

Peter Augustine Lawler

Democratic Therapy and the End of Community

My purpose is to explore the relationship between modern democracy and community. While appreciating the nobility of the efforts of the authors of *Habits of the Heart* to preserve human excellence by defending community against heart-contracting privatization, I do not think they learned enough from Tocqueville to understand the challenge modern thought poses to human community and dignity. They are unable to resist effectively the therapeutic project of Richard Rorty and others to free human beings from communitarian misery for private happiness. Such resistance requires, as Tocqueville explains, recognition that human beings have genuinely spiritual needs and experiences that cannot be satisfied by any form of social or political reform.

Habits of the Heart was written in opposition to individualism, which the authors see, with the support of Tocqueville, as a malady of the heart specific to our time. But the authors tend to differ from Tocqueville in their description of what individualism is, as well as in their inability to see that individualism properly understood is the theoretical culmination of the democratic or egalitarian movement in thought. They tend to identify individualism with aggressively competitive selfish-

ness, based on the illusion of the possibility of individual self-sufficiency. But for Tocqueville, individualism is neither aggressive nor passionate. Rather, it is apathetic withdrawal into oneself, an existence without distinctively human passions or interests, without love or hate. It is a malady of the heart, characteristic of democracy, that causes the heart to contract to a subhuman size.

The authors of *Habits*, to their credit, do sometimes see with Tocqueville that the excessive restlessness characteristic of modern life may well become the cause of excessive passivity. The Tocquevillian paradox is that too much independence leads to unprecedented dependence. Individuals might find their unsupported liberty so difficult or hateful that they will surrender it completely to impersonal forces and institutions beyond their control. The misery of what the authors call “utilitarian individualism” produces “therapeutic” antidotes, the most effective of which is the imaginative surrender of one’s individuality, a passive surrender of the self’s distinctiveness and so its neediness.

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In the name of consistency and contentment, the genuinely therapeutic or passive view of self-sufficiency eventually triumphs over the competitive, ruggedly individualistic one. Because therapeutic theory is obviously more consistent or egalitarian than individualistic or “neocapitalist” theory, *Habits’* authors, despite themselves, really do show how egalitarianism might triumph not over individualism so much as individuality. They agree at one point with Tocqueville, although without acknowledging it, that the most radically therapeutic theory is Emersonian or New Age pantheism, a denial of all individuality through the divinization of everything.

The affirmation by *Habits’* authors of political participation or communal association over apathetic passivity is meant to preserve a distinctively human capacity against the most comprehensive form of egalitarianism. They resist the wholly democratic triumph of the therapeutic, but their resistance is still too democratic to be effective. It is on behalf of the universal human community, which comes into being as a national and potentially global “social movement” in pursuit of the political common good or “substantive” justice.

The authors, in the name of a wholly consistent understanding of egalitarian justice, have a very un-Tocquevillian suspicion of the “exclusionary” character of volunteerism and localism. Their suspicion is evidence for Tocqueville’s concern that the love of equality erodes human love as it actually exists. The heart-enlarging effects of political participation can only occur in the context of strong, free local institutions. The particularity or “local chauvinism” of the love such institutions inspire will always fall short of the strict standards of egalitarian justice. The resulting attachments and practices seem to *Habits’* authors to be “irrationally constricting,” and they actually assert that “Our

present radical individualism is...a justified reaction” against, as well as a technique for, liberation from them.

But the most important shortcoming of *Habits’* analysis is its unsupported, rather Rousseauian assertion that political reform, by itself, could ever be an effective antidote to individualism. Its authors tend to reduce religion to civil religion, to support for that reform. They follow Rousseau and Marx in saying that the anxious, restless misery of the Americans is caused by political institutions supporting capitalistic economic structures. Their promise is that anxious misery can be eradicated by political reform on behalf of economic justice (meaning egalitarian redistribution).

