

HUMAN RIGHTS, RATIONALITY, AND SENTIMENTALITY

In a report from Bosnia, David Rieff said, "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."¹ This theme of dehumanization recurred when Rieff said:

A Muslim man in Bosanski 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 – 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.

The moral to be drawn from Rieff's stories is that Serbian murderers and rapists do not think of themselves as violating human rights. For they are not doing these things to fellow human beings, but to *Muslims*. They are not being inhuman, but rather are discriminating between true humans and pseudo-humans. They are making the same sort of distinction the Crusaders made between humans and infidel dogs, and Black Muslims make between humans and blue-eyed devils. The founder of my university was able both to own slaves and to think it self-evident that all men were endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. This was because he had convinced himself that the consciousness of blacks, like that of animals, "participates more of sensation than of reflection."² Like the Serbs, Mr. Jefferson did not think of himself as violating *human* rights.

¹ David Rieff, "Letter from Bosnia," *New Yorker*, November 23, 1992, 82–95.

² "Their griefs are transient. Those numberless afflictions, which render it doubtful whether heaven has given life to us in mercy or in wrath, are less felt, and sooner forgotten with

Serbs take themselves to be acting in the interests of true humanity by purifying the world of pseudo-humanity. In this respect, their self-image resembles that of moral philosophers who hope to cleanse the world of prejudice and superstition. This cleansing will permit us to rise above our animality by becoming, for the first time, wholly rational and thus wholly human. Serbs, moralists, Jefferson, and Black Muslims all use the term "men" to mean "people like us." They all think that the line between humans and animals is not simply the line between featherless bipeds and the rest. Rather, this line divides some featherless bipeds from others: there are animals walking about in humanoid form. We and those like us are paradigm cases of humanity, but those too different from us in behavior or custom are, at best, borderline cases. As Clifford Geertz puts it, "Men's most important claims to humanity are cast in the accents of group pride."³

We here in the safe, rich democracies feel about Serbian torturers and rapists as they feel about their Muslim victims: they are more like animals than like us. But we are not doing anything to help the Muslim women who are being gang-raped or the Muslim men who are being castrated, any more than we did anything in the 1930s when the Nazis were amusing themselves by torturing Jews. Here in the safe countries we find ourselves saying things like "That's how things have always been in the Balkans," suggesting that, unlike us, those people are used to being raped and castrated. The contempt we always feel for losers – Jews in the 1930s, Muslims now – combines with our disgust at the winners' behavior to produce the semiconscious attitude: "a pox on both your houses." We think of Serbs or Nazis as animals, because ravenous beasts of prey are animals. We think of Muslims or Jews being herded into concentration camps as animals, because cattle are animals. Neither sort of animal is very much like us, and there seems no point in human beings getting involved in quarrels between animals.

The human-animal distinction, however, is only one of three main ways in which we paradigmatic humans distinguish ourselves from borderline cases. A second is by invoking the distinction between adults and children. Ignorant and superstitious people, we say, are like children; they will attain true humanity only if raised up by proper education. If they seem incapable

them. In general, their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection. To this must be ascribed their disposition to sleep when abstracted from their diversions, and unemployed in labor. An animal whose body is at rest, and who does not reflect must be disposed to sleep of course." Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on Virginia," *Writings*, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert Ellery Bergh (Washington, D.C., 1905), 1: 194.

³ Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description," in his *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 22.

of such education, that shows that they are not really the same kind of being as we educable people are. Blacks, the whites in the United States and in South Africa used to say, are like children; that is why it is appropriate to address black males, of whatever age, as "boy." Women, men used to say, are permanently childlike; that is why it is appropriate to spend no money on their education and to refuse them access to power.

When it comes to women, however, there are simpler ways of excluding them from true humanity: for example, using "man" as a synonym of "human being." As feminists have pointed out, such usages reinforce the average male's thankfulness that he was not born a woman, as well as his fear of the ultimate degradation: feminization. The extent and depth of the latter fear are evidenced by the particular sort of sexual sadism Rieff describes. His point that such sadism is never absent from attempts to purify the species or cleanse the territory confirms Catharine MacKinnon's claim that, for most men, being a woman does not count as one way of being human. Being a nonmale is the third main way of being nonhuman.

Philosophers have tried to help straighten out this confusion by specifying what is special about featherless bipeds, explaining what is essential to being human. Plato suggested that there is a big difference between us and animals, a difference worthy of respect and cultivation. He thought that human beings have a special added ingredient that puts them in a different ontological category than brutes. Respect for this ingredient provides a reason for people to be nice to each other. Anti-Platonists like Nietzsche reply that attempts to get people to stop murdering, raping, and castrating one another are, in the long run, doomed to failure – for the real truth about human nature is that we are a uniquely nasty and dangerous kind of animal. When contemporary admirers of Plato claim that all featherless bipeds – even the stupid and childlike, even the women, even the sodomized – have the same inalienable rights, admirers of Nietzsche reply that the very idea of "inalienable human rights" is, like the idea of a special added ingredient, a laughably feeble attempt by the weaker members of the species to fend off the stronger members.

