

The Pragmatics of Parenthood: Rorty and West on the Politics of the Family

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ABSTRACT

In this article I argue that ideas about parenthood have become a point of connection where the neopragmatist theorists Richard Rorty and Cornel West have sought to intertwine two of the primary responsibilities of democratic citizenship. Both Rorty and West turn to parenthood as a reliable lodestar of virtue that allows citizens to navigate the challenging waters of contest. I argue that this strategy exacerbates rather than mitigates the problems that accompany the political uses of parenthood. When the experience of parenthood is used to circumscribe the realm of political contest, the substance of political debate can become shallow and contribute to political stagnation. When the virtuous citizenship that parenthood is meant to instill is subject to challenge, insecurities are exacerbated and the temptation to turn to undemocratic solutions intensifies.

1. *Introduction*

The question of developing accounts of the right, the true, or the good that are deeply felt yet open to contest is one of the central themes of the pragmatist tradition. Contemporary political theory has recently revisited questions of how to balance these two central notions of democratic citizenship. Stephen K. White identifies a trend in which many American theorists acknowledge, “all fundamental conceptualizations of the self, other and world are contestable,” but also hold that, “such conceptualizations are nevertheless necessary or unavoidable for an adequately reflective ethical and political life.”¹ In other words, contemporary theorists of democratic citizenship often seek to answer the question of how we make genuinely felt assertions about better and best ways to live as democratic citizens and how we open those assertions to contingency and reconsideration.

¹ White, Stephen K. *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2000. Pg. 8.

In this article I argue that ideas about parenthood have become a point of connection where the neopragmatist theorists Richard Rorty and Cornel West have sought to intertwine two of these two central aspects of democratic citizenship. Both Rorty and West turn to parenthood as a reliable lodestar of virtue that allows citizens to navigate the challenging waters of contest. Each of these theorists turns to the experience of parenthood to articulate a deeply felt and widely shared sense of the good in contemporary politics. In doing so, both theorists undermine their commitment to contest and reconsideration.

The desire to identify a unifying source of meaning is not new to pragmatism. Daniel Boorstin, Louis Hartz, and Timothy Kaufman-Osborn all note, as the later puts it, that “pragmatism furnishes philosophical expression to a society united upon certain core values and hence free to dedicate its energies to their most efficient realization.”² Rorty and West, as I examine below, settled upon the experience of parenthood as the most important source of the core values of contemporary Americans. I argue that this strategy is counterproductive for each theorist. When the experience of parenthood is used to circumscribe the realm of political contest, the substance of political debate can become shallow and contribute to political stagnation. When the virtuous citizenship – the claim to a deeply rooted notion of the good – that parenthood is meant to instill is subject to challenge, insecurities are exacerbated and the temptation to turn to undemocratic solutions intensifies.

Rorty often described his preferred method of political persuasion as “enlarging the scope of one’s favorite metaphor.” Over the course of his career parental sentiments became Rorty’s favorite metaphor for citizenship. In enlarging the scope of this parental metaphor Rorty would allow it to engulf both his private and public goals for liberal society. The result is a vision of politics that is in many ways the mirror opposite of Rorty’s stated intentions – one that values uniformity over multiple perspectives and is acquiescent to the *status quo* rather than creative in the pursuit of political change. West hopes parental sentiments will help ward off the nihilism that can result from the chaotic forces of the market, and the impulse to authoritarianism that he believes threatens American freedom and democracy. But I argue that in staking his conception of citizenship upon parenthood West creates new difficulties. Nihilism can overwhelm even the altruistic feelings he associates with parenthood and family. When this last bastion of love and hope is threatened, West

² Osborn-Kaufman, Timothy. *Politics/Sense/Experience: A Pragmatic Inquiry into the Promise of Democracy* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1991), 13. Kaufman cites Hartz’s *The Liberal Tradition in America* and Boorstin’s *The Genius of American Politics* in making this point.

is tempted by solutions that court hopelessness, limit freedom and flirt with authoritarianism.