Tocqueville—echoing Pascal—believed that Americans are anxious and restless, most of all, in the absence of God. Their condition is to experience themselves too readily as contingent, temporary accidents, as self-conscious mortals, and nothing more. Their religion is too calculating and occupies too little of their lives to be sufficient for meeting their ineradicable spiritual needs. Americans are restless because they believe they are unable to live well with the truth about their time-bound, ultimately death-defined, existences.

From this perspective, the Americans’ restlessness, their incessant pursuit of both material prosperity and perfect political equality, is a progressively less effective diversion from what they really know. As their diversions fail, individualism, or apathetic withdrawal, becomes more attractive. Individualism, finally, is a return of human beings to the brutish condition of Rousseau’s state of nature. It is their complete surrender, Tocqueville says, of their concern for the future, a total immersion in the present. It is, we can say, a therapeutic judgment that it is better not to be moved by one’s awareness of one’s death. That

judgment, Tocqueville asserts, is mistaken. He affirms human liberty in all its greatness and misery. But he also believes that Americans must have some religious belief, which can never in Christian or post-Christian times be reduced to civil religion, in order to affirm the goodness of their individuality in spite of their misery.

Tocqueville also gives a more plausible and precise account of the place of therapeutic expertise in American democracy than is presented in *Habits*. He observes that democratic social conditions, created largely by a dogmatic distrust of all authoritative belief as arbitrarily inegalitarian, make the individual feel too intellectually weak, too uncertain and disoriented. He has no standpoint by which to resist intellectual domination by public opinion. That domination, unlike that of aristocrats or priests, does not seem to be undemocratic, because it seems to be the rule of no one in particular.

Democratic public opinion, Tocqueville goes on to explain, is shaped by its growing tendency to be expressed in the language of impersonal or deterministic science. In democratic language, “metaphysics and theology slowly lose ground.” The Americans are Cartesian skeptics without having read a word of Descartes. The best exponent of this Tocquevillian perspective in our time was the novelist Walker Percy. As Percy put it, Americans are pop Cartesians. Their language and their opinions are formed by their deference to experts who popularize Cartesian or materialistic science, who claim authority not on the basis of their personal judgments but on the objective authority of science. This deference also appears not to be undemocratic. The expert determination of public opinion—surely easier now than ever through the use of the electronic media—appears to be the rule of no one in particular.

Americans are told to believe by various

sorts of enlightened, scientific experts that all their experiences have a materialistic, scientific explanation, or can be reduced to the causes and effects of electrons, neurons, and so forth. They are told to believe that, like all other animals, human beings will be content in good environments, and miserable in bad or materially deprived ones. The pop Cartesian experts—therapists, counselors, Phil Donahue, Carl Sagan (to use Percy’s famous examples), and so forth—say that human beings should dismiss as a worthless illusion any experience that makes them miserable in fortunate material circumstances. It makes no sense to be restless in the midst of prosperity. The experts’ aim is to correct through re-description any perception that produces an uncomfortable or unproductive mood. They deny that human beings truly have spiritual longings, that they are genuinely moved by their self-conscious mortality, that their restless, anxious dissatisfaction has more than an environmental cause. Pop Cartesian experts argue that all human misery can be eradicated by medical, economic, or political reform.

Americans in our century tend to call pop Cartesians pragmatists. Pragmatists identify human inquiry wholly with activity to transform the world in the service of human desire. They identify human progress with technological progress, and with economic and political reform to facilitate that progress. But Tocqueville, along with Percy, describe a world in which such progress has not, in the most fundamental sense, improved the human condition. “The contemporary state of a young man or woman,” Percy states, “is that he or she has more of the world’s affluence than any other people on earth, and yet is more dissatisfied, more restless.” Pragmatism’s success turns out to depend upon a therapeutic supplement to technology’s progress.

People have to be talked into doing what is reasonable, into enjoying their affluence.

America's most famous professor of philosophy today, Richard Rorty, understands well that the task of pragmatism has become therapeutic or linguistic. He comprehends far better than the *Habits'* authors or even the therapists they describe what is required to free Americans from their anxious, restless misery. He also sees what the relationship between language and human experience would have to be if pragmatism can genuinely succeed. The experiences that make human beings unnecessarily miserable can be described out of existence.