As I see it, one important intellectual advance that has been made in our century is the steady decline in interest in this quarrel between Plato and Nietzsche about what we are really like. There is a growing willingness to neglect the question "What is our nature?" and to substitute the question "What can we make of ourselves?" We are much less inclined than our ancestors were to take "theories of human nature" seriously, much less inclined to take ontology or history or ethology as a guide to life. We are much less inclined to pose the ontological question "What *are* we?" because we have

come to see that the main lesson of both history and anthropology is our extraordinary malleability. We are coming to think of ourselves as the flexible, protean, self-shaping animal rather than as the rational animal or the cruel animal.

One of the shapes we have recently assumed is that of a human rights culture. I borrow the term "human rights culture" from the Argentinean jurist and philosopher Eduardo Rabossi. In an article called "Human Rights Naturalized" Rabossi argues that philosophers should think of this culture as a new, welcome fact of the post-Holocaust world. Rabossi wants them to stop trying to get behind or beneath this fact, stop trying to detect and defend its so-called philosophical presuppositions. On Rabossi's view, philosophers like Alan Gewirth are wrong to argue that human rights cannot depend upon historical facts. "My basic point," Rabossi says, is that "the world has changed, that the human rights phenomenon renders human rights foundationalism outmoded and irrelevant."⁴

Human rights foundationalism is the continuing attempt by quasi-Platonists to win, at last, a final victory over their opponents. Rabossi's claim that this attempt is *outmoded* seems to me both true and important; it is my principal topic in this essay. I shall enlarge upon, and defend, Rabossi's claim that the question of whether human beings really *have* the rights enumerated in the Helsinki Declaration is not worth raising. In particular, I shall defend the claim that nothing relevant to moral choice separates human beings from animals except historically contingent facts of the world, cultural facts.

This claim is sometimes called "cultural relativism" by those who indignantly reject it. One reason they reject it is that such relativism seems to them incompatible with the fact that our human rights culture is morally superior to other cultures. I quite agree that ours is morally superior, but I do not think that this superiority counts in favor of the existence of a universal human nature. It would only do so if we assumed that a claim of moral superiority entails a claim to superior knowledge – assumed that such a claim

4 See Eduardo Rabossi, "La teoría de los derechos humanos naturalizada," *Revista del Centro de Estudios Constitucionales* (Madrid), no. 5 (January-March 1990), 159-79. Rabossi also says that he does not wish to question "the idea of a rational foundation of morality." I am not sure why he does not. Rabossi may perhaps mean that in the past – e.g., at the time of Kant – this idea still made a kind of sense, but makes sense no longer. That, at any rate, is my own view. Kant wrote in a period when the only alternative to religion seemed to be something like science. In such a period, inventing a pseudo-science called "the system of transcendental philosophy" – setting the stage for the show-stopping climax in which one pulls moral obligation out of a transcendental hat – might plausibly seem the only way of saving morality from the hedonists on one side and the priests on the other.

is ill-founded if not backed up by knowledge of a distinctively human attribute. But it is not clear why "respect for human dignity" – our sense that the differences between Serb and Muslim, Christian and infidel, gay and straight, male and female should not matter – must presuppose the existence of any such attribute.

Traditionally, the name of the shared human attribute that supposedly "grounds" morality is "rationality." Cultural relativism is associated with irrationalism because it denies the existence of morally relevant transcultural facts. To agree with Rabossi one must, indeed, be irrationalist in that sense. But one need not be irrationalist in the sense of ceasing to make one's web of belief as coherent, and as perspicuously structured, as possible. Philosophers like myself, who think of rationality as simply the attempt at such coherence, agree with Rabossi that foundationalist projects are outmoded. We see our task as a matter of making our own culture – the human rights culture – more self-conscious and more powerful, rather than of demonstrating its superiority to other cultures by an appeal to something transcultural.

We think that the most philosophy can hope to do is to summarize our culturally influenced intuitions about the right thing to do in various situations. The summary is effected by formulating a generalization from which these intuitions can be deduced, with the help of noncontroversial lemmas. That generalization is not supposed to ground our intuitions, but rather to summarize them. John Rawls's "Difference Principle" and the U.S. Supreme Court's construction, in recent decades, of a constitutional "right to privacy" are examples of this kind of summary. We see the point of formulating such summarizing generalizations as increasing the predictability, and thus the power and efficiency, of our institutions, thereby heightening the sense of shared moral identity that brings us together in a moral community.

Foundationalist philosophers, such as Plato, Aquinas, and Kant, have hoped to provide independent support for such summarizing generalizations. They would like to infer these generalizations from further premises, premises capable of being known to be true independently of the truth of the moral intuitions that have been summarized. Such premises are supposed to justify our intuitions, by providing premises from which the content of those intuitions can be deduced. I shall lump all such premises together under the label "claims to knowledge about the nature of human beings." In this broad sense, claims to know that our moral intuitions are recollections of the Form of the Good, or that we are the disobedient children of a loving God, or that human beings differ from other kinds of animal by having dignity rather than mere value are all claims about human na-

ture. So are such counterclaims as that human beings are merely vehicles for selfish genes or merely eruptions of the will to power. To claim such knowledge is to claim to know something that, though not itself a moral intuition, can *correct* moral intuitions. It is essential to this idea of moral knowledge that a whole community might come to *know* that most of its most salient intuitions about the right thing to do were wrong.

