West as, say, the KGB and the Union Carbide Company. Further, Dewey would be dubious about the claim that modern science and technology have oppression built in, as opposed to being tools which are equally useful for causing oppression and for relieving it.

Nandy, however, believes that such a claim of neutrality is false. He decries the attempt to “operate as if the pathology of modern science lay only in its context”¹⁶—as if it were not modern science itself but only its use by particular people which is blamable. He insists that “violence lies at the heart of modern science”¹⁷ and that “today science has a built-in tendency to be an ally of authoritarianism.”¹⁸ By contrast, he claims, “the traditional cultures, not being driven by the principles of absolute internal consistency and parsimony, did allow the individual to create a place for himself in a plural structure of authority.” This, it seems to me, is Nandy's basic argument for the claim that “the main civilizational problem is not with irrational, self-contradicting superstitions, but with the ways of thinking associated with the modern concept of rationality.”¹⁹ Like Foucault, Nandy sees the culture created in the West by modern science as differing from “the traditional cultures” in that “modern science has already built a structure of near-total isolation where human beings themselves—including all their suffering and moral experience—have been objectified as things and processes, to be vivisected, manipulated, or corrected.”²⁰ Both Foucault and Nandy see in the modern West a panoptic society in which individuality—and thus rationality₃—is becoming increasingly impossible. Dewey, by contrast, sees the rising amount of leisure, wealth, and security available in technological societies as making individuality—and thus rationality₃—increasingly easy.

Nandy may be right in his prediction that the forces within Western culture which promote panopticism and prevent individuality will, in the end, outweigh romantic hopes for a utopia pervaded by rationality₃. But

Richard Rorty

I am not sure that we philosophers can do much to decide whether he is right or not. That is, I am not sure that there is much point in our debating what is “central” or “essential” to the culture of the West or that of India, or in debating whether, for instance, the presence of “a theory of transcendence” in the latter has done more or less for individuality than the forty-hour work week and the welfare state has done for the former.

All that we philosophers can do, I suspect, is to sharpen the issues a bit. Nandy sharpens them by insisting that we question the common Western idea that science is neutral between political and cultural alternatives. All I can do to sharpen them is to point out that Dewey suggests a way of hanging on to science and technology while dropping the notions of rationality₂ and of culture₃, thereby setting aside the claim of the West to “objective” superiority, where “objective” has some ahistorical, transcultural sense. Further, Dewey’s pragmatic, antirepresentationalist view that scientific beliefs are tools for the gratification of desires, together with his doctrine of the means-end continuum (the doctrine that new means continually engender new ends, and conversely), gives us a way of doing something Nandy recommends. It lets us, in Nandy’s words, “refuse to partition cognition and affect” and thereby “blur the boundaries between science, religion, and the arts.”²¹ For on a pragmatic view, science, religion, and the arts are all, equally, tools for the gratification of desire. None of them can dictate, although any of them can and will suggest, what desires to have or what evaluative hierarchies to erect.

It would be in the spirit of his criticisms of Spencer for Dewey to agree with Nandy that nowadays “we must look elsewhere [than to science] to find support for democratic values.”²² But whereas Nandi apparently follows Gandhi in thinking of religion as a better place to find such support, Dewey, with an eye to the dangers of religious fundamentalism, prefers art. Dewey accepts the traditional account of Greek art—in particular, the art of the Athenian sculptors and tragedians—as an important contribution to the process of secularization, thus bringing human beings out of a culture of resignation into a culture of hope.²³ He shares the typically Western preference for art which is not a handmaiden to religion—a preference for the sort of plastic art which developed out of Renaissance humanism and out of nineteenth-century bohemianism rather than the sort of temple decoration found at Varanasi, Nara, and Chartres. He shares the typically Romantic idea that the artist’s activity is less ancillary and more autonomous than anyone else’s, that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, the proper successors to the priests and the sages.

I suspect that this difference about whether religion or art provides the safest and most reliable counterweight to science and technology may be the crucial difference between Nandy and Dewey, just as the

difference about whether there is something called *denken* over against *dichten* is the crucial difference between Heidegger and Dewey.²⁴ For Dewey, it is the romantic strain, rather the rationalist strain, which should be preserved from Hegel and Marx and combined with a Darwinian naturalism. Such naturalism is fairly difficult to combine with traditional religions, but fairly easy to combine with the romanticism which is the least common denominator of Wordsworth and Byron, of Emerson and Nietzsche.

If Dewey were asked what activities typical of culture₂ are in the best position to mediate encounters between cultures₁, in such a way as to promote rationality₃, I think that he might look to the sort of novels and memoirs which are being written by people whose personal lives have involved a tension between cultures₁. I am thinking of books by people like Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Sara Suleri, Kazuo Ishiguro, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Ruth Praver Jhabvala.²⁵ Dewey would look to people who have had to find, in the course of self-creation and artistic creation, concrete, nontheoretical ways of blending the modern West with one or another non-Western culture.

Such a preference for small concrete compromises over large theoretical syntheses would accord with Dewey's pragmatic view that theory is only to be encouraged when likely to facilitate practice. My own hunch is that attempts to erect large theoretical oppositions between, or effect large theoretical syntheses of, the "spirit" or the "essence" of distinct cultures₁ are only stopgaps and makeshifts. The real work of building a multicultural global utopia, I suspect, will be done by people who, in the course of the next few centuries,²⁶ unravel each culture₁ into a multiplicity of fine component threads, and then weave these threads together with equally fine threads drawn from other cultures₁—thus promoting the sort of variety-in-unity characteristic of rationality₃. The resulting tapestry will, with luck, be something we can now barely imagine: a culture₁ which will find the cultures₁ of contemporary America and contemporary India as suitable for benign neglect as we find those of Harapa or Carthage.