Rorty agrees with the founder of American pragmatism, John Dewey, that poets or philosophers are really linguistic social or political engineers. He realizes that his task is to complete the project begun by Bacon and Descartes to remove metaphysical and theological discourse, the results of being moved by the experience of self-conscious mortality, from respectable human conversation. Theology, to Rorty's mind, is already obsolete. His task is to do to the metaphysical assumptions still present in American discourse what Jefferson did to references to the supernatural in the Bible. His project has been to make all thought merely useful or superficial, completing the secularization of American thought and life.

Rorty says that his choice of this project depends upon a view of the human future that exists prior to reason, and he adds that the only criteria of truth are human utility and historical effectiveness. Despite his superficial rejection of all rationalism, his choice is that of the Enlightenment philosophers, to produce a more cosmopolitan, just, happy, secular, well-ordered world. As he is perfectly aware, Rorty may be postmodern epistemologically, but he is modern morally and politically. Given the priority of politics or democracy to phi-

losophy, he is decisively modern.

With his identification of truth with utility or comfort, Rorty's modern choice is most clearly for happiness. He rejects the genuinely postmodern view of, for example, Heidegger and Solzhenitsyn, that if human beings were born primarily to be happy, they would not be born to die. Rorty criticizes the moodiness of the rather postmodern cultural historian Christopher Lasch, who came to be "almost as dubious about the pursuit of happiness as Heidegger was." Lasch claimed to have discovered that, paradoxically, "the secret of happiness lies in renouncing the right to be happy." For Rorty, suspicious of paradoxes if not of irony, this discovery puts Lasch in the camp of the religious fanatic Jonathan Edwards, and not with the American democratic pursuers of happiness such as Jefferson, Emerson, and Whitman.

Lasch ends up rejecting the modern or pragmatic project to master nature, including human nature, as an illusion, one that culminated in a spiritual crisis, "a dark night of the soul." But for Rorty, the only sound reason for "the renunciation of happiness" is the possibility of supernatural redemption, and nothing is more illusory than that. So Rorty cheerfully "persist[s] in believing that a merely material and secular goal suffices: mortal life as it might be lived in the sunlit uplands of global democracy and abundance."

Rorty knows why the goal of the Enlightenment, the mastery of nature, remains reasonable. Through pragmatic linguistic therapy, our happiness or unconstrained material enjoyment need not be disturbed by the fact that we have not really conquered death. The promise of that therapy is that the Tocquevillian description of Americans is temporary. They need not remain restless and anxious in the midst of abundance. They do not, in truth, have any ineradicable spiritual needs.

Rorty's project seems to be to bring community to an end. The inhabitants of Rorty's "Enlightenment utopia" would seem to have remarkably contracted hearts. Freed from what Allan Bloom called the twinship of love and death, they would apathetically define happiness as the comfortable, asocial immersion in a "private fantasy," which would seem to be almost the equivalent of Rousseau's solitary "reverie."

But Rorty also provides a truncated form of *Habits'* authors' foundation for community, the common pursuit of global justice or democracy. For the Enlightenment or modern philosophers, and so for Rorty, justice is "the first virtue," or perhaps all of social virtue. He says that human beings actually should have two pursuits, private or idiosyncratic happiness and social justice. He sometimes contends that the two pursuits are best understood as disconnected, but a large part of his definition of a just society or liberal utopia is one in which all human beings have an equal opportunity to fulfill their private fantasies. Rorty also asserts that any definition of justice is foundationless or idiosyncratic, but he explains clearly and affirms unreservedly the Enlightenment view of justice. He is confident that it is coming and deserves to prevail everywhere.