But now suppose we ask: is there this sort of knowledge? What kind of question is *that*? On the traditional view, it is a philosophical question, belonging to a branch of epistemology known as "metaethics." But on the pragmatist view I favor, it is a question of efficiency: a question about how best to grab hold of history – how best to bring about the utopia sketched by the Enlightenment. If the activities of those who attempt to achieve this sort of knowledge seem of little use in actualizing this utopia, that is a reason to think there is no such knowledge. If it seems that most of the work of changing moral intuitions is being done by manipulating our feelings rather than by increasing our knowledge, that is a reason to think there is no knowledge of the sort that philosophers like Plato, Aquinas, and Kant hoped to get.

This pragmatist argument against the Platonist has the same form as an argument for cutting off payment to the priests who perform purportedly war-winning sacrifices – an argument which says that all the real work of winning the war seems to be done by generals and admirals, not to mention foot soldiers. This argument does not say: since there seem to be no gods, there is probably no need to support the priests. It says instead: since there is apparently no need to support the priests, there probably are no gods. We pragmatists argue from the fact that the emergence of the human rights culture seems to owe nothing to increased moral knowledge, and everything to hearing sad and sentimental stories, to the conclusion that there is probably no knowledge of the sort Plato envisaged. We go on to argue that since no useful work seems to be done by insisting on a purportedly ahistorical human nature, there probably is no such nature, or at least nothing in that nature that is relevant to our moral choices.

In short, my doubts about the effectiveness of appeals to moral knowledge are doubts about causal efficacy, not about epistemic status. My doubts have nothing to do with any of the theoretical questions discussed under the heading of "metaethics": questions about the relation between facts and values, or between reason and passion, or between the cognitive and the noncognitive, or between descriptive statements and action-guiding statements. Nor do they have anything to do with questions about realism and antirealism. The difference between the moral realist and the moral antirealist seems to pragmatists a difference that makes no practical difference.

Further, such metaethical questions presuppose the Platonic distinction between inquiry that aims at efficient problem solving and inquiry that aims at a goal called "truth for its own sake." That distinction collapses if one follows Dewey in thinking of all inquiry – in physics as well as ethics – as practical problem solving or if one follows Peirce in seeing *every* belief as action-guiding.⁵

Even after the priests have been pensioned off, however, the memories of certain priests may still be cherished by the community – especially the memories of their prophecies. We remain profoundly grateful to philosophers like Plato and Kant, not because they discovered truths but because they prophesied cosmopolitan utopias – utopias most of whose details they may have gotten wrong, but utopias we might never have struggled to reach had we not heard their prophecies. As long as our ability to *know* and in particular to discuss the question "What is man?" seemed the most important thing about us human beings, people like Plato and Kant accompanied utopian prophecies with claims to know something deep and important – something about the parts of the soul or the transcendental status of the common moral con-

5 The present state of metaethical discussion is admirably summarized by Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton, "Toward Fin de Siècle Ethics: Some Trends," *Philosophical Review* 101 (January 1992), 115–89. This comprehensive and judicious article takes for granted that there is a problem about "vindicating the objectivity of morality" (127), that there is an interesting question as to whether ethics is "cognitive" or "noncognitive," that we need to figure out whether we have a "cognitive capacity" to detect moral properties (148), and that these matters can be dealt with ahistorically.

When these authors consider historicist writers such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Bernard Williams, they conclude that they are "[meta]théoriciens malgré eux" who share the authors' own "desire to understand morality, its preconditions and its prospects" (183). They make little effort to come to terms with suggestions that there may be no ahistorical entity called "morality" to be understood. The final paragraph of the article does suggest that it might be helpful if moral philosophers knew some more anthropology or psychology or history. But the penultimate paragraph makes clear that, with or without such assists, "contemporary metaethics moves ahead, and positions gain in complexity and sophistication."

It is instructive, I think, to compare this article with Annette Baier's "Some Thoughts on the Way We Moral Philosophers Live Now" (*Monist* 67, no. 4 [1984], 490–7). There Baier suggests that moral philosophers should "at least occasionally, like Socrates, consider why the rest of society should not merely tolerate but subsidize our activity." She goes on to ask, "Is the large proportional increase of professional philosophers and moral philosophers a good thing, morally speaking? Even if it scarcely amounts to a plague of gadflies, it may amount to a nuisance of owls." The kind of metaphilosophical and historical self-consciousness and self-doubt displayed by Baier seems to me badly needed, but it is conspicuously absent in *Philosophy in Review* (the centennial issue of the *Philosophical Review* in which "Toward Fin de Siècle Ethics" appears). The contributors to this issue are convinced that the increasing sophistication of a philosophical subdiscipline is enough to demonstrate its social utility and are entirely unimpressed by murmurs of "decadent scholasticism."

sciousness. But this ability and those questions have, in the past two hundred years, come to seem much less important. It is this cultural sea change that Rabossi summarizes in his claim that human rights foundationalism is *outmoded*. In the remainder of this essay, I want to take up the following questions: Why has knowledge become much less important to our self-image than it was two hundred years ago? Why does the attempt to found culture on nature, and moral obligation on knowledge of transcultural universals, seem so much less important to us than it seemed in the Enlightenment? Why is there so little resonance, and so little point, in the question "Do human beings in fact *have* the rights listed in the Helsinki Declaration"? Why, in short, has moral philosophy become such an inconspicuous part of our culture?