2. Rorty, Pragmatism and the turn to family

Rorty's pragmatism has its philosophical roots in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. In that book he sought to disabuse his fellow philosophers of the idea that they might arrive at foundational truths or fulfill their quests for certainty through discoveries about the "real" nature of the world. Rorty thought philosophers should abandon efforts "to get behind reasons to causes, beyond argument to compulsion from the object known, to a situation in which argument would be not just silly, but impossible, for anyone gripped by the object in the required way will be *unable* to doubt or to see an alternative. To reach that point is to reach the foundations of knowledge" (PMN 159).³ Thus Rorty hoped to reclaim for philosophy a sense that claims are contingent, contestable, held to the standards of persuasion rather than truth or virtue, and subject to revision and being abandoned. Rorty did not see his reclamation of contest for philosophy to be particularly political, however. His account of philosophy, he suggested, "is a story of academic politics—not much more, in the long run, than a matter of what sort of professors come under what sort of departmental budget" (CP 228). Rorty did acknowledge that "there *are* relations between academic politics and real politics," but he argued that, "they are not tight enough to justify carrying the passions of the latter over into the former" (CP 229).

In the years that followed, however, Rorty would dedicate himself to exploring those relations. This was in part because his interpreters saw political implications in his work and sought to pull him in that direction. One of these was Cornel West. In an account of Rorty's early work,⁴ an effort that Rorty called "as informed and sympathetic a treatment as [my work] has ever received,"⁵ West depicted Rorty as a case of unfulfilled potential. West was im-

³ References to Rorty and West's major works will be made in text with the use of abbreviations. A list of abbreviations appears in the appendix at the end of this article.

⁴ West's book was published the same year as Rorty's *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, 1989, and surveys much of Rorty's published work up to, but not including, that point. West, Cornel. *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin 1989).

⁵ Rorty, Richard. "The Professor and the Prophet." *Transition*: No. 52, 1991, 75. West summarized Rorty's ideas regarding philosophy in a way that began to apply his ideas to the realm of political contest. For example, he conflates disagreements about actual social

pressed that Rorty had taken on “the ambitious project of resurrecting pragmatism in contemporary North America.”⁶ But West worried that in continually arguing with philosophers about the uselessness of abstract philosophy, Rorty had become too satisfied with tearing down previous ideas. He hoped Rorty would take on the task that Rorty’s own philosophical work seemed to identify as the only important one: offering useful, rather than “true” accounts of contemporary real-world problems, and describing compelling suggestions regarding the right way to deal with them. West believed that in arguing that we can accept, live with, and celebrate contingency Rorty had become complacent in his relatively arbitrary preference for “liberal-democratic” ideals and too quick to accept the idea that “bourgeois capitalist” politics are “irrelevant to most of the problems of most of the population of the planet.”⁷ West worried that in becoming satisfied with irony, Rorty’s philosophical project reflected and could contribute to “the deep sense of impotence among the middle classes in contemporary capitalist societies, the sense of there being no liberating projects in the near North Atlantic future, and hence to the prevailing cynicism..., narcissistic living, and self-indulgent, ironic forms of thinking.”⁸ West hoped instead that Rorty might follow the example of John Dewey, whom Rorty admired, by articulating the sort of political projects that answer the contingency of current arrangements with compelling accounts of how they might be improved as well as which commitments were worth preserving – and do so in a way that dealt with the profound inequalities and injustices in the North Atlantic and beyond.

West summed up his critique of Rorty in a telling way – using reproductive language. He thought, “[Rorty’s] project, though pregnant with rich possibilities, remains polemical...and hence barren. It refuses to give birth to the offspring that it conceives.”⁹ It was right about the time that West offered this critique that Rorty began to articulate his ideas about the importance to the public realm of citizens’ hopes for their children. West himself, at that time in his career, was writing about the role of hope in politics in the context of the Christian and pragmatic traditions. It was following this particular exchange

practice with intellectual debates in saying that for Rorty, “In cases of conflict and disagreement, we should either support our prevailing practices, reform them, or put forward realizable alternatives to them, without appealing to ahistorical philosophical discourse as the privileged mode of resolving intellectual disagreements.” West 1989, 200-1.

⁶ West 1989, 199.

⁷ West, 1989, 205. West is quoting Rorty’s *Consequences of Pragmatism* p. 210. In his chapter on Rorty

⁸ West, 1989, 207.

