

# Richard Rorty and the Demands of Liberalism

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*In this article, I show that Richard Rorty's unduly neglected normative political theory advances a far more distinct and demanding form of liberalism than is usually attributed to him. Attention to how Rorty understands solidarity—and its corresponding conception of public obligations—encourages analysis of his nonjuridical vision of liberal community. Through examination of his oft-ignored, revealing interpretation of Vladimir Nabokov and instructive comparison with the thought of Judith Shklar, I argue that, for Rorty, the sustainability of a liberal community requires an ethos of curiosity, whereby citizens feel moved to uncover and understand the personal experiences of cruelty and humiliation endured by others. We can make sense of this ethos and its demands of us through rethinking the idea of political conversation. This understanding of Rorty's intellectual project not only enriches our appreciation of his complex political theory but also contests the meaning and implications of liberalism itself.*

## INTRODUCTION

Though the intellectually restless and prolific writing of Richard Rorty addresses a range of authors and concepts across different political and philosophical traditions, his main normative priority is to articulate and defend a particular form of liberalism wherein a contingent call to hope supplants any concern with the knowledge of justice (Rorty 1989; 1998a; 1999; 2007a). Perhaps because of the nature of his controversial philosophical commitments—to a strident antifoundationalism that critics often equate with relativism—there has been a dearth of scholarly interest in the substantive character of his normative theory.<sup>1</sup> Although there have been several excellent studies that take Rorty's work on its own terms and attend to its political value (e.g., Bacon 2008; Chin 2018; Curtis 2015; Llanera 2020; Malachowski 2014; Voparil 2006), there remains the need to demonstrate the resonance of his normative voice for conversations about the meaning and implications of liberalism.<sup>2</sup> In this article, through an innovative reading across his corpus, I argue that Rorty

is committed to a far more demanding vision of liberal politics than is usually attributed to him. His ideal conception of liberal community emerges as one in which its citizens maintain an active curiosity in the lives of their fellows—specifically their experiences of cruelty and humiliation—and therefore opt, when appropriate, to observe unenforced public obligations at the expense of the exercise of private freedoms. Rorty thinks, in other words, that a liberal community requires an *ethos of curiosity* that its citizens embrace rather than merely rights, laws, and political institutions.

The significance of my reading of Rorty's liberalism is twofold. First, my analysis improves—through clarification and complication—our understanding of the political theory advanced by one of the most important American intellectuals of the twentieth century. It suggests a specific normative substance that is absent from scholarly accounts of Rorty's thought and pushes back against interpretations that might enable either a *laissez-faire*, or politically complacent, understanding of his liberalism. My interpretation undermines the judgement—put forward when he was last the primary subject of an article in *American Political Science Review*—that Rorty is “incapable of offering any insights into or exits from pressing problems in contemporary liberal societies” (Topper 1995, 954). Second, my reading of the demanding character of Rorty's normative theory contributes to ongoing conversations about the nature of liberalism itself. Scholars, political actors, and ordinary citizens remain engaged in contestations of the nature and political demands of liberalism. As Duncan Bell observes, “today we both inherit and inhabit” the liberal worldview (2014, 685) and such cultural dominance entails both the possibility and importance of contesting its political meaning and implications. Due to its perennial—and perhaps definitive—commitment to individual freedom, its advocates and detractors might assume that liberalism must therefore accord priority to private rights over social duties.<sup>3</sup> Rorty rejects this inference and through

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<sup>1</sup> As Malachowski observes, “many of Rorty's critics, especially in philosophy, fail to read him carefully” and regard his views as “*obviously absurd*” (2014, xiii). Among prominent critics who accuse Rorty of relativism, we find affiliates of the pragmatist tradition from which he himself claims inspiration. For example, Cheryl Misak casts Rorty's thought—which she describes as “more radical than James and Dewey at their most radical” (2013, 229)—as having “nothing to say” to proponents of Nazism (2013, 230). Robert Talisse likewise bemoans Rorty's inability “to maintain that democracy is in any relevant way *better* than, say, tyranny” (2001, 624). For Rorty's response to accusations of relativism, see (Rorty 1991a).

<sup>2</sup> Rorty's exclusion from such conversations seems especially misplaced given the apparent convergence of his philosophical commitments with those of John Rawls's later writings. Rorty often (1989; 1991b; 1999), advertizes his kinship with Rawls's approach to political philosophy in general—which he describes as “thoroughly historicist and antiuniversalist” (Rorty 1991b, 180; 2007a)—as well as his particular attempt to “systematize the principles and intuitions typical of American liberals” (Rorty 1991b, 189).

<sup>3</sup> Advocates of libertarianism thus lay claim to a tradition of “classical liberalism” (e.g., Brennan and Tomasi 2012; Nozick 1974).

his identification of the ethos of curiosity that it demands, he shows us how we might rethink and reclaim liberalism as a political tradition in the name of its own survival.

I begin by briefly reconstructing Rorty's account of solidarity, the crucial force of fellowship capable of sustaining liberal community. Solidarity—which is, for Rorty, both a contingent and creative achievement—appears at first to involve only the public obligations owed to our fellows, which must compete somehow with our private freedoms of self-creation. I then explain how a purely juridical and institutional reading of the competition envisaged by Rorty fails inevitably to appreciate the pivotal place of cruelty in his thought: it misunderstands his particularistic construal of that concept and underestimates its centrality in his account of liberal politics. Through attention to his largely overlooked reading of the works of Vladimir Nabokov, I argue that Rorty's liberalism is committed to a demanding political ethos of curiosity that implies the obligation to reveal the cruelty that surrounds us but to which we are prone to be oblivious. Through instructive comparison with Judith Shklar's concept of passive injustice, I scrutinize the meaning of this ethos and suggest that one of its practical entailments is that liberal citizens should invest their energy in political conversations that seek to expose and understand experiences of cruelty within our community. We are then bound to adjust our civic language as we navigate these conversations, to continually reimagine and recreate our political world.

## SOLIDARISTIC COMMUNITY AND THE PUBLIC–PRIVATE DIVIDE IN RORTY'S LIBERALISM

In perhaps his best-known work, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty places an idealized figure of “liberal ironist” at the center of a vision of politics that involves an ostensibly “firm” distinction between public and private lives (1989, 83). Such ironists reconcile themselves to the simultaneous (private) rejection of metaphysical certainties and (public) endorsement of the culturally contingent liberal values that command their loyalty. The substantive content of Rorty's politics, in that text and elsewhere, can appear ambiguous. Rorty's explication of liberal values is somewhat anaemic, their political manifestations sketched austere as “standard ‘bourgeois freedoms’” for all, alongside liberal institutions and civil society, against a background of “peace and wealth” (1989, 84). The normative ambiguity of these political commitments heightens when we observe that Rorty's thought contains both sincere valorizations of individual freedom (e.g., 1989, xvi, 84–5; 1999, 235) and a suspicion of individual rights that is sufficiently intense for him to link their prominence—in the American political imagination—to a dystopian collapse of democratic institutions (1999, 243–51). To complicate matters further—in contrast to John Rawls, who eschews the label pointedly—Rorty describes his normative ideal as a “community,” which suggests a

social unity not always associated with liberalism (Rawls 1993, 40–3; Rorty 1989, 44–69).