A simple answer to these questions is: because between Kant's time and ours, Darwin argued most intellectuals out of the view that human beings contained a special added ingredient. He convinced most of us that we were exceptionally talented animals, animals clever enough to take charge of our own evolution. I think this answer is right as far as it goes. But it leads to a further question: Why did Darwin succeed, relatively speaking, so very easily? Why did he not cause the creative philosophical ferment that was caused by Galileo and Newton?

The revival by the New Science of the seventeenth century of a Democritean-Lucretian corpuscularian picture of nature scared Kant into inventing transcendental philosophy, inventing a brand-new kind of knowledge, one that could demote the corpuscularian world picture to the status of "appearance." Kant's example encouraged the idea that the philosopher, as an expert on the nature and limits of knowledge, can serve as a supreme cultural arbiter.⁶ But by the time of Darwin this idea was already beginning to seem quaint. The historicism that dominated the intellectual world of the early nineteenth century had created an antiessentialist mood. So when Darwin came along, he fit into the evolutionary niche that Herder and Hegel had begun to colonize. Intellectuals who populate this niche look to the future rather than to eternity. They prefer new ideas about how to

6 Fichte's *Vocation of Man* is a useful reminder of the need that was felt, circa 1800, for a cognitive discipline called philosophy that would rescue utopian hope from natural science. It is hard to think of an analogous book written in reaction to Darwin. Those who couldn't stand what Darwin was saying tended to go straight back behind the Enlightenment to traditional religious faith. The unobtrusive, unphilosophical opposition, in nineteenth-century Europe, between science and faith suggests that most intellectuals could no longer believe that philosophy might produce some sort of superknowledge, knowledge that might trump the results of physical and biological inquiry.

change things over stable criteria for determining the desirability of change. They are the ones who think much of both Plato and Nietzsche outmoded.

The best explanation both of Darwin's relatively easy triumph and of our own increasing willingness to substitute hope for knowledge is that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw, among Europeans and Americans, an extraordinary increase in wealth, literacy, and leisure. This increase made possible an unprecedented acceleration in the rate of moral progress. Such events as the French Revolution and the ending of the transatlantic slave trade helped nineteenth-century intellectuals in the rich democracies to say: It is enough for us to know that we live in an age in which human beings can make things better for ourselves.⁷ We do not need to dig behind this historical fact to nonhistorical facts about what we really are.

In the two centuries since the French Revolution, we have learned that human beings are far more malleable than Plato or Kant had dreamed. The more we are impressed by this malleability, the less interested we become in questions about our ahistorical nature. The more we see a chance to recreate ourselves, the more we shall read Darwin not as offering one more theory about what we really are but as providing reasons why we do not need to ask what we really are. Nowadays, to say that we are clever animals is not to say something philosophical and pessimistic but something political and hopeful – namely, if we can work together, we can make ourselves into whatever we are clever and courageous enough to imagine ourselves becoming. This is to set aside Kant's question "What is man?" and to substitute the question "What sort of world can we prepare for our great-grandchildren?"

The question "What is man?" in the sense of "What is the deep ahistorical nature of human beings?" owed its popularity to the standard answer to that question: we are the *rational* animal, the one that can *know* as well as merely feel. The residual popularity of this answer accounts for the residual popularity of Kant's astonishing claim that sentimentality has nothing to do with morality, that there is something distinctively and transculturally hu-

7 Some contemporary intellectuals, especially in France and Germany, take it as obvious that the Holocaust made it clear that the hopes for human freedom which arose in the nineteenth century are obsolete – that at the end of the twentieth century we postmodernists know that the Enlightenment project is doomed. But even these intellectuals, in their less preachy and sententious moments, do their best to further that project. So they should, for nobody has come up with a better one. It does not diminish the memory of the Holocaust to say that our response to it should not be a claim to have gained a new understanding of human nature or of human history, but rather a willingness to pick ourselves up and try again.

man called "the sense of moral obligation" which has nothing to do with love, friendship, trust, or social solidarity. As long as we believe *that*, people like Rabossi are going to have a tough time convincing us that human rights foundationalism is an outmoded project.

To overcome this idea of a *sui generis* sense of moral obligation, it would help to stop answering the question "What makes us different from other animals?" by saying, "We can know and they can merely feel." We should substitute "We can feel *for each other* to a much greater extent than they can." This substitution would let us disentangle Christ's suggestion that love matters more than knowledge from the neo-Platonic suggestion that knowledge of the truth will make us free. For as long as we think there is an ahistorical power that makes for righteousness – a power called truth or rationality – we will not be able to put foundationalism behind us.

The best, and probably the only, argument for putting foundationalism behind us is the one I have already suggested: it would be more efficient to do so, because it would let us concentrate our energies on manipulating sentiments, on sentimental education. That sort of education gets people of different kinds sufficiently well acquainted with one another that they are less tempted to think of those different from themselves as only quasi-human. The goal of this sort of manipulation of sentiment is to expand the reference of the terms "our kind of people" and "people like us."