⁹ West 1989, 207.

that West and Rorty would each go on to make ideas about parenthood more central to their political thought.

But first Rorty saw fit to defend his particular version of philosophical impotence (to borrow West's description). He did so with a lament regarding the sort of family-centered sentiment that he would later give a central place in his political ideas. Rorty was still suspicious of the "passions" of politics and their potential to cross boundaries (like those between politics and academics) and corrupt reasonable discussion. In responding to West, Rorty maintained that pragmatist philosophy would struggle to find a way to be helpful in contemporary political arguments – largely because argument had devolved into sentiment, particularly sentiment of the resentful sort. "Nowadays nobody even bothers to back up opposition to liberal reforms with argument. People merely say that taxes are too high, that their brother-in-law would have a better job had it not been for his company's affirmative action program, and that it is time for the poor and weak to start looking after themselves. In Dewey's America, as in Emerson's, there was work for intellectuals to do in cracking the crust of convention, questioning the need for traditional institutions. But nowadays, as far as I can see, the problem is not a failure of imagination – a failure of the sort which philosophers might help with. It is more like a failure of nerve, a fairly sudden loss of generous instincts and of patriotic fellow feeling."¹⁰

In the example Rorty offered, family-feeling gets in the way of fellow-feeling. Sympathy for a brother-in-law obscures our responsibility to fellow citizens. In the years that followed Rorty would begin to face this problem in the only way he knew. Rorty liked to call the sort of work that philosophers should undertake as *redescription*. Rather than trying to make their ideas conform to some "truth" about the world, Rorty's "method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it" (CIS 9). For the purpose of politics Rorty would chose to redescribe one thing over and over – family. But his descriptions of family would be parental rather than fraternal—focusing on children rather than brothers-in-law—and would replace present resentments with future hopes. He would conceive of the "rising generation" not merely as a privileged audience but as the central part of the description itself.

Looking at American politics and finding it infused with resentful sentiments Rorty saw not a "failure of imagination" but "a failure of nerve" – he initially saw no need, as a philosopher, to help crack the crust of convention.

¹⁰ Rorty 1991, 76

But Rorty eventually worked up the nerve himself to wade into the political fray. But it might represent a failure of imagination that in order to do so he turned to the same sort of family-centered sentiment that he associated with wrong-headed conservatism in the example of the laid-off brother-in-law. Rather than cracking “the crust of convention” and questioning “traditional institutions,” Rorty would rely upon conventional understandings of the most traditional of institutions.

As mentioned above, Rorty argued that through our redescriptions we should try, “to outflank the objections [of others] by enlarging the scope of one’s favorite metaphor” (CIS 44). For the purpose of politics, parenthood became Rorty’s favorite metaphor and he would stake his hopes for political progress on enlarging its scope. But in its expansion, Rorty’s metaphor would grow out of control. Rorty would extend the parental metaphor outward into the political realm, so that family-feeling extends toward future generations and larger communities, and in doing so he would stretch the metaphor beyond its descriptive usefulness. The metaphor would come to obscure more than it illuminated. And parental sentiments would also expand inward, threatening the private realm of contest that Rorty hoped to preserve. The experience of parenthood would become a source of personal meaning that takes on the character of fundamentalism and must be protected from challenge – at first for the masses but eventually, in the end, for the ironists as well.

3. *Family and the Politics of Hope*

Honig summarizes Rorty’s ideas about the difference between private life and politics this way: “Irony is recommended for private individuals.... For citizens, however, Rorty recommends romance....”¹¹ “Romance” is a word that Rorty only began applying to citizenship after his exchange with West in the late 1980s. West had included Rorty among those that he criticized, along with theorists like Foucault and Derrida, as politically paralyzed because of a one-sided focus on what was wrong with the world – on criticism rather than affirmation. West believed Rorty and other contemporary American pragmatists,¹² “...resemble their counterparts in postmodern literary criticism – postmodern American philosophers have failed to project a new worldview, a countermovement, ‘a new gospel of the future.’” Regarding Rorty in particu-

¹¹ Honig 2001, 166.