The concept to which Rorty turns to explain the basis for such community is “solidarity,” a bond felt with others that binds people together as a collective (1989, 189–98). As he points out, the possible sources for ties of solidarity are contingent in nature and infinite in number. He identifies some common catalysts for solidaristic connections as shared imaginations of religious commitments, hometowns, union affiliations, professions, sports interests, and family experiences (Rorty 1989, 190–1). It is important to stress that solidarity is not here a bond that we find in, or appears as the consequence of, the recognition of an already shared or discoverable identity. Solidarity rather *creates* shared identity. It is a bond that we create ourselves, as “a matter of imaginative identification with the details of others' lives” (Rorty 1989, 190; 1998b) that is sparked by sentimental, affective engagement. Such identification is, for example, what Rorty thinks feminism achieves when its claimants endeavour to “create women” as a solidaristic community (1998b, 212). Due to its roots in our imaginations, we are unlikely to sustain the fellowship necessary for solidarity through appeal to abstract or formal characteristics that are putatively antecedent to their creation, as in the case of ahistorical categories like “human being” (Rorty 1989, 189–92; 1998b, 211–2; 1998c, 178–9).<sup>4</sup> When seeking global ties of solidarity, or in making the case for human rights, liberal communities should, for Rorty, thus address their illiberal neighbors through experiential, sentimental narratives rather than invoke universalistic notions of rationality or morality (1998c; 2007a, 54–5).

For Rorty, rather than any philosophical or religious unity underlying our solidarity, “what binds [liberal] societies together are common vocabularies and common hopes” (1989, 86). Common hopes can provide the “social glue” that holds citizens together because they reach out beyond our individual worlds to imagine a future for our community (Miller 2020, 187–90; Rorty 1989, 84;). While each person holds particular “hopes for one's grandchildren,” when expressed in the context of a civic conversation they implicitly imagine a world for the grandchildren of a whole community as well (Rorty 1989, 85; 1998c, 175). Throughout his writing, Rorty contrasts the concept of hope with that of knowledge and the expression of our common hopes is again a creative endeavor (e.g., 1998a; 1999). Rather than draw on a detached, scientific view of the present to predict a certain future, we instead narrate our unique personal experiences to offer “prophecies” and “yearnings” for the community of which we wish to be part (Rorty 1998b, 207–8; 1999, 155). Through telling our “stories,” we try to create the community for which we yearn, and thereby

<sup>4</sup> “Our sense of solidarity is strongest,” claims Rorty, “when those with whom solidarity is expressed are thought of as ‘one of us,’ where ‘us’ means something smaller and more local than the human race” (1989, 191; 2007a).

“forge a moral identity” for ourselves as a collective, as Rorty does himself when narrating his political hope for America in *Achieving Our Country* (1998a, 13).

Rorty asserts that we have “obligations by virtue of our sense of solidarity” (1989, 195). He thinks, however, that such solidaristic obligations to others “constitute *only* the public side of our lives” and that this set of responsibilities “competes with our private affections and our private attempts at self-creation,” without having any “*automatic* priority” over them (Rorty 1989, 194). The nature of the “competition” that Rorty envisages between our public obligations and private freedoms is uncertain. Rorty acknowledges that our private freedoms of self-creation might have undesirable consequences for others, enabling an avoidance of our obligations that, in turn, threatens solidarity. He notes, for example, that the “redescription” of the world—which accompanies ostensibly private projects of self-creation—“often humiliates” others by throwing their entire worldview into question (Rorty 1989, 90). Such redescriptions can range from those of the artist or novelist who depicts our world in creative ways that violate our deepest self-understandings to everyday comments and jokes, the meaning and rhetorical success of which depends on their humiliation of others. The humiliation prompted by such exercises of private freedom would seem to endanger solidarity, as the consequent feelings of resentment may weaken the ties that bind a community together. We would seem to require an understanding of Rorty’s competition between private freedoms and public obligations that supports, rather than undermines, the solidarity of a liberal community.

The nature of Rorty’s commitment to this supposedly firm public–private divide has engaged various scholars, who have attempted to make sense of the difficulties it poses for understanding the practical entailments of his liberalism (e.g., Anderson 2017; Barthold 2012; Llanera 2016; Miller 2020; Voparil 2006, 132–43). Some interpreters stress the importance of retaining a robust distinction between public obligations and private freedoms. John Anderson (2017), for example, maintains that Rorty’s “strong” divide between public and private implies a welcome discursive restraint in liberal political dialogue such that citizens refrain from drawing on their personal ethical commitments and cultural identities during democratic deliberations in the public sphere. Others seek instead to resolve and overcome the potential tensions between public and private realms in Rorty’s liberalism. Tracy Llanera (2016; 2020) suggests that the complementarity of each sphere is understandable with reference to the same normative value of “self-enlargement” such that the freedom of self-creation we seek in private involves ultimately a perfectionist surrender of egotism that enhances our public role as liberal citizens. Christopher Voparil likewise invokes a species of perfectionism to overcome his concern that Rorty’s allegiance to privacy means that his “conceptions of politics and public life neither enlist nor require the individual’s highest energies” (2006, 134).

I wish to make the case for an alternative understanding of Rorty’s political theory that goes some way toward resolving the tension between public and private without denying his commitment to the solidity of the distinction itself. Rather than suggest that Rorty’s potentially rivalrous notions of public and private spheres stem from any single, unifying normative value, I will argue that his idealized vision of liberal community is characterized by a political ethos that, when appropriate, accords priority to the obligations we hold toward our fellows over our personal freedoms. The tension between public and private thus remains authentic and potentially perilous, but Rorty’s belief is that, on many, if not most, occasions, the pursuit of our freedoms must yield to our obligations, should we wish to preserve our liberal community. Before we get to the content of the ethos that Rorty thinks is necessary for a liberal political community to adopt, cultivate, and maintain, we must attend to its form. What exactly is a political ethos and its role within a community? We can define the ethos of a community, capably, to refer to the attitudes, values, and motivations that characterize and underlie the informal interactions and social practices of its members, as opposed to the formal rules that govern them.<sup>5</sup> The crucial feature of an ethos in the context of a political community is thus that it is separable from the juridical domain of formally codified rights and laws; it defines instead the interactions that take place beyond that domain. If a community has a shared ethos, then regardless of any formal institutional framework, its citizens are committed to certain norms of interpersonal interaction that are neither equivalent nor reducible to compliance with rights and laws. To demonstrate the conceptual space for such an ethos within Rorty’s political thought, we need show the limitations of any merely juridical reading that focuses solely on rights, laws, and institutions.

## THE CENTRALITY AND PARTICULARITY OF CRUELTY

We can begin to unpack the substance of Rorty’s concept of a liberal ethos by returning to his belief that one of the means to achieving solidarity is through the articulation of our common hopes. Rorty claims that the “hope which characterizes modern liberal societies” is “the hope that life will eventually be freer, less cruel, more leisured, richer in goods and experiences, not just for our descendants but for everybody’s descendants” (1989, 86). This description of substantive hope recalls the liberal principles identified earlier, with one crucial addition. Along with standard “bourgeois freedoms,” Rorty includes being “less cruel” as a characteristic of “liberal hope.” Cruelty occupies a prominent position in Rorty’s political thought, and he invokes Judith Shklar’s definitive claim that

<sup>5</sup> For a broadly similar understanding of the idea of a political ethos, see (Cohen 2008), though he deploys it in the very different context of an egalitarian theory of justice.



“liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do” (Rorty 1989, xv, 173; Shklar 1984, 44).<sup>6</sup> For Shklar, although cruelty is evil “in and of itself”—a status not derivable from “any other higher norm” (1984, 8–9)—its position as the worst vice for liberals comes from their rejection of the political salience of religious ideas of sin and natural rights, which befits Rorty’s rejection of metaphysical certainties. It is perhaps unsurprising—as he thinks it necessary for the sustenance of community—that Rorty ascribes solidarity real importance for the minimisation of cruelty (Rorty 1989, 189–98; 1998c). However, solidarity is not the conceptual opposite of cruelty and the presence of the former does not ensure the elimination of the latter. Rorty invokes a very specific, experiential understanding of cruelty that broadens the concept beyond most conventional definitions such that its total elimination looks impossible. For him, this broader understanding means that liberals can expect to find forms of cruelty in their own communities, even if they potentially have resources available to guard against, and respond productively to, the suffering it causes.

Attention to how Rorty understands the centrality and particularity of cruelty helps unveil the normative content of his liberalism, revealing its demands. The meaning of cruelty is not a matter of objective or transcultural fact for Rorty but lies instead in a person’s subjective experience of the world. We experience cruelty not necessarily when we endure physical pain at the hands of another but also when a person’s behavior somehow disfigures fundamentally our understanding of ourselves such that we do not recognize the world as our own. It is what individuals themselves value, how they perceive and experience their own “powerlessness” and “obsolescence” subjectively, that gives cruelty its content and therefore renders its potential definition limitless (Rorty 1989, 89–90).<sup>7</sup> We find a vivid illustration of Rorty’s subjective understanding in his reading of George Orwell’s *1984*, and the torture of Winston Smith at the hands of O’Brien. As Rorty emphasizes, the cruelty of O’Brien lies not in any physical pain inflicted but in the carefully arranged humiliation that Winston endures (Rorty 1989, 177–9). This humiliation is irreducibly personal and particular to Winston’s own experience and understanding of the world. It involves the ultimate betrayal of the person he loves and the psychological disfigurement caused by being compelled to believe something about the world that is irreconcilable with his self-understanding. For Rorty, the humiliation that accompanies cruelty lies in “the forcible tearing down of the particular structures of language and belief” that comprise our personal view of our world and ourselves within it (1989, 177). As we each hold uniquely personal self-understandings and webs of belief, so our individual experiences of

cruelty and humiliation will differ accordingly (Rorty 1989, 179).

William Curtis (2015) tries to make juridical and institutional sense of how Rorty understands cruelty, and highlighting the limitations of this approach indicates the conceptual space for the ethos that his liberal community requires. Curtis (2015, 91) claims that the appropriate response of Rorty’s liberal community to instances of cruelty is democratic deliberation (to verify their existence), followed by the consensual normative ascription—and subsequent legal protection—of individual rights (to address any future instances of such cruelty). The main political challenge Curtis observes is the practical one of how to identify with confidence the authenticity of claims of experiencing cruelty and humiliation. The solution to this challenge lies, for his juridical reading of Rorty, in political “debate,” within which we can verify the authentic experience of cruelty through democratic consensus (Curtis 2015, 91). Individuals should thus use the formal, political arena to draw on, and appeal to, liberal values—of equality and freedom—to present their criticisms of cruel social practices for potential democratic uptake (Curtis 2015, 88–91).<sup>8</sup> Curtis offers the emergence of the 1964 U.S. Civil Rights Act as an instance of such successful civic deliberation, as—on his reading—it outlawed racial segregation and discrimination in response to public discourse and a democratic consensus about the cruelty experienced by African Americans. He points to the “recognition” within the democratic community of “how society’s treatment of African Americans is cruel” and how that treatment conflicts with the liberal values of freedom and equality (Curtis 2015, 91). The Civil Rights Act thus exemplifies a legislative response to a democratic consensus that verifies that specific claims of cruelty violate liberal principles.

This juridical and institutional understanding of cruelty invites numerous criticisms. Perhaps most glaringly, it permits a sanitization of—historical and contemporary—political conflicts that could encourage a dangerous sanguinity and complacency about the presence of sustained cultures of cruelty in a community that nevertheless espouses formal commitments to the ideas of freedom and equality. It does so because it would seem to entail both that laws and political institutions are sufficient to overcome cruelty and that the historical record vindicates their efficacy at realizing liberal ideals. The sustained experience of horrific racism by African American citizens in the United States, in the years since the Civil Rights Act, makes such notions highly dubious. This narrowly juridical and institutional understanding of liberalism implies the faith that formal, legal equality is a sure route to meaningful political equality, as it assumes that the claims of those who experience cruelty will have force in relevant democratic fora and legislative bodies. It also puts the onus on individuals to present to their community instances of cruelty endured, which then

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion of Rorty on cruelty, see Bacon and Dianda (2021), Elshtain (2003), Haliburton (1997), and Owen (2001).

<sup>7</sup> As Bacon (2017, 960) observes, Rorty’s understanding denies that we could give any “final” account of the necessary and sufficient conditions of cruelty.

<sup>8</sup> For a different discussion of Rorty’s understanding of democratic deliberation, see Dieleman (2017).

makes it possible that those who feel humiliated and silenced by their experiences will remain unnoticed should others not hear and heed their voices. If accepted as politically sufficient, this juridical and institutional interpretation of cruelty might justify a rejection of Rorty's liberalism as naïve—embodying what one critic alleges is his “blithe trust in existing democratic institutions to do the job of identifying suffering” (Stullerova 2014, 30)—and therefore too enfeebled to sustain solidarity except among the most privileged members of a community.

## THE CRUELTY OF AUTONOMY

Rorty provides his richest account of cruelty—revealing its connection to solidarity and pointing to the liberal ethos that it demands—through a penetrating reading of the novels of Nabokov.<sup>9</sup> The conception of cruelty that emerges during Rorty's analysis of Nabokov enables a transformative interpretation of the normative substance of his liberalism. It offers a vision of how a community can, and should, most effectively expose cruelty, which departs radically from any narrowly juridical liberalism and calls for empathetic civic conversation guided by an ethos of curiosity rather than merely democratic deliberation characterized by political debate. At the beginning of his discussion of Nabokov, Rorty distinguishes between two different types of books that can help us “become less cruel” (1989, 141). While the first addresses the cruelty of “social practices and institutions,” the second type, exemplified by the works of Nabokov, allows us instead to “see the effects of our private idiosyncrasies on others” (Rorty 1989, 141). It might seem at first surprising, given his already noted commitment to the distinction between public and private, that Rorty incorporates an interest in this second set of books into his political philosophy. The value of books that scrutinize our private idiosyncrasies lies, for Rorty—echoing consciously the concerns of William James—in their capacity to “exhibit the blindness of a certain kind of person to the pain of another kind of person” (Rorty 1989, 141; James 2000). Such books “dramatize the conflict between duties to self and duties to others” and “show how our attempts at autonomy, our private obsessions with the achievement of a certain sort of perfection, may make us oblivious to the pain and humiliation we are causing” (Rorty 1989, 141).