All I can do to supplement this argument from increased efficiency is to offer a suggestion about how Plato managed to convince us that knowledge of universal truths mattered as much as he thought it did. Plato thought that the philosopher's task was to answer questions like "Why should I be moral? Why is it rational to be moral? Why is it in my interest to be moral? Why is it in the interest of human beings as such to be moral?" He thought this because he thought that the best way to deal with people like Thrasymachus and Gorgias was to demonstrate to them that they had an interest of which they were unaware, an interest in being rational, in acquiring self-knowledge. Plato thereby saddled us with a distinction between the true and the false self. That distinction was, by the time of Kant, transmuted into a distinction between categorical, rigid moral obligation and flexible, empirically determinable self-interest. Contemporary moral philosophy is still lumbered with this opposition between self-interest and morality, an opposition which makes it hard to realize that my pride in being a part of the human rights culture is no more external to my self than my desire for financial or sexual success.

It would have been better if Plato had decided, as Aristotle was to decide, that there was nothing much to be done with people like Thrasymachus and Callicles and that the problem was how to avoid having children who would

be like Thrasymachus and Callicles. By insisting that he could reeducate people who had matured without acquiring appropriate moral sentiments by invoking a higher power than sentiment, the power of reason, Plato got moral philosophy off on the wrong foot. He led moral philosophers to concentrate on the rather rare figure of the psychopath, the person who has no concern for any human being other than himself. Moral philosophy has systematically neglected the much more common case: the person whose treatment of a rather narrow range of featherless bipeds is morally impeccable, but who remains indifferent to the suffering of those outside this range, the ones he thinks of as pseudo-humans.⁸

Plato set things up so that moral philosophers think they have failed unless they convince the rational egotist that he should not be an egotist – convince him by telling him about his true, unfortunately neglected self. But the rational egotist is not the problem. The problem is the gallant and honorable Serb who sees Muslims as circumcised dogs. It is the brave soldier and good comrade who loves and is loved by his mates, but who thinks of women as dangerous, malevolent whores and bitches.

Plato thought that the way to get people to be nicer to each other was to point out what they all had in common – rationality. But it does little good to point out, to the people I have just described, that many Muslims and women are good at mathematics or engineering or jurisprudence. Resentful young Nazi toughs were quite aware that many Jews were clever and learned, but this only added to the pleasure they took in beating such Jews. Nor does it do much good to get such people to read Kant and agree that one should not treat rational agents simply as means. For everything turns on who counts as a fellow human being, as a rational agent in the only relevant sense – the sense in which rational agency is synonymous with membership in *our* moral community.

For most white people, until very recently, most black people did not so count. For most Christians, until the seventeenth century or so, most heathen did not so count. For the Nazis, Jews did not count. 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. Kant's

⁸ Nietzsche was right to remind us that "these same men who, amongst themselves, are so strictly constrained by custom, worship, ritual gratitude and by mutual surveillance and jealousy, who are so resourceful in consideration, tenderness, loyalty, pride and friendship, when once they step outside their circle become little better than uncaged beasts of prey" (*The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956], 174).

account of the respect due to rational agents tells you that you should extend the respect you feel for the people like yourself to all featherless bipeds. This is an excellent suggestion, a good formula for secularizing the Christian doctrine of the brotherhood of man. But it has never been backed up by an argument based on neutral premises, and it never will be. Outside the circle of post-Enlightenment European culture, the circle of relatively safe and secure people who have been manipulating one another's sentiments for two hundred years, most people are simply unable to understand why membership in a biological species is supposed to suffice for membership in a moral community. This is not because they are insufficiently rational. It is, typically, because they live in a world in which it would be just too risky – indeed, would often be insanely dangerous – to let one's sense of moral community stretch beyond one's family, clan, or tribe.

To get whites to be nicer to blacks, males to females, Serbs to Muslims, or straights to gays, to help our species link up into what Rabossi calls a "planetary community" dominated by a culture of human rights, it is of no use whatever to say, with Kant: notice that what you have in common, your humanity, is more important than these trivial differences. For the people we are trying to convince will rejoin that they notice nothing of the sort. Such people are *morally* offended by the suggestion that they should treat someone who is not kin as if he were a brother, or a nigger as if he were white, or a queer as if he were normal, or an infidel as if she were a believer. They are offended by the suggestion that they treat people whom they do not think of as human as if they were human. When utilitarians tell them that all pleasures and pains felt by members of our biological species are equally relevant to moral deliberation, or when Kantians tell them that the ability to engage in such deliberation is sufficient for membership in the moral community, they are incredulous. They rejoin that these philosophers seem oblivious to blatantly obvious moral distinctions, distinctions any decent person would draw.

This rejoinder is not just a rhetorical device, nor is it in any way irrational. It is heartfelt. The *identity* of these people, the people whom we should like to convince to join our Eurocentric human rights culture, is bound up with their sense of who they are *not*. Most people – especially people relatively untouched by the European Enlightenment – simply do not think of themselves as, first and foremost, a human being. Instead, they think of themselves as being a certain *good* sort of human being – a sort defined by explicit opposition to a particularly bad sort. What is crucial for their sense of who they are is that they are *not* an infidel, *not* a queer, *not* a woman, *not* an untouchable. Just insofar as they are impoverished, and as their lives are per-

petually at risk, they have little else than pride in not being what they are not to sustain their self-respect. Since the days when the term "human being" was synonymous with "member of our tribe," we have always thought of human beings in terms of *paradigm* members of the species. We have contrasted *us*, the *real* humans, with rudimentary or perverted or deformed examples of humanity.