Rorty's liberal utopia comes into existence with the abolition of cruelty, a distinctly human aberration at the foundation of all injustice. Although Rorty on occasion gives rather complex accounts of the cruelty of the totalitarian "genius monster" in pursuit of "aesthetic bliss," he makes clear

that the most common and powerful reason human beings are cruel is that they are afraid. They strike out against pain, death, and humiliation by inflicting pain, death, and humiliation. If human beings no longer experienced fearful misery, they would no longer be cruel. They would be without the experiences that make them unjust.

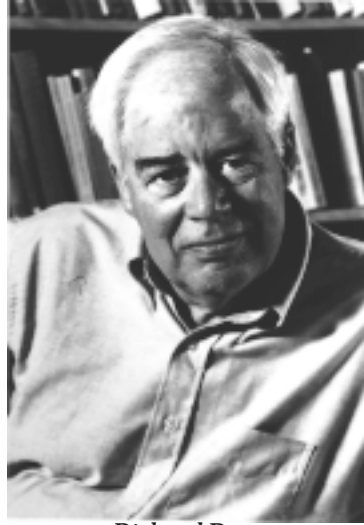
In the name of justice, Rorty would finally abandon the distinctions between justice and injustice and good and evil. Those whom human beings call bad are

better called deprived.

They are not deprived, as the Platonists say, of truth or moral knowledge. What they lack is a "risk-free" life, one freed from fear. Only with such security can human beings relax enough to be affected by Rorty's therapeutic linguistic engineering or "sentimental education," and so to be induced to be nice or uncruel to all others. A life without cruelty requires both the abolition of scarcity by modern

technology and sentimental education. Rorty shows the interdependence of the abolition of scarcity, sentimental education, and the experience of life as risk-free.

Perhaps the astuteness of Rorty's pragmatic diagnosis of deprivation is best expressed existentially. Feigning indifference, he usually ignores and occasionally dismisses the existential questions. He aims to redescribe them out of existence. Rorty never says (because he knows so well) that human beings are inexplicably distinguished from the other animals by their self-conscious mortality. That consciousness's most powerful effect is to make human beings miserable in a way the other animals never are. Its



Richard Rorty

existence seems an unfortunate, monstrous aberration from the natural order. As Rousseau first explained, human self-consciousness can hardly be understood for one's own or the species' self-preservation. As the pragmatist says, it is not useful.

We cannot understand self-consciousness as the gift of a benevolent God who made us in His image. If it came from God, we would have to blame Him for His cruelty. If we act in His image, we act cruelly. Human beings are cruel because their very existence is cruel. The worst form of misery is not what they do to each other, but what has inexplicably been done to each of them. Until that cruel experience is eradicated, until human beings by some therapy cease to be moved by knowledge of their deaths, they will not stop being cruel to each other. But once they stop being moved by death, they will also be without distinctively human passion or love. A world without cruelty will be a world without love, and so one without the heart-enlarging experiences that make community possible. That world, Rorty sees clearly, will be one in which human beings are properly defined as "clever animals" and nothing more.

Rorty does not emphasize that he would reduce human passion or eros to a subhuman level by disconnecting it from death. He does say that what would be left would mostly be private fantasies that would not be cruelly destructive of ourselves and others. But he also points to a weak and abstract "solidarity" that would include all others indiscriminately. Rorty even calls Dewey's pragmatism "power in the service of love," but he means a vague "Whitmanesque" love of "democratic community." This cosmopolitan love of humankind is not love of particular self-conscious mortals or citizens of a particular community. It includes no understanding of citizenship in a strong, positive sense.

But Rorty allows us to wonder whether the achievement of a risk-free existence would not extinguish even the nice sentimentality on which the pragmatist's democratic community depends. It is my compassion, or revulsion against cruelty, that extends my imagination to others. If the liberal utopia abolishes cruelty, then surely it also abolishes compassion. The perfection of Rorty's liberal utopia would be a return to Rousseau's state of nature. There, natural man does live a happy or content, risk-free life, because he is too self-sufficient or asocial, to be moved either to be cruel to or feel compassion for others.