We can already make three important observations about these prefatory remarks. The first is that Rorty believes that we can cause others to experience cruelty without ourselves being aware of it. This view rejects any intuitive temptation we may have to think of cruelty in terms of the particular intentions that lie behind an action, as in the case of O'Brien's meticulous torture of Winston.<sup>10</sup> Rorty thus appears to depart from Shklar's understanding of cruelty as a definitively

“deliberate” form of humiliation (Shklar 1984, 37). Second, we can observe that Rorty's initial comments about cruelty indicate that we have not only rights to pursue our freedom for self-creation but also substantial “duties” to others and that the two can conflict outside of any juridical framework. Rorty is explicit that the second type of books to which he refers reveals cruelty to us, “not by warning us against social injustice”—and thus not raising a problem of duties that might be solvable through juridical means—but rather “by warning us against the tendencies to cruelty inherent in searches for autonomy” (1989, 144). Our search for cruelty will evidently take us beyond codified entitlements and formal institutions and draw attention instead to the obligations that liberalism demands of us, even—and sometimes especially—when we are exercising our rights and making the most of our freedoms. The third, and perhaps most important, thesis indicated by his initial remarks on Nabokov concerns Rorty's belief in the *ubiquity* of cruelty. Rorty refers to the cruelty that others experience because of “our” obliviousness to it and he thereby signals our complicity in its enablement. It is thus a mistake to think that only evil individuals or degraded cultures bear responsibility for, or witness to, cruelty. It is rather “our attempts at autonomy, our private obsessions” that inflict cruelty and it is therefore “we” liberals who bear responsibility for its experience and therefore its recognition and remedy (Rorty 1989, 141).

For Rorty, the distinct insight that Nabokov brings to our understanding is a view of “cruelty from the inside” (Rorty 1989, 146). Nabokov's novels provide an examination of how cruelty is manifest by nothing more sinister than a person's inner life, which, even when it focuses on the pursuit of a personal goal or an ideal of excellence, can inadvertently engender forms of cruelty that are—in a liberal community, by definition—politically relevant. Upon first consideration, Nabokov's *Lolita* might look a bizarre choice to vindicate such a thesis, as it gives center stage to one of the most brazenly cruel protagonists found in modern literature: the sinister, narcissistic pedophile, Humbert Humbert. Not only extremeness but also an elaborate theatre of manipulation marks Humbert's cruelty, suggesting that his behavior is anything but inadvertent. The foreword to the novel—written after Humbert's death in incarceration—leaves no doubts as to his character. It casts Humbert as “abnormal,” “horrible,” and “abject,” a “shining example of moral leprosy,” whose memoir is bound to prove a “classic in psychiatric circles” (Nabokov 1970, 5). The picture only darkens when Humbert's memoir begins, as he exposes the reader immediately to his demonic thoughts and obsessions. From the outset, we encounter Humbert's gleeful

<sup>9</sup> For Rorty as interpreter of Nabokov, see Stow (1999) and McCarty (2015).

<sup>10</sup> As his discussion of Nabokov demonstrates, Rorty clearly does not think that cruelty must involve torture—the latter is, for him, merely one instantiation of the former. Therefore, historian Samuel Moyn (2013) is mistaken when he claims that Rorty views torture as the “*summum malum*” and that he places it “first among public concerns.”

attitude toward his own pedophilia (tempered only occasionally by self-loathing) and a litany of cruel thoughts that oscillate from exactitude to carelessness. Nabokov presents Humbert's behavior as pathological, and there are references to his previous stays in "madhouses" (Nabokov 1970, 172). As Rorty points out, however, consideration of Humbert's character—the content of his inner life and disturbing obsessions—is actually useful for thinking about the particularity and interiority of cruelty. Such consideration requires understanding Humbert not merely as an epic figure of evil, an unapologetic and delusional villain who belongs beyond the fringes of our community. It involves resisting the urge to reduce him to his perversions. We should instead look to his confessional memoir to uncover the roots of much more banal and everyday experiences of cruelty. The banal and everyday element of Humbert's story lies not in the horrific content of his thoughts or actions but rather in the particular and much more ordinary disposition that characterizes and enables them.

Rather than interpreting Humbert's lack of empathy as pathological, Rorty thinks that Nabokov draws us toward the part of his character that we readers are most likely to recognize during our everyday experiences, perhaps in others, but most certainly in ourselves. Rorty describes Humbert—along with Charles Kinbote, from Nabokov's *Pale Fire*—in the following terms:

Both Kinbote and Humbert are exquisitely sensitive to everything which affects or provides expression for their own obsession, and entirely incurious about anything that affects anyone else. These characters dramatize, as it has never before been dramatized, the particular form of cruelty about which Nabokov worried most—incuriosity. (Rorty 1989, 158)

We must, thinks Rorty, read Humbert as a "monster of incuriosity," rather than a monster of evil or madness (1989, 161). The profundity of his incuriosity renders Humbert unaware of the interior lives and sufferings of others, which is what makes him such an unreliable narrator. Rorty offers various parts of *Lolita* as vindication for his reading of Humbert, including a memorable passage where he is struck by the revelation that he does "not know a thing" about the mind of Dolores/Lolita, who is suggested at this point and others to be a literal object of obsession rather than a person (Rorty 1989, 163). However, in truth Rorty could settle on almost any page of the novel, as each would seem to show Humbert's consistent lack of curiosity for anyone who is not himself or not a means of satisfying his obsessions. For Rorty, such incuriosity—and the corresponding failure to notice the experience of others—is an everyday habit of mind to which we know we can fall prey such that "we emerge from the final pages" of Nabokov's novels "wondering whether we like ourselves" (Rorty 1992, xv).

Rorty's interpretation does not settle whether we should regard Humbert as incurious or evil, nor does it establish whether it is more helpful morally or politically to normalize or monster him. It is unimportant,

for our purposes, whether we accept Rorty's specific interpretation of Nabokov's novels. The importance of Rorty's analysis lies instead in how it illuminates his own understanding of cruelty and, by extension, the substantive character of his liberalism. For Rorty, the crucial insight that his reading of Nabokov demands of us is that "the pursuit of autonomy is at odds with feelings of solidarity" (Rorty 1989, 159). This contention has significant implications for understanding the logic of Rorty's political theory. We know already that solidarity is what ensures community. Therefore, we can conclude with some confidence that the pursuit of autonomy can be the enemy, rather than moral lynchpin, of liberal community.<sup>11</sup>