¹² In particular Kuhn, Quine, Sellers and Goodman.

lar, West saw his ideas as backward-looking. He thought Rorty's "ingenious conception of philosophy as cultured conversation rests upon a nostalgic appeal to the world of men (and women) of letters of decades past." Thus in West's view, Rorty did not offer any "visions, worldviews or... 'counter-philosophies' to the nihilism to which [his] position seems to lead."¹³

Rorty seemed to agree, and admired West's efforts to be forward-looking. Rorty noted that, "among prominent leftist intellectuals in the United States Cornel West may be unique in that he is patriotic, religious, and romantic."¹⁴ It was West's romanticism, his ability to hold onto "social hope," that struck him most. Rorty thought this was an aspect of West's ideas that was worth defending: "Romantic hope is, for most American leftists, a sign of intellectual immaturity. For such hope is incompatible with the ice-cold man-from-Mars style of thinking and writing exemplified by Foucault, and with the scorn for social hopes of the Enlightenment which we postmoderns are supposed to have learned from Nietzsche and Heidegger. From the point of view of most of the American Left, West's *tone* is all wrong. So much the worse, in my view, for that Left."¹⁵

So Rorty began to change his own tone to be more romantic. He would defend a sort of patriotic romantic hope that was first and foremost *forward-looking*. And while Rorty would never endorse the sort of religious belief that West has made central to his political ideas, Rorty did seek to stake his forward-looking politics on something that approximates religious faith – our hopes for our progeny. As Rorty put it, people once believed, "hope of heaven was required to supply moral fiber and social glue - that there was little point, for example, in having an atheist swear to tell the truth in a court of law. As it turned out, however, willingness to endure suffering for the sake of future reward was transferable from individual rewards to social ones, from one's hopes for paradise to one's hopes for one's grandchildren (CIS 85)."

So while Honig figures Rorty in terms of a turn from "Romantic individualism" to "national romance,"¹⁶ Rorty would come to embrace romance by one extra turn. He figured national politics as a family romance.

While Rorty had recommended private efforts to repeatedly redescribe "lots and lots of things," in his turn to politics he began to forgo multiplicity to take on a more singular tone: our unitary (glued-together) public culture should be given a single redescription. "[L]iberal culture needs an improved self-

¹³ West, Cornell. *The Cornel West Reader*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999, 209-210.

¹⁴ Rorty, Richard. "The Professor and the Prophet." *Transition*: No. 52, p. 70. 1991.

¹⁵ Rorty 1991, 70.

¹⁶ Honig 2001, 171.

description rather than a set of foundations” (CIS 52). And in shifting to a family-centered, future-oriented self-description, Rorty thought that liberal culture “has been strengthened by this switch.” While scientific discoveries and philosophical innovations posed a continuous threat to public religion, Rorty believed that “it is not clear that any shift in scientific or philosophical opinion could hurt the sort of social hope which characterizes modern liberal societies – the hope that life will eventually be freer, less cruel, more leisurely, richer in goods and experiences, not just for our descendants but for everybody’s descendants” (CIS 86).

While Rorty thought the nation’s self-description should be forward-looking, he would defend it by first looking back, toward one of his philosophical “heroes” and a patron saint of American pragmatism – Dewey. Rorty explained that in conceiving of politics in terms of a hope for the future, he was articulating a pragmatic philosophy in the tradition of Dewey. “Dewey argues that so far the thrust of philosophy has been conservative; it has typically been on the side of the leisure class, favoring stability over change. Philosophy has been an attempt to lend the past the prestige of the eternal. ‘The leading theme of the classic philosophy of Europe,’ he says, has been to make metaphysics ‘a substitute for custom as the source and guarantor of higher moral and social values.’ *Dewey wanted to shift attention away from the eternal to the future*, and to do so by making philosophy an instrument of change rather than of conservation, thereby making it American rather than European.... (PSH 29).”¹⁷

In this sort of presentation of Dewey’s ideas, one can see the connections that Rorty would like to make: a concern for metaphysics and eternal truths is tied to conservatism, the past, and Europe, and a more pragmatic approach to philosophy goes along with hope for the future and America. The latter connection is a particularly important one for Rorty. He believed America is the most fruitful ground for a pragmatic approach to both philosophy and politics because “America has always been a future-oriented country, a country which delights in the fact that it invented itself in the relatively recent past” (PSH 24).