Rorty simply does not address the concern Tocqueville would raise about his sentimental education. Its cosmopolitan scope works to undermine human love as it actually exists. Because our powers of knowing and loving are limited, we can really only love a limited number of others. The intense experience of human loving depends upon privileging some, really a very few, over others. Even Christians say that our love of all other human beings depends upon our love of a single, personal God. Rorty seems to deny the force of this concern, by rejecting the idea of fixed, natural limits (which, of course, brings death to mind). But he may accept it implicitly by usually presenting his goal as universal niceness and not universal love. Rorty suggests that the reduction of passionate intensity is the price to be paid for secularizing Christianity, and so dispensing with the personal God of love. It is a price we should actually want to pay. Love in the strong or distinctively human sense is inconceivable without hatred or cruelty. It certainly is a barrier to perfect justice. We are better off without it.

Percy, following Tocqueville, observes that the claims of pragmatism are untrue. They do not conform to the experiences of con-

temporary Americans. Nor is progress really being made in the direction of their truth. The Americans' anxious restlessness in the midst of prosperity is greater than ever, and cruelty, anger, love, and the other distinctively human passions and inclinations are not disappearing from the world.

Americans cannot help but experience the contradiction between what they genuinely experience and what they are told by therapeutic experts. They can become pop Cartesians only by surrendering their personal sovereignty, by denying what they really know about themselves. Often to their confused dismay, they find complete self-denial or diversion to be impossible. They cannot be deprived of the experience of being moved by their self-conscious mortality, by what constitutes the

soul or self. But they have been deprived to some great extent by therapeutic expertise of the language with which to articulate those experiences. One result of language's impoverishment, Percy says, is "a radical impoverishment of human relations." On this point, Percy and the authors of *Habits* agree, although Percy would add that *Habits'* virtually exclusive concern with communal, political transformation also is a denial of the most fundamental experience of soul or self.

Percy says that human beings, and not just the rare philosopher, have the mysterious capacity to live well in acceptance of

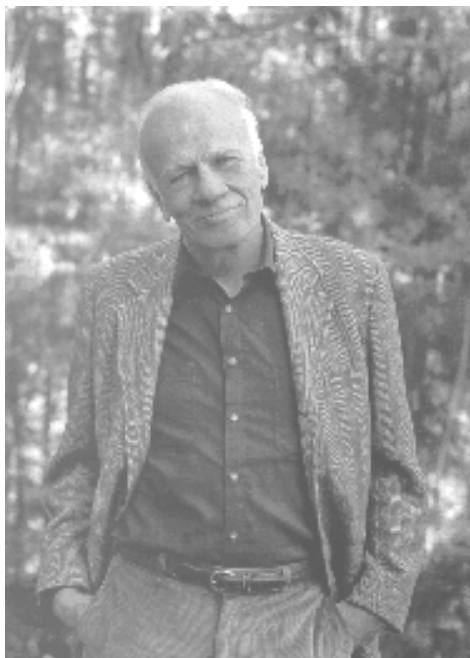
death. The phenomenon of acceptance, which eludes understanding as much as the soul or self itself, does not depend upon but is made comprehensible by religious faith. So Percy denies that the perception of one's individuality—which includes one's capacity to love other persons and find genuine community—makes human beings intolerably miserable. Percy argues that it is not

love of some abstract truth, or even the truth about death, but love of particular persons, including the personal God, that is more than adequate compensation for the anxious misery of self-conscious mortality.

Percy views Rorty's pragmatic, linguistic therapy as tyrannical and misanthropic. Rorty, most fundamentally, denies that human beings can live well with the experience that is at the foundation of

their courage, their dignity, their liberty or rights. He means to deprive them of what separates them from clever animals.

The authors of *Habits* are more ambivalent about this conclusion. They join Percy in opposing a world full of souls without longing as less than human. But *Habits* nowhere explains how the universal, consistently just, political community either satisfies the deepest human longings or is in accord with the particular, limited character of human knowing and loving. In the end, the question is whether most human beings would be better off not being moved by the fact of their mortality.



Walker Percy