When discussing Rorty's interpretations of literary works, it is tempting to have in mind his view that "novels rather than moral treatises are the most useful vehicles of moral education" and to read this sentiment in straightforward, didactic terms, to indicate lessons to learn therein (1998d, 12). This temptation might explain the scholarly urge to reduce his normative concerns to a Kantian "'don't be cruel' rule," despite Rorty's disdain for universalizable moral mantras (Elshtain 2003, 145; Rorty 1989, 192–93). Others see Rorty's invitation to consult authors like Nabokov as wanting for readers to "see the ways in which human beings are cruel to one another ... in order to become less cruel" (Guignon and Hiley 2003, 26). It is thus worth emphasizing that, for Rorty, the precise point of reading *Lolita* is not to dissuade us from *acting* like Humbert Humbert (for such a conclusion should be obvious to us) but rather to show us how we are prone already to *think* like him.<sup>12</sup> Rorty selects specific novelists not because reading them will give us direct lessons on the conduct we should think cruel and thus avoid but because they can expose to us the everyday habits of mind that nurture our behavior and underlie our attitudes toward others. Novels thus expand our imagination, making vivid to us the irrepressibly variable character of cruelty, as well as our failings to notice our own responsibility for it, which we find encapsulated in Nabokov's illumination of incuriosity. The normative conclusion that Rorty urges upon us, from his discussion of Nabokov, is not just that reading more novels will make us less cruel (Rorty 1992, xviii–xix). It is also the particular conviction that incuriosity is a habit that not only enables but actually itself instantiates our cruelty to others, as it means that we fail to notice and appreciate their quiddity and thus do not pay heed to the potential sources of their humiliation and suffering. As it is the enemy of solidarity and therefore threatens the

<sup>11</sup> In her incisive reading of Rorty, Llanera (2016, 327–30) discusses this problem as one of "egotism," though she does not—because of her unification of his public and private spheres through the concept of self-enlargement—categorize this characteristic as inherent to the pursuit of autonomy.

<sup>12</sup> For Rorty, the "moral" of *Lolita* is "to notice what one is doing, and in particular to notice what people are saying. For it might turn out, it very often does turn out, that people are trying to tell you that they are suffering" (1989, 164).



very basis of liberal community, we must vanquish incuriosity—the cruelty we find inherent in autonomy—as best we can.

## AN ETHOS OF CURIOSITY

The good news, for Rorty, is that because a liberal community is, by definition, characterized by its opposition to cruelty, we have available the conceptual resources to describe, cultivate, and maintain the political ethos that can best expose and combat it. As cruelty is the worst ill for members of their community to experience, liberals are uniquely equipped to seek out the myriad ways in which it is manifest therein. For Rorty, this is borne out by the historical experience that liberal societies have had such that, over time, they “have become aware of forms of suffering and humiliation of which Mill was less aware” (Rorty 1999, 236). In *Achieving Our Country*, though critical of many elements of late twentieth-century American democracy, Rorty nonetheless celebrates the successful articulation, and corresponding diminution, of various forms of cruelty that he thinks were commonplace until the 1960s. For him, a late twentieth-century political prioritization of the experiences of various marginalized groups has “decreased the amount of sadism in our society” such that “the casual infliction of humiliation is much less socially acceptable than it was during the first two-thirds of the [twentieth] century,” which, for him, embodies moral progress (Rorty 1998a, 80–1).<sup>13</sup> Lest we get complacent about such progress, in that text Rorty seeks also to expand the definition of the marginalized to include the economically disadvantaged—such as “the unemployed, the homeless, and residents of trailer parks”—who may be neglected through a predominant academic focus on cultural minorities (1998a, 80).<sup>14</sup> Such a focus, though itself prompted by a concern to expand our awareness of cruelty, has the potential to inculcate its own habits of incuriosity.<sup>15</sup>

The view that incuriosity poses a real danger for liberal community implies a corresponding commitment to the idea that enhanced curiosity can provide the best means of combating cruelty and strengthening solidarity. The incuriosity that accompanies the selfish pursuit of autonomy is not a problem that we can fix through juridical means via the ascription of further rights. A liberal political authority cannot effectively compel its citizens to be curious about others and thus empathetic about their lived experiences of humiliation, as it can exert no control over intentional states. The most potent juridical response available would be to police public displays of incuriosity that cause cruelty rather than attend to the private attitudes that lie behind such actions. Recall, however, that solidarity is likewise not something that we can legislate or institutionalize into existence but arises instead out of a fellow feeling that takes hold between people for all kinds of contingent reasons. Thus, there is no reason to think that there cannot be a political solution to incuriosity, even if it is not juridical but lies instead in the cultivation and maintenance of a liberal ethos.

To vindicate the presence of a liberal ethos of curiosity within Rorty’s thought, we can return to his understanding of the relationship between our private and public lives. Rorty is well aware that the boundaries of public and private cannot be, in practice, as “firm” (1989, 83) as his theoretical distinction between them might suggest. The boundary is instead porous and the distinction between the two spheres dependent on context and therefore “flexible” (Llanera 2016, 334). Although Rorty retains the idea of “private purposes” as a category of actions that a liberal community will protect, potentially even when they involve the display of attitudes that might cause suffering to others, he does not think that this category vitiates the duties we hold to those others to care about their lives and refrain from causing them humiliation. The realm of our lives that is purely private and therefore exempt from such duties would seem, in fact, to be quite limited in scope, as the following, crucial assertion indicates:

My private purposes, and the part of my final vocabulary which is not relevant to my public actions, are none of your business. But as I am a liberal, the part of my final vocabulary which is relevant to such actions *requires me to become aware of all the various ways in which other human beings whom I might act upon can be humiliated*. So the liberal ironist needs as much imaginative acquaintance with alternative final vocabularies as possible, not just for her own edification, but in order to *understand the actual and possible humiliation of the people who use these alternative final vocabularies*. (Rorty 1989, 92, emphases added).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Rorty defines moral progress as “the direction of greater human solidarity,” which is “the ability to see more and more traditional differences ... as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation” (1989, 192).

<sup>14</sup> For Rorty’s further thoughts on economic inequality and marginalization, see (1999, 223–8, 255–61).

<sup>15</sup> Understanding Rorty’s critique of the late twentieth-century “cultural left” as a contingent objection to the exclusion of the economically marginalized allows for a productive interpretation of his dialogue with Nancy Fraser. In response to Fraser’s (1995) suggested choice between a politics of recognition or redistribution, Rorty (2000a) favors the latter and appears skeptical of the former, consistent with his views in (1998a) and (1999). As Fraser (2000) points out, however, Rorty’s skepticism about the politics of recognition stems from worries about essentialist claims that he thinks underwrite “the identity model of recognition” (Fraser 2000, 23). Absent such essentialism, Rorty’s liberalism is evidently welcoming to any political emphasis placed on one’s personal identity as a locus of meaning, insofar as it helps us understand the particularity of experiences of cruelty and humiliation. For further discussion of Rorty and feminism, see (Dieleman 2021). See also (Voparil 2006, 101–5).

<sup>16</sup> This call for liberal awareness of “alternative final vocabularies” to understand experiences of cruelty alien to our own might address Voparil’s concern about the need for Rorty’s framework to “be open to joining the conversations of others rather than asking them to join ours” (2011, 125).

When read alongside Rorty's interpretation of Nabokov, a great deal follows from this pivotal passage and its explicit linkage of being a liberal with the obligation to "become aware of *all* the various ways" that I might cause the humiliation of another, despite the absence of any formal, juridical requirement that we do so. We find here that an active and panoramic form of curiosity—that which concerns "the actual and possible humiliation" of all others—defines the ethos of a liberal community and helps sustain its solidarity.