While America may have “always been” future-oriented, Rorty liked to pick out and praise certain Americans, like Emerson and Whitman, who have

¹⁷ Rorty’s quotations of Dewey are from *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, and from “Philosophy and Democracy.” The idea of replacing looking for the eternal with looking to the future is one of Rorty’s favorite ways to summarize what he is trying to accomplish (PSH 29, TP 174). Italics added.

best exemplified this spirit, and criticize others, like Henry Adams, who did not. He began to make the same distinctions regarding his contemporaries. While Rorty praised Dewey's association of metaphysical philosophy with conservatism, Rorty identified a group of intellectuals on the *left* side of the political spectrum who he believed had failed to exemplify a spirit of hope for the future. They were many of the same philosophers and theorists that West had lumped in with Rorty as "nihilistic." In joining West in romantic thinking, Rorty would also join this attack. Previously Rorty had found uses for postmodern theory in the private realms of life. "Theorists like Hegel, Nietzsche, Derrida, and Foucault seem to me invaluable in our attempt to form a private self-image,...."¹⁸ When their ideas were applied to politics, they had struck Rorty as less than nefarious – "merely nuisances" (AOC 97). Such theorists and their ideas, Rorty suggested, are "pretty much useless when it comes to politics" (CIS 83). But in embracing a future-oriented politics of hope, Rorty began to find them much more troubling. He came to believe that due to the work of "postmodern" philosophers, "Hopelessness has become fashionable on the Left – principled, theorized, philosophical hopelessness. The Whitmanesque hope which lifted the hearts of the American Left before the 1960's is now thought to have been a symptom of a naïve 'humanism'.... The Foucauldian Left represents an unfortunate regression to the Marxist obsession with scientific rigor. This Left still wants to put historical events in a theoretical context. It exaggerates the importance of philosophy for politics, and wastes its energy on sophisticated theoretical analyses of the significance of current events (AOC 37)."

The essence of his criticism of these scholars on the left is that they "prefer knowledge over hope," in that they try to get behind appearances and understand the "true" nature of oppression, power, hegemony, et cetera.¹⁹ They are

¹⁸ West describes the relationship between the early Rorty and the European postmodernists this way: "Rorty [...] ingeniously echoes the strident antihumanist critiques—such as those of Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault—of a moribund humanism. Yet his brand of neopragmatism domesticates these critiques in a smooth, seductive and witty Attic prose and more important, dilutes them by refusing to push his own project toward cultural and political criticisms of the civilization he cherishes..." (West 1989, 206).

¹⁹ See the chapter "A Cultural Left" in *Achieving our Country*, and "The Humanistic Intellectual: Eleven Theses" in *Philosophy and Social Hope*. Rorty is willing to give credit to these same leftist intellectuals for contributing to many noteworthy accomplishments, in particular for getting the US to realize that Vietnam was a disaster and for helping people in the US become more tolerant and sensitive toward minorities, women, and gays (AOC 68, 80-82). Rorty and West's condemnations of continental philosophers like Foucault and

stuck in the past, and in the deep origins of injustice, rather than looking toward the future.

Part of Rorty's problem with this sort of analysis was that he saw it as useless on the practical level. It offered a "dreadful, pompous, useless, mish-mash of Marx, Adorno, Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan. It has resulted in articles that offer unmaskings of the presuppositions of earlier unmaskings of still earlier unmaskings."²⁰ But more importantly, these ideas were affecting the "rising generation" that Rorty saw as the predominant group "re-descriptions" are meant to "tempt" (CIS 9). Thus Rorty was particularly bothered that "Belief in the utility of this genre has persuaded a whole generation of *idealistic young leftists* in the First World that they are contributing to the cause of human freedom by, for example, exposing the imperialistic presuppositions of Marvel Comics...."²¹