We Eurocentric intellectuals like to suggest that we, the paradigm humans, have overcome this primitive parochialism by using that paradigmatic human faculty, reason. So we say that failure to concur with us is due to "prejudice." Our use of these terms in this way may make us nod in agreement when Colin McGinn tells us, in the introduction to his recent book,⁹ that learning to tell right from wrong is not as hard as learning French. The only obstacles to agreeing with his moral views, McGinn explains, are prejudice and superstition.

One can, of course, see what McGinn means: if, like many of us, you teach students who have been brought up in the shadow of the Holocaust, brought up believing that prejudice against racial or religious groups is a terrible thing, it is not very hard to convert them to standard liberal views about abortion, gay rights, and the like. You may even get them to stop eating animals. All you have to do is to convince them that all the arguments on the other side appeal to "morally irrelevant" considerations. You do this by manipulating their sentiments in such a way that they imagine themselves in the shoes of the despised and oppressed. Such students are already so nice that they are eager to define their identity in nonexclusionary terms. The only people such students find any trouble being nice to are the ones they consider irrational – the religious fundamentalist, the smirking rapist, or the swaggering skinhead.

Producing generations of nice, tolerant, well-off, secure, other-respecting students of this sort in all parts of the world is just what is needed – indeed, *all* that is needed – to achieve an Enlightenment utopia. The more youngsters like this we can raise, the stronger and more global our human rights culture will become. But it is not a good idea to encourage these students to label "irrational" the intolerant people they have trouble tolerating. For that Platonic-Kantian epithet suggests that with only a little more effort, the good and rational part of these other people's souls could have triumphed over the bad and irrational part. It suggests that we good people know something these bad people do not know and that it is probably their own silly

9 Colin McGinn, *Moral Literacy: or, How to Do the Right Thing* (London: Duckworth, 1992), 16.

fault that they do not know it. All they had to do, after all, was to think a little harder, be a little more self-conscious, a little more rational.

But the bad people's beliefs are not more or less "irrational" than the belief that race, religion, gender, and sexual preference are all morally irrelevant – that these are all trumped by membership in the biological species. As used by moral philosophers like McGinn, the term "irrational behavior" means no more than "behavior of which we disapprove so strongly that our spade is turned when asked *why* we disapprove of it." So it would be better to teach our students that these bad people are no less rational, no less clear-headed, no more prejudiced than we good people who respect Otherness. The bad people's problem is, rather, that they were not as lucky in the circumstances of their upbringing as we were. Instead of treating all those people out there who are trying to find and kill Salman Rushdie as irrational, we should treat them as deprived.

Foundationalists think of these people as deprived of truth, of moral knowledge. But it would be better – more concrete, more specific, more suggestive of possible remedies – to think of them as deprived of two more concrete things: security and sympathy. By "security" I mean conditions of life sufficiently risk-free as to make one's difference from others inessential to one's self-respect, one's sense of worth. These conditions have been enjoyed by North Americans and Europeans – the people who dreamed up the human rights culture – much more than they have been enjoyed by anyone else. By "sympathy" I mean the sort of reactions Athenians had more of after seeing Aeschylus's *The Persians* than before, the sort that whites in the United States had more of after reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* than before, the sort we have more of after watching television programs about the genocide in Bosnia. Security and sympathy go together, for the same reasons that peace and economic productivity go together. The tougher things are, the more you have to be afraid of, the more dangerous your situation, the less you can afford the time or effort to think about what things might be like for people with whom you do not immediately identify. Sentimental education works only on people who can relax long enough to listen.

If Rabossi and I are right in thinking human rights foundationalism outmoded, then Hume is a better adviser than Kant about how we intellectuals can hasten the coming of the Enlightenment utopia for which both men yearned. Among contemporary philosophers, the best adviser seems to me to be Annette Baier. Baier describes Hume as "the woman's moral philoso-

10 Annette Baier, "Hume, the Women's Moral Theorist?" in *Women and Moral Theory*, ed. Eva Kitay and Diana Meyers (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1987), 40.

pher" because Hume held that "corrected (sometimes rule-corrected) sympathy, not law-discerning reason, is the fundamental moral capacity."¹⁰ Baier would like us to get rid of both the Platonic idea that we have a true self and the Kantian idea that it is rational to be moral. In aid of this project, she suggests that we think of "trust" rather than "obligation" as the fundamental moral notion. This substitution would mean thinking of the spread of the human rights culture not as a matter of our becoming more aware of the requirements of the moral law, but rather as what Baier calls "a progress of sentiments."¹¹ This progress consists in an increasing ability to see the similarities between ourselves and people very unlike us as outweighing the differences. It is the result of what I have been calling "sentimental education." The relevant similarities are not a matter of sharing a deep true self that instantiates true humanity, but are such little, superficial similarities as cherishing our parents and our children – similarities that do not distinguish us in any interesting way from many nonhuman animals.