The liberal obligation of curiosity is no less important or real because it does not exist in the juridical realm and therefore does not correlate to a legally enforceable perfect right. Such obligations are instead important and real for the committed liberal herself. Rorty's antifoundationalism allows him to reframe the traditional justificatory account of political authority because he flattens any distinction between morality and prudence (1989, 57–61; 1999, 72–90; 2007a). He thinks that if we (liberals) do regard liberalism as valuable, we should find ways to reimagine and contest its meaning, make it more attractive to our fellows, and realize any political potential that appears latent therein.<sup>17</sup> Rorty also suggests that we recast claims about competing duties of rational justice and sentimental affection as relational conflicts between different loyalties (2007a, 44). We thus find ourselves moved to care for others by our sentimental commitments of fellowship rather than any motivation born of universalistic rationality, and it is on this basis that we should seek to build "a community of trust between ourselves and others" (Rorty 2007a, 55; 1998c). The adoption of an ethos of curiosity is therefore an obligation *for the liberal* precisely because of their desire to sustain their community regardless of any formal institutionalization of political obligation through a network of rights. The deployment of our curiosity about the experience of others—which engages us in affective, sentimental terms—to battle cruelty thus reveals the contingent and collapsible nature of the distinction between public and private. It gives us hope that our obligations can triumph, more often than not, in the inevitable competition between their observance and our freedom to do otherwise.

We can sharpen our understanding of Rorty's ethos of curiosity—as a means of thwarting cruelty in a liberal community—through instructive comparison with Shklar's concept of "passive injustice" (1990). Shklar uses this concept to evoke a concern, which parallels that held by Rorty, about the harms that all too often go unnoticed because they take place outside the formal, juridical domain of a political community (Shklar 1990, 20–1). For her, the "normal model" employed by philosophers when constructing theories of justice is deficient in its restricted focus on laws and civic institutions.

This focus ignores that "most injustices" actually take place against the backdrop of a conventionally functional political system (Shklar 1990, 19). When they confine their attention to, or even prioritize, abstract questions of "*macrojustice*" (Shklar 1990, 113), political theorists will likely end up with nothing to say about the daily injustices that plague liberal societies from everyday racism, sexism, and homophobia to instances of bullying, corruption, and nepotism. The prevalence of passive injustices—which certain individuals and groups are bound to experience more frequently than do others, but to which everyone is potentially vulnerable—erodes the "democratic ethos" (1990, 35) of a community, which then curdles into an "ethos of inequality" (1990, 87).

Like Rorty, Shklar emphasizes the subjective experience of injustice (Shklar 1990, 49), as well as the ubiquitousness of cruelty, which she finds even in the "pleasures of laughter" and the humiliation that it can cause others to experience (1990, 36). With him, she urges a shift of the onus of attention to cruelty and injustice away from those who endure it and toward their fellow members of a community who carry burdens of ethical responsibility for them. As in Rorty's framework, Shklar points to the problems—those "nasty everyday realities" (Forrester 2011, 614) that philosophical abstraction ignores—which arise when we exercise our freedoms at the expense of obligations we hold to others. Both of their understandings of the demands of liberalism hinge on the fundamental need for an "ethos" that prescribes a certain kind of "informal relations" within the community (Shklar 1990, 41) and thus together show that resistance to cruelty involves an active attention to our fellows and the world that surrounds us.

There seem to be two instructive differences between Shklar's understanding of passive injustice and the ethos of curiosity that we find in Rorty's liberalism that help to underscore the distinctness of each. First, unlike Rorty's notion of incuriosity, we can understand Shklar's concept of passive injustice as, at least in some relevant sense, an *active* phenomenon. Passive injustice is somewhat misleadingly entitled insofar as it includes those occasions "when we close our eyes to small daily injustices, even for such harmless motives as not wanting to make a fuss" (Shklar 1990, 43). Such inaction—our failure to report to police the domestic violence that takes place in the house next door or our refrainment from whistleblowing on corruption that we encounter in the workplace—is not exactly passive, as it stems from the conscious, deliberate decisions of individuals, with their own motivations for complicity with what they *know* themselves to be injustice. The decision (whether motivated by cowardice or laziness) to ignore an injustice is different from a failure (born of incuriosity) to notice and comprehend its existence at all. The deliberate use of one's freedom to avoid being a good citizen is not quite equivalent to Rorty's depiction of incuriosity because there is a difference of intentionality in each, as far as the lives of others are concerned. Passive injustice assumes that the person in question is

<sup>17</sup> Rorty's (1998a) narrative that contests the nature of American political hope is an exemplary first-order, normative counterpart to this second-order, metaphilosophical claim that we should find ways to make the future of our cultural inheritance seem more attractive, if it is of value to us.



aware of their opportunity to respond to the wrong to which they bear witness, whereas incuriosity describes the person who is insufficiently attentive to observe its existence in the first place. The passivity in Shklar's understanding refers to the reluctance on the part of the citizen to act in an upright way, which she describes in akratic terms, rather than through the complete absence of the requisite intentionality, which is the phenomenon that stirs Rorty's interest. The panoramic curiosity that Rorty thinks we should strive to cultivate as liberals is important because of our ignorance of the myriad forms of humiliation that surround us on a daily basis, not necessarily because of any weakness in our resolve to follow through on moral commitments.

The second apparent difference between Shklar and Rorty hinges not on passivity but the idea of injustice itself and its status within a normative account of politics. Rorty's understanding of incuriosity seems to denote a different, perhaps more capacious concept than injustice, with a shifting, open-ended meaning and sphere of application. Although Shklar's concept takes our focus away from the juridical domain where the ascription of rights is sufficient for liberalism, the very idea of an injustice implies some kind of civic wrong, one that might be capable of rectification. Part of the undoubted political power of Shklar's account is that her notion of passivity as a malign force in a liberal community can prompt us to rethink the distinction drawn between injustice and—what some might otherwise cast as—mere misfortune. We can point to the passivity of political actors as a source of relevant responsibility for ignored injustices and thereby bolster democratic accountability through calls for appropriate institutional redress (Mihai 2014). Rorty's notion of the humiliation that comes from incuriosity points, by contrast, to a harm that is ultimately particularistic and experiential and so may not always be thinkable as an injustice, or in terms that require any political response other than to listen, and take seriously, the narrative of the person describing their suffering.

Although Shklar's analysis shows the limitations of the normal model employed by conventional theories of justice, passive injustice is a matter ultimately of bad citizenship, a failure to live up to a standard of civic virtue. For her, "passive injustice refers to our public roles and their political context—citizenship in a constitutional democracy" (Shklar 1990, 41). Shklar does "not mean our habitual indifference to the misery of others" but rather our "far more limited and specifically civic failure" to act to thwart injustice (1990, 6). For Rorty, by contrast, the incuriously cruel are not necessarily bad citizens at all but are at most describable perhaps as bad liberals. Although we can, even within Rorty's sentimental framework, "still speak of things being just or unjust" (Dieleman 2017, 329), his conception of incuriosity seems to stretch beyond the confines of most conventional understandings of injustice. For example, we can conceive the sort of person who acts energetically to identify passive injustices during their daily lives and is a paragon of good citizenship, on Shklar's

account, but who is nevertheless resolutely incurious in terms of their intentionality and interiority, which then defines their outlook on life and attitudes to others.