In these debates with the "hopeless" left, Rorty was reenacting his old struggle with analytic philosophy. In that earlier struggle, he hoped to recover a spirit of philosophical contest from the search for foundational truths. In his battle with the postmodernists, he hoped to recover a sense of political contest from a search for deeper and truer understandings of power and oppression. While young academics influenced by this hopelessness might busy themselves with trivialities like comic books, young citizens might give up on politics altogether. "A contemporary American student may well emerge from college less convinced that her country has a future than when she entered. She may also be less inclined to think that political initiatives can create such a future" (AOC 10). So in taking on the "hopeless" left Rorty largely gave up his distinction between academic politics and real politics. Since the future was at stake, and the next generation was at stake, it was time for the philosopher to enter politics proper and once again "enlarge the scope" of his "favorite metaphor."

Rorty thought that liberal solidarity had been strengthened by coming to center upon the shared experience of hopes for our children's future. This "social glue" was so strong because the sentiment was so deeply felt. Most people's lives, Rorty believed, are "given meaning by this hope" (CIS 86). It was the public responsibility of philosophers, whatever their private "ironist" beliefs, to work with this meaning and explore its possibilities. Rorty complained

Derrida are often, but not always, broadly drawn and in many cases their generalizations fail to do justice to the theorists they attack.

²⁰ Rorty, Richard. "Thugs and Theorists, A Reply to Bernstein." *Political Theory*, 15:4 (November 1987), 570.

²¹ Rorty 1987, 569. Emphasis added.

that “The left has taken less and less interest in what the rest of the country is worrying about.”²² If regular people’s lives were given meaning by hopes for their children, then philosophers should focus their efforts there instead of digging into the fundamental nature of power or oppression. Rorty summarized, “Philosophy should try to express our political hopes rather than ground our political practices.”²³

4. Enlarging the metaphor: from family outward

So Rorty took on the task of expressing political hopes by expanding upon the family-centered sentiment which, he believed, make our hopes feel meaningful. In taking up political contest in this fashion, Rorty would have to circumscribe contest as well. Contest would be constrained by the particular source of hope that gave meaning to people’s lives and would involve competing efforts to expand upon parental virtue. In his own efforts Rorty would make the tendency to derive meaning in our lives from the experience of family life, especially parenthood, a central aspect of his descriptions and redescriptions of various groups in various contexts, from some Americans, to Americans in general, to people in the rich North Atlantic democracies, to people in the West, to human beings in general. Rorty saw the depth of family-feeling as the best basis upon which to expand, in a meaningful rather than purely philosophical sense, the way that people think of who is in their moral community. Rorty, in moving from the contest of philosophy to the realm of politics, would put ideas about family to use to craft a wider community of meaning and value, and in doing so come to embrace a politics of virtue.

But before Rorty could expand family-centered virtue outward to a larger community, he had to shore up its roots in our daily lives. Rorty believed that one of the main flaws of metaphysical moral philosophy, from Plato to Kant, is that it does not appreciate the way that the “natural” depth of family-feeling affects humans. As Rorty puts it: “The central flaw in much traditional moral philosophy has been the myth of the self as non-relational, as capable of existing independent of concern for others, as a cold psychopath needing to be constrained to take account of other people’s needs” (PSH 77).²⁴ It is

²² Rorty 1987, 570.

²³ Rorty, Richard. "From Logic to Language to Play," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 59 (1986), 752.

²⁴ Rorty actually ascribes this view to Dewey and Annette Baier, but he is clearly presenting it as a view he agrees with.

our experience with our families, according to Rorty, that prevents us from actually being this amoral psychopath postulated by western philosophy. Offering a rather upbeat take on the Freudian account of the family, Rorty summarized: “The most important link between Freud and Dewey is the one that [Annette] Baier²⁵ emphasizes: the role of the family, and in particular of maternal love, in creating nonpsychopaths, that is, human selves who find concern for others completely natural” (PSH 78). Rorty believed that because this concern for others feels so natural within the family, morality is not something that philosophers should feel obliged to argue for or seek theoretical “grounds” for in thinking about how we should behave: “...consider the question: Do I have a moral obligation to my mother? My wife? My children? ‘Morality’ and ‘obligation’ here seem inapposite. For doing what one is obliged to do contrasts with doing what comes naturally, and for most people responding to the needs of family members is the most natural thing in the world. Such responses come naturally because most of us define ourselves, at least in part, by our relations to members of our family. Our needs and theirs overlap; we are not happy if they are not. We would not wish to be well while our children go hungry; that would not be natural (PSH 78).”²⁶

This “natural” solidarity between parent and child, the sense that your sense of well-being can not be separate from your child’s, provides the basis for the sort of relationship that Rorty wanted to see between members of larger communities.