NOTES

1 – Milan Kundera has described a utopia pervaded by rationality₃ as the "paradise of individuals" envisaged by the European novel. I discuss Kundera's conception of the role of the novel in the context of East-West cultural comparison in my "Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens," in *Culture and Modernity: East-West Philosophic Perspectives*, ed. Eliot Deutsch (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), pp. 3–20,

Richard Rorty

and reprinted in my *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). I sketch a version of this paradise as “an intricately-textured collage of private narcissism and public pragmatism,” a “bazaar surrounded by lots and lots of exclusive private clubs,” at the end of my “On Ethnocentrism: A Reply to Clifford Geertz,” reprinted in my *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

- 2 – Roger Garaudy, “Foreword,” in Ashis Nandy, *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. x.
- 3 – This goes along with a tendency to try for a “theory of oppression,” an attempt which seems to me as likely to be fruitless as are theories of evil, or of power. I think that abstraction and generalization have, in such attempts, gone one step too far, and that we need to get back to the rough ground.
- 4 – John Dewey, *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899–1924*, vol. 3, *Essays on the New Empiricism, 1903–1906*, ed. Patricia R. Baysinger (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), p. 208.
- 5 – *Ibid.*, p. 203.
- 6 – On the role of religious tolerance in Rawls’ account of liberal justice, see my “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” reprinted in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*.
- 7 – Dewey’s attitude toward the idea that philosophers might provide foundations for social practices resembled that of Wittgenstein, who said, in reference to the Frege-Russell notion that the foundations of mathematics can be found in logic: “The mathematical problems of what is called foundations are no more the foundations of mathematics for us than the painted rock is the support of the painted tower” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, ed. G. H. Von Wright and R. Rhees, trans. G. E. Anscombe [Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1978; rev. ed., 1983], vol. 8, p. 16). In other words, the philosophy of X (where X is something like mathematics, art, science, class struggle, or postcolonialism) is just more X, and cannot support X—although it may expand, clarify, or improve X.
- 8 – Nandy, *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias*, p. xvi.
- 9 – *Ibid.*, pp. 129–130.
- 10 – John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, 1934), p. 25.
- 11 – *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- 12 – See *ibid.*, p. 33.

Philosophy East & West 13 – Nandy, *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias*, p. 9.

- 14 – Nandy mentions this strain in *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias* (pp. 82 ff.), but he seems to think that it cannot be reconciled, as Dewey tried to reconcile it, with an enthusiasm for technology. So he sees Thoreau, Ruskin, and Tolstoy as the true heirs of Wordsworth and Blake. He thus resembles the so-called “Young American” critics of Dewey—Van Wyck Brooks, Lewis Mumford, Waldo Frank, and Randolph Bourne—who had many of the same heroes. See the discussion of the hostility of these four men toward Dewey’s technologism in Casey Blake, *Beloved Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).
- 15 – Nandy, *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias*, p. 22.
- 16 – *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- 17 – *Ibid.*
- 18 – *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- 19 – *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- 20 – *Ibid.*
- 21 – *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- 22 – *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- 23 – For an account of the West as the former sort of culture prior to the late Middle Ages and as the latter sort of culture thereafter, see Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, ed. Tom McCarthy, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1983). Blumenberg argues that at a certain point (thanks to Ockhamite themes developed by Francis Bacon) the West switched from pinning its hope on another world to the chance that future generations might be happier and freer than their ancestors.
- 24 – On the Heidegger-Dewey contrast, see the first two essays in my *Essays on Heidegger and Others*.
- 25 – See, for an example of the attitude and the practice that I have in mind here, Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Is the Post- in Post-Modernism the Post- in Post-Colonial?” *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Winter 1991): 336–357. On p. 354, Appiah says:

If there is a lesson in the broad shape of this circulation of cultures, it is surely that we are all already contaminated by each other, that there is no longer a fully autochthonous *echt*-African culture awaiting salvage by our artists (just as there is, of course, no American culture without African roots). And there is a clear sense in some postcolonial writing that the postulation of a unitary Africa over against a monolithic West—the binarism of Self and Other—is the last of the shibboleths of the modernizers that we must learn to live without.

Richard Rorty

On p. 356, Appiah quotes Suleri as saying that she is tired of being an “otherness machine” and notes that one effect of colonialism has been to force postcolonial intellectuals to have “the manufacture of alterity as our principal role.” Appiah takes as the emblem of his essay a recent wooden Yoruba sculpture called *Man with a Bicycle*, which, Appiah says,

is produced by someone who does not care that the bicycle is the white man’s invention; it is not there to be Other to the Yoruba Self; it is there because someone cared for its solidity; it is there because it will take us further than our feet will take us; it is there because machines are now as African as novelists . . . and as fabricated as the kingdom of Nakem.” (P. 357)

For another example of fruitful contamination, consider the kind of America we may have in the middle of the next century, a period when American yuppies may need not only to learn Japanese, but to know a lot about traditional Japanese culture, in order to get a promotion within an American economy owned and directed by Americanized Japanese.

- 26 – Do we *have* a few centuries? Perhaps not. The possibility of nuclear holocaust or environmental catastrophe will not go away, if it ever does, for a long time—and if either happens, it will be fair, although a bit pointless, to blame “the West.” But short odds seems no reason to stop constructing utopias.