Though the information Nabokov gives us about his life is sketchy and unreliable, we have no reason to assume that Charles Kinbote in *Pale Fire* is necessarily a bad citizen. He might, for all we know, be committed to calling out the everyday injustices to which he is witness.<sup>18</sup> However, such active citizenship would not bear on Kinbote's incuriosity and consequent cruelty, which turns on his obsessiveness and resultant obliviousness to the trauma endured by his neighbor whose daughter has committed suicide, something that seems more a tragedy than an injustice (Rorty 1989, 163–4; 1992, xiii–xiv). Rorty likewise makes passing reference to Mr. Casaubon of *Middlemarch*, presumably because he epitomizes the person who lives a respectable life that involves no outward toleration of injustice, yet is so interiorly devoted to the pursuit of his scholarship that he lives in stubborn ignorance of the inner life of his wife, Dorothea (Rorty 1989, 141). It seems mistaken to regard Casaubon or Kinbote—or Iris Murdoch's equally obsessive and incuriously cruel Charles Arrowby, in *The Sea, The Sea*—as the perpetrator of an injustice in Shklar's sense, though there is something monstrous about their character. For Rorty, the incurious, those whose private, inner selves are inattentive to the lives and sufferings of others, evidently pose a political threat to liberal community that the language of injustice cannot capture. Mindful of the centrality of his public/private distinction, Voparil observes that Rorty maintains "a lifelong resistance" to the feminist insight that "the personal is political" (Voparil 2006, 23). We can now see, however, that an appreciation of the fundamental interiority of Rorty's notion of incuriosity might actually imply an endorsement of this insight, lending credence to Susan Dieleman's view of him as a feminist "ally" (2021, 179). Though beyond the (juridical and institutional) realm of justice and injustice, our personal lives are of the utmost political relevance in Rorty's normative theory, as it is upon them that the solidarity of liberal community depends.

## CURIOSITY AND POLITICAL CONVERSATION

Though we can perhaps find a private version of Rorty's commitment to curiosity—in his emphasis on personal moral development and self-creation (Malachowski 2021, 144–8; Rorty 1991d)—he depicts it mostly as a "social virtue" in a liberal community that provides a means through which we can sustain, and enhance, our fellowship with others (Voparil 2014,

<sup>18</sup> I assume this conclusion holds regardless of whether Kinbote is the exiled King of Zembla.

96).<sup>19</sup> Curiosity thereby provides a substantive content for the normative ethos that governs our informal interactions through the obligation we have to uncover the manifold ways in which others experience cruelty and humiliation and reflect on, and reckon with, our responsibility for their suffering. Though it makes sense to think that this ethos will be contingent and variable in terms of its social and political practices, we can draw some plausible inferences from Rorty's writing about what it might entail. There would appear to be various ways in which we can achieve the "imaginative acquaintance" with the lives of others that Rorty thinks will give us an insight into what can make them feel pain and humiliation. We can broaden our moral and political horizons with exposure to different experiences through particular narratives. Rorty suggests that because philosophy tends toward generality, it is toward "the disciplines which specialize in thick description of the private and idiosyncratic" that we should look to "bind humans together, and thus ... help eliminate cruelty" (Rorty 1989, 94). "Novels and ethnographies," for instance, "sensitize one to the pain of those who do not speak our common language" (Rorty 1989, 94). However, we need not confine ourselves to specific media—let alone those associated with high culture—as any form of personal narrative will have the potential to expose cruelty, insofar as it brings some particular experience of humiliation to our attention that we might otherwise fail to notice. Although Rorty has his own view of the hierarchy of cultural materials best suited to our personal self-creation, the nourishment of our curiosity about the lives of others depends presumably on various eclectic and demotic sources. The particularity of cruelty means that genuine curiosity cannot be elitist.

A fruitful way to understand the political expression of curiosity in a liberal community is through the idea of conversation with others, both in terms of (re)defining its form as a social practice with specific conventions and through attention to what counts as its substantive civic content. The concept of conversation has great significance in Rorty's thought, occupying a prominent place throughout his writings from his earlier work on epistemology to his later, more explicitly political essays. At several points, he urges us to rethink the practice of philosophy itself and view it not as a scientific exercise in truth-seeking undertaken by professionalized experts but rather as a form of "cultural politics" committed to "keeping the conversation going" (Rorty 1979, 378; 2007b). Rorty's understanding of conversation has a definite normative dimension, as his account implies a distinction between "genuine conversation and insincere conversation" (Cooke 2004, 84). Rorty acknowledges as much himself—for example, when he contrasts his vision of conversational

philosophy to the scientific alternative that he disparages (2007b) and when he refers to any claim to religious truth advanced within liberal politics as a "conversation-stopper" because of the final, metaphysical authority it invariably invokes (1999, 168–74).<sup>20</sup> Rorty is thus committed to conversation as philosophical practice and as a way to characterize our political exchanges within a liberal community.

We can unpack aspects of genuine political conversation that would be most amenable to the exposure of cruelty. We can see, for example, that a conversation where the purpose is to uncover—and thereby secure an imaginative acquaintance with—experiences of cruelty felt by another would look very different from a political debate conducted within juridical and institutional parameters. Such a conversation would involve instead the exchange of personal narratives, where the understanding of individual and group experience is *itself* the constitutive goal of the activity. As the sources of cruelty are inexhaustible, so is our capacity for such conversation. As cruelty is, in Rorty's understanding, a particularistic experience, his liberal politics seems bound toward a continuous conversation, the purpose of which is to expose ever-varying forms of humiliation and thus increase solidarity through empathy.<sup>21</sup> Although the possibilities for revelatory conversations about cruelty are inexhaustible, we should not assume that they must be exhausting of all of our energies. As we know, Rorty is committed to individual freedom for the express purpose of self-creation—it is only through its exercise that we have uniquely particular selves to disclose through conversation in the first place—and so our obligations to others cannot consume us to the point of dangerous excess. The nature of the appropriate balance between our obligations to others and our freedoms cannot be determined in advance (and certainly not settled through philosophical analysis) and so we need exercise our judgement about when personal exhaustion looms. Furthermore, the need to yield to our obligations is likely to vary across the community, depending on our capacities. The single mother who juggles two jobs alongside caring responsibilities may be less able than are others to expend their energies on (additional) attentive conversations. It is perhaps inevitable that the obligation to practice curiosity through the initiation of political conversations will be incumbent more on members of a community that occupy situations of comparative privilege.

The way in which Rorty understands the demands of liberalism—entailed by the ethos of curiosity—allows us also to make sense of the practical and linguistic alterations we make to the nature of political conversations within our community. We can plausibly link the liberal desire to reveal and thwart experiences of cruelty to the changes we make to our existing political

<sup>19</sup> Curiosity "brings cosmopolitanism, and democratic politics, in its train. The more curiosity you have, the more interest you will have in talking to foreigners, infidels, and anybody else who claims to know something you do not know, to have some ideas you have not yet had" (Rorty 2000b, 17).