The way to accomplish this, Rorty believed, was to tell stories that might enlarge our solidarity by enlarging the familial metaphor. In order to include more people in the way we define ourselves – more people whose well-being we care about on a visceral level rather than through a sense of obligation based on the thin stuff of metaphysical speculations about morality – we must find a way to include more people “in telling ourselves stories about who we are” (PSH 79). We would not leave our children out of our story about who we take ourselves to be, Rorty believed, and that is why our care for our children is “natural.” If we can find a way to include more people in our stories about ourselves, then the “natural” morality of parental care will expand outward to

²⁵ Rorty is referring to Baier’s *Postures of the Mind*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

²⁶ Obviously, Rorty’s view of the feelings that occur within families is wildly simplistic and optimistic. Freud believed that there are conflicting feelings of love and hostility involved in growing up in a family. It is the efforts to negotiate these conflicting feelings, rather than a sort of feel-good experience of love, that causes a person to develop a superego that determines what they consider moral behavior.

larger communities. “[T]he desire to feed [a] hungry stranger may of course *become* as tightly woven into my self-conception as the desire to feed my family” (PSH 79). This process has little to do with abstract morality in the Kantian sense, but to Rorty it represents a sort of moral progress. “Moral development in the individual, and moral progress in the human species as a whole, is a matter of re-marking human selves so as to enlarge the variety of relationships which constitute [people’s] selves” (PSH 79).

Since the feelings of trust and interdependence that Rorty hoped to expand upon were most typical of the experience of parenting, Rorty thought parenthood should also be central to the sorts of stories we use to enlarge our moral imagination and achieve this moral progress. Because a “hope for the future” is the crucial attitude that Rorty would like to serve as the basis of our community feeling, it is logical that the familial role that would best intermingle hope for the future and a relational sense of “who we are” is the role of the parent caring about the child. For example, Rorty thought that if you want to explain to someone why they should care about a person who they do not know and are not related to, “a person whose habits [they] find disgusting,” it is best to eschew arguments of the moral obligations humans have to other members of their species. Rather, “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 [...]’ or ‘Because she might become your daughter-in-law’ or ‘Because her mother would grieve for her’” (TP 185). Applying the idea to real events of the most horrible kind, Rorty suggested that the citizens of Denmark and Italy who scrambled to help their Jewish neighbors escape from the Gestapo were possibly motivated by imagining them, if they had no more direct connection, as “a fellow parent of small children” (CIS 190-191).²⁷

In stating the ultimate goal of the tradition of pragmatism with which he aligned himself, Rorty gives priority to what could be called the “procreative moment.” “What matters for pragmatists is devising ways of diminishing human suffering and increasing human equality, increasing the ability of all human children to start life with an equal chance of happiness” (PSH xxix). Following the logic of Rorty’s ‘family feeling extended’ model of moral progress – it is the profound feelings of hopefulness that Rorty believes a person experiences in having a child that provides the best basis for the creation of a more ideal society. And it is sympathy with other people’s hopes for their children

²⁷ Arendt offers a very different account of the reasons for these brave responses in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Penguin 1992). Arendt saw important differences between the situation in Denmark, where political leaders openly defied the Nazi occupiers, and Italy, where resistance to the European holocaust was carried out through subterfuge.

that represents, for Rorty, the culmination of the sort of moral development that he would like to encourage: “[T]he ability to shudder with shame and indignation at the unnecessary death of the child – a child with whom we have no connection of family, tribe, or class – is the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained while evolving modern social and political institutions” (CIS 147).