To accept Baier's suggestions, however, we have to overcome our sense that sentiment is too weak a force and that something stronger is required. This idea that reason is "stronger" than sentiment, that only an insistence on the unconditionality of moral obligation has the power to change human beings for the better, is very persistent. I think this persistence is due mainly to a semiconscious realization that if we hand our hopes for moral progress over to sentiment, we are in effect handing them over to *condescension*. For we shall be relying on those who have the power to change things – people like the rich New England abolitionists or rich bleeding hearts like Robert Owen and Friedrich Engels – rather than relying on something that has power over *them*. We shall have to accept the fact that the fate of the women of Bosnia depends on whether television journalists manage to do for them what Harriet Beecher Stowe did for black slaves – whether these journalists can make us, the audience back in the safe countries, feel that these women are more like us, more like real human beings, than we had realized.

To rely on the suggestions of sentiment rather than on the commands of reason is to think of powerful people gradually ceasing to oppress others, or to countenance the oppression of others, out of mere niceness rather than

11 Baier's book on Hume is entitled *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991). Baier's view of the inadequacy of most attempts by contemporary moral philosophers to break with Kant comes out most clearly when she characterizes Allan Gibbard (in his book *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*) as focusing "on the feelings that a patriarchal religion has bequeathed to us" and says that "Hume would judge Gibbard to be, as a moral philosopher, basically a divine disguised as a fellow expressivist" (312).

out of obedience to the moral law. But it is revolting to think that our only hope for a decent society consists in softening the self-satisfied hearts of a leisure class. We want moral progress to burst up from below, rather than waiting patiently upon condescension from the top. The residual popularity of Kantian ideas of "unconditional moral obligation" – obligation imposed by deep ahistorical noncontingent forces – seems to me almost entirely due to our abhorrence of the idea that the people on top hold the future in their hands, that everything depends on them, that there is nothing more powerful to which we can appeal against them.

Like everyone else, I too would prefer a bottom-up way of achieving utopia, a quick reversal of fortune that will make the last first. But I do not think this is how utopia will in fact come into being. Nor do I think our preference for this way lends any support to the idea that the Enlightenment project lies in the depths of every human soul.

So why does this preference make us resist the thought that sentimentality may be the best weapon we have? I think Nietzsche gave the right answer to this question: we resist out of resentment. We *resent* the idea that we shall have to wait for the strong to turn their piggy little eyes to the suffering of the weak, slowly open their dried-up little hearts. We desperately hope there is something stronger and more powerful that will *hurt* the strong if they do *not* do these things – if not a vengeful God, then a vengeful aroused proletariat or, at least, a vengeful superego or, at the very least, the offended majesty of Kant's tribunal of pure practical reason. The desperate hope for a noncontingent and powerful ally is, according to Nietzsche, the common core of Platonism, of religious insistence on divine omnipotence, and of Kantian moral philosophy.¹²

Nietzsche was, I think, right on the button when he offered this diagnosis. What Santayana called "supernaturalism," the confusion of ideals and power, is *all* that lies behind the Kantian claim that it is not only nicer, but more *rational*, to include strangers within our moral community than to exclude them. If we agree with Nietzsche and Santayana on this point, however, we do not thereby acquire any reason to turn our backs on the Enlightenment project, as Nietzsche did. Nor do we acquire any reason to be sardonically pessimistic about the chances of this project, in the manner of such admirers of Nietzsche as Santayana, Ortega, Heidegger, Strauss, and Foucault.

For even though Nietzsche was quite right to see Kant's insistence on un-

¹² Nietzsche's diagnosis is reinforced by Elizabeth Anscombe's famous argument that atheists are not entitled to the term "moral obligation."

conditionality as an expression of resentment, he was quite wrong to treat Christianity and the age of the democratic revolutions as signs of human degeneration. He and Kant, alas, shared something with each other that neither shared with Harriet Beecher Stowe – something that Iris Murdoch has called "dryness" and Jacques Derrida has called "phallogocentrism." The common element in the thought of both men was a desire for purity. This sort of purity consists in being not only autonomous, in command of oneself, but also in having the kind of self-conscious self-sufficiency that Sartre describes as the perfect synthesis of the in-itself and the for-itself. This synthesis could be attained, Sartre pointed out, only if one could rid oneself of everything sticky, slimy, wet, sentimental, and womanish.

Although this desire for virile purity links Plato to Kant, the desire to bring as many different kinds of people as possible into a cosmopolis links Kant to Stowe. Kant represents, in the history of moral thinking, a transitional stage between the hopeless attempt to convict Thrasymachus of irrationality and the hopeful attempt to see every new featherless biped who comes along as one of us. Kant's mistake was to think that the only way to have a modest, damped-down, nonfanatical version of Christian brotherhood after letting go of the Christian faith was to revive the themes of pre-Christian philosophical thought. He wanted to make knowledge of a core self do what can be done only by the continual refreshment and re-creation of the self, through interaction with selves as unlike itself as possible.