<sup>20</sup> Dieleman (2017, 324) points to parallels between Rorty's view and the understandings of public reason and deliberation advanced by Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. For an alternative reading, see (Barthold 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Telling "long, sad, sentimental" stories provides, for Rorty, the best hope for defending human rights (1998c).

vocabularies and the motivations behind them. For example, we can understand the identification of “microaggressions”—forms of humiliation that are subtle, not always intentional, but degrading treatments of marginalized individuals or groups (McTernan 2018, 264–5)—as a species of cruelty that we can use conversation to uncover and then modify to reflect. Rorty’s commitment to the contingency and malleability of language alongside his view that “re-description often humiliates” helps us make political sense of discursive innovations made in response to such microaggressions that do not necessarily involve recourse to a juridical and institutional framework (Rorty 1989, 90, 3–22).<sup>22</sup> Calling citizens who are transgender by the name they had before they transitioned or using an incorrect pronoun to refer to them are exemplary microaggressions: they are subtle, not always intentional, forms of degradation that gain their force from conferring the powerlessness and obsolescence that Rorty sees as the mark of cruelty.<sup>23</sup> We can also appreciate the creation of concepts such as *dead-naming* and *misgendering* as attempts to improve our vocabularic arsenal such that we can describe these hitherto unrecognized forms of cruelty. Attention to such forms of cruelty points the way toward different conversational conduct in the future and, following Rorty’s logic, tightens solidaristic bonds.

As well as identifying discursive tropes that inflict cruelty, we can extend Rorty’s account of the practice of conversation within a liberal community to consider which habits are most conducive to its sustainability. The central importance of curiosity suggests that such habits include the practice of careful listening, of judging when to initiate specific dialogues, an earnest attentiveness to the various elements of a person’s story, and the ability to issue a sincere response. Perhaps most crucially, we express curiosity when we pay attention to others in our daily lives, on *their* terms. Rorty instances James’s transformative conversation with an Appalachian farmer, who explains the particular meaning—a “paean of duty, struggle, and success”—he ascribes to the building of log cabins and the corresponding sacrifice of a forest (James 2000, 269; Rorty 1989, 38). We see James’s curiosity, and the humility it requires, exemplified in his ability to recognize the particular beauty and meaningfulness in what struck him first as ugliness and careless destruction. James also generalizes this commitment to curiosity through reference to Josiah Royce’s explanation of how attention to our neighbor—whose life appears at first nothing more than “a pale fire beside thy own burning desire”—reveals that they too have a particularity laden with meaning and,

with this realization, one “hast begun to know thy duty” (James 2000, 273).

One question to address is whether Rorty’s conception of cruelty implies limitless toleration in the configuration and content of our political conversations. As we have seen, Rorty is committed to a radically particularistic understanding of cruelty: our need for revelatory civic conversations comes about because of the subjective nature of the experience of humiliation. Critics might worry that this subjective conception of cruelty poses intractable problems for liberal community. Since the content of cruelty comes from our own feelings of powerlessness and obsolescence, we might conclude worriedly that members of our community could experience the development of liberal politics as itself cruel, insofar as they perceive its values (and their expression) as a humiliating denunciation of their worldview. It might seem that the logic of Rorty’s political theory implies, for instance, that the white supremacist could complain legitimately about their particular humiliation by antiracist developments in the community and, furthermore, that we are, as liberals, bound to listen earnestly and take such experiences seriously.

Although Rorty’s theory might seem initially vulnerable to such a concern, our analysis of the concepts most important for his liberalism provides the resources required to repel its force. His particularistic framework does not seem able to deny that the white supremacist could experience a form of humiliation when they yield to the liberal political culture of antiracism. It nevertheless does not follow from this observation that members of a liberal community have any obligation whatsoever to tolerate their racist attitudes. However, the concept that allows the Rortyan liberal to reach this conclusion is not cruelty but rather curiosity, which has a normative substance to its definition that resists restriction in its content. Genuine curiosity cannot be restrictive in its focus but must instead be, for Rorty, panoramic, open, and in search of continuous refreshment. An ethos of curiosity might motivate the liberal to engage, where fruitful and appropriate, in conversation with those who hold illiberal viewpoints, to comprehend their humiliation and its sources, but that obligation does not vitiate their own liberal commitments, nor does it entail political toleration. One’s own experience of cruelty does not absolve the obligation to be curious about the lives of others, and the refusal of that demand amounts to the abandonment of liberal solidarity itself.

## CONCLUSION

In articulating his vision of liberal community in *Achieving Our Country*—through conversation with his national heroes, such as James Baldwin, John Dewey, and Walt Whitman—Rorty declares that “you have to describe the country in terms of what you passionately hope it will become” (1998a, 101). Elsewhere in that text, he paraphrases approvingly Whitman’s hope for such a community, as expressed in

<sup>22</sup> Although microaggressions can exemplify a nonjuridical category of harm, we need not understand them as such. There seems no reason that Rorty’s liberal community could not regard specific microaggressions as matters of legal prohibition. Although Rorty’s theory implies a distinction between juridical and nonjuridical liberal commitments, distinguishing the two seems a matter of contingent political conversation.

<sup>23</sup> For discussion of the harms of misgendering, see Kapusta (2016).



*Leaves of Grass*, as being one in which “Americans will be curious about every other American” (Rorty 1998a, 16). The significance of this pregnant remark and its political resonance should be clear following our analysis of Rorty’s account of the demands of liberalism. While it remains commonplace to think that liberalism is concerned only, or at least primarily, with the juridical and institutional framework of a society (that which Rawls calls its “basic structure,” [1993, 257–9]), Rorty encourages us to look beyond this artificial horizon. For Rorty, liberalism must do more than maintain the institutions and procedures that secure rights and justice; it also requires a specific kind of community with an intentional ethos that motivates and guides the informal interactions of its members.

Proper attention to the meaning of cruelty within Rorty’s political theory—and its central place therein—reveals the normative character of this ethos and therefore the important demands of his liberalism. It is clear that Rorty understands cruelty as a subjective phenomenon that is given meaning by our unique experiences of the world. His interpretation of Nabokov further shows that he regards nothing more sinister than the pursuit of private autonomy—and correspondingly incurious, interior focus on our own lives—*itself* as an instantiation of cruelty to others and therefore a threat to solidarity. Such incuriosity, for Rorty, encapsulates our failure to be interested in the lives of others, to listen to them, to become acquainted with their experiences and values, and to be confident about what could cause them pain and humiliation. As with Shklar’s understanding of passive injustice, Rorty’s focus on incuriosity draws our attention to everyday ways in which we can fight cruelty within a liberal community. The ethos of curiosity we find in Rorty’s thought thus vindicates the view that it is “more politically radical than it has usually been given credit for” (Rondel 2018, 139; see also Dieleman 2021, 197–8).

The activation of our curiosity provides a way to battle cruelty. It enables us to “stay on the lookout for marginalized people—people whom we still instinctively think of as ‘they’ rather than ‘us’” (Rorty 1989, 196). Although this attitude lends potential support to a cosmopolitan politics that makes foreigners into fellows (Rorty 1998c; 2007a; 2000b, 17), it also makes more immediate demands of us, closer to home, within our own communities. It demands that we must pay empathetic attention to those whom we fail to notice, “the menials who, all this time, have been doing our dirty work” (Rorty 1989, 196). The practice of cultivating panoramic curiosity—beginning conversations with the marginalized to identify and understand the humiliation they face—is thus an everyday political obligation, one that is of particular importance to the privileged members of a community but in any case exists only for those who already are committed to liberalism. “One cannot,” thinks Rorty, “be irresponsible toward a community of which one does not think of oneself as a member” (1991c, 197). This understanding of obligations—one that thinks that the

demands of liberalism are a matter only for liberals—is obviously circular, but, for Rorty, it is the only one available for our normative conversations and holds at least the hope that a community can be gained as well as lost.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

## ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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