Kant performed the sort of awkward balancing act that is required in transitional periods. His project mediated between a dying rationalist tradition and a vision of a new, democratic world, the world of what Rabossi calls "the human rights phenomenon." With the advent of this phenomenon, Kant's balancing act has become outmoded and irrelevant. We are now in a good position to put aside the last vestiges of the idea that human beings are distinguished by the capacity to know rather than by the capacities for friendship and intermarriage, distinguished by rigorous rationality rather than by flexible sentimentality. If we do so, we shall have dropped the idea that assured knowledge of a truth about what we have in common is a prerequisite for moral education, as well as the idea of a specifically moral motivation. If we do all these things, then we shall see Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* as a placeholder for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – a concession to the expect-

¹³ See Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), for a treatment of the sentimental novel that chimes with the point I am trying to make here. In her chapter on Stowe, Tompkins says that she is asking the reader "to set aside some familiar categories for evaluating fiction –

tations of an intellectual epoch in which the quest for quasi-scientific knowledge seemed the best response to religious exclusionism.¹³

Unfortunately, many philosophers, especially in the English-speaking world, are still trying to hold on to the Platonic insistence that the principal duty of human beings is to *know*. That insistence was the lifeline to which Kant and Hegel thought we had to cling.¹⁴ Just as German philosophers in the period between Kant and Hegel saw themselves as saving reason from Hume, many English-speaking philosophers now see themselves as saving reason from Derrida. But with the wisdom of hindsight, and with Baier's help, we have learned to read Hume not as a dangerously frivolous iconoclast but as the wettest, most flexible, least phallogocentric thinker of the Enlightenment. Someday, I suspect, our descendants may wish that Derrida's contemporaries had been able to read him not as a frivolous iconoclast, but rather as a sentimental educator, as another of "the women's moral philosophers."¹⁵

If one follows Baier's advice, one will see it as the moral educator's task not to answer the rational egotist's question "Why should I be moral?" but

stylistic intricacy, psychological subtlety, epistemological complexity – and to see the sentimental novel not as an artifice of eternity answerable to certain formal criteria and to certain psychological and philosophical concerns, but as a political enterprise, halfway between sermon and social theory, that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time" (126).

The contrast that Tompkins draws between authors like Stowe and "male authors such as Thoreau, Whitman and Melville, who are celebrated as models of intellectual daring and honesty" (124), parallels the contrast I tried to draw between public utility and private perfection in my *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989). I see *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Moby Dick* as equally brilliant achievements, achievements we should not attempt to rank hierarchically, because they serve such different purposes. Arguing about which is the better novel is like arguing about which is the superior philosophical treatise: Mill's *On Liberty* or Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*.

¹⁴ Technically, of course, Kant denied knowledge in order to make room for moral faith. But what is transcendental moral philosophy if not the assurance that the noncognitive imperative delivered via the common moral consciousness shows the existence of a "fact of reason" – a fact about what it is to be a human being, a rational agent, a being that is something more than a bundle of spatiotemporal determinations? Kant was never able to explain how the upshot of transcendental philosophy could be knowledge, but he was never able to give up the attempt to claim such knowledge. On the German project of defending reason against Hume, see Fred Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

¹⁵ I have discussed the relation between Derrida and feminism in "Deconstruction, Ideology and Feminism: A Pragmatist View," *Hypatia* 8 (1993), 96–103, and also in my reply to Alexander Nehamas in *Live Rorty* (Paris: Eclat, 1992). Richard Bernstein is, I think, basically right in reading Derrida as a moralist, even though Thomas McCarthy is also right in saying that "deconstruction" is of no political use.

rather to answer the much more frequently posed question "Why should I care about a stranger, a person who is no kin to me, a person whose habits I find disgusting?" The traditional answer to the latter question is "Because kinship and custom are morally irrelevant, irrelevant to the obligations imposed by the recognition of membership in the same species." This has never been very convincing, since it begs the question at issue: whether mere species membership is, in fact, a sufficient surrogate for closer kinship. Furthermore, that answer leaves one wide open to Nietzsche's discomfiting rejoinder: *that* universalistic notion, Nietzsche will sneer, would have crossed the mind of only a slave – or, perhaps, an intellectual, a priest whose self-esteem and livelihood both depend on getting the rest of us to accept a sacred, unarguable, unchallengeable paradox.

A better sort of answer is the sort of long, sad, sentimental story that begins, "Because this is what it is like to be in her situation – to be far from home, among strangers," or "Because she might become your daughter-in-law," or "Because her mother would grieve for her." Such stories, repeated and varied over the centuries, have induced us, the rich, safe, powerful people, to tolerate and even to cherish powerless people – people whose appearance or habits or beliefs at first seemed an insult to our own moral identity, our sense of the limits of permissible human variation.

To people who, like Plato and Kant, believe in a philosophically ascertainable truth about what it is to be a human being, the good work remains incomplete as long as we have not answered the question "Yes, but am I under a *moral obligation* to her?" To people like Hume and Baier, it is a mark of intellectual immaturity to raise that question. But we shall go on asking that question as long as we agree with Plato that it is our ability to *know* that makes us human.

Plato wrote quite a long time ago, in a time when we intellectuals had to pretend to be successors to the priests, had to pretend to know something rather esoteric. Hume did his best to josh us out of that pretense. Baier, who seems to me both the most original and the most useful of contemporary moral philosophers, is still trying to josh us out of it. I think Baier may eventually succeed, for she has the history of the past two hundred years of moral progress on her side. These two centuries are most easily understood not as a period of deepening understanding of the nature of rationality or of morality, but rather as one in which there occurred an astonishingly rapid progress of sentiments, in which it has become much easier for us to be moved to action by sad and sentimental stories.