Rorty’s notion of expanding feelings of obligations from the family, where they are “natural,” outward to larger groups of people bears a family resemblance to Julia Kristeva’s notion of cosmopolitanism as developed in her *Nations Without Nationalism*.²⁸ Kristeva also imagines feelings of community being extended outward from the self and family toward increasingly larger groups, each group serving as a “transitional object” for the previous one – from self to family, from family to nation, from nation to Europe, and so forth. An important difference between the two is that for Rorty, family and especially children always remain the important “transitional” object. People include others in their sense of themselves by thinking of those others in the context of their family lives, especially as fellow parents of children.²⁹

In suggesting that the sentiments of parenthood should be central to the “better self-description” that we give to our own lives as well as to “liberal society,” Rorty seemed to favor a description of parental sentiments that is rather sanguine, perhaps naively so. It seems possible that the particular aspirations one has for one’s own children might interfere with, rather than provide the basis of, one’s commitment to improve the life prospects of other people’s children. Rorty himself offered several gestures in this direction. Though he prided himself on his “cold-war liberalism” and staunch anti-communism,³⁰ Rorty thought at least one aspect of Marx’s insights had continued relevance: “To say that history is ‘the history of class struggle’ is still true, if it is interpreted to mean that in every culture, under every form of government, and in every imaginable situation...the people who have already got their hands on money and power will lie, cheat and steal in order to make sure that *they and*

²⁸ Kristeva, Julia. *Nations without Nationalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, 40-41.

²⁹ Honig sees something similar happening in Michael Sandel’s notion of liberal community. She notes, for example, that Sandel argues for the inclusion of gays in the moral community, because they are *basically similar* to other Americans. In particular, gay citizens, in their desire to marry and have children, affirm the “sanctity” of “procreation and marriage” (Honig 1993, 188).

³⁰ Rorty 1987. Rorty was willing to endorse the insights of the Communist Manifesto, “still an admirable statement of the great lesson we learned from watching industrial capitalism in action” (PSH 205).

their descendants monopolize both forever” (PSH 206).³¹ Even when he was feeling less sweepingly Marxist, Rorty recognized the tendency of the rich and powerful to seek advantages for their own children at the expense of other people’s children.³² Sometimes Rorty wrote about this dilemma in terms of a “super-rich” class, liberated by globalization from traditional obligations and economic ties to poorer Americans. This group, in Rorty’s analysis, seems to have had their moral development move in exactly the opposite direction from the “family-outward” development of sentiment that Rorty prefers. The super-rich, instead, have morally regressed from a feeling of responsibility to America to an exclusive focus on their own descendants. “The economic royalists whom Franklin Roosevelt denounced still had a lot invested in America’s future. For today’s super-rich, such an investment would be imprudent. There is too little public discussion of the changes that this globalized labor market will inevitably bring to America in the coming decades. Bill Bradley is one of the few prominent politicians to have insisted that we must prevent our country from breaking up into *hereditary economic castes*...[There are plausible scenarios in which] America, the country that was to have witnessed a new birth of freedom, will gradually be divided by class differences of a sort that would have been utterly inconceivable to Jefferson or to Lincoln or to Walt Whitman (PSH 258-9).”³³

So for the super-rich, family-feeling and caring for your children doesn’t radiate warmth and care outward toward the larger community. Rather family

³¹ Emphasis added. Where I have inserted an ellipsis, Rorty listed a number of examples of historical places and periods where the people who have their hands on money and power acted to preserve it for themselves and their children. Among these examples are “America under Reagan.”

³² Keith Topper offers a critique of Rorty that makes a similar point in a different way. Topper is dubious about Rorty’s notion that private and public can be considered separately, and in particular that the public realm should be insulated from the complexities of private existence. Topper suggests that the work of Pierre Bourdieu in which he demonstrated that University professors assess students on the basis of the sort of stylistic indicators of class background one picks up from one’s parents, rather than on the quality of their work, demonstrates complex relations between the public and private realms that Rorty ignores. I address Rorty’s take on the public role of professors below. “Richard Rorty, Liberalism and the Politics of Redescription,” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 89, No. 4 (Dec., 1995).

³³ Emphasis added. It is hard to believe that Jefferson, slave-owner and the President whose executive order expanded slavery into the Louisiana territories, could not have conceived of a society in which different castes, defined by genetic criteria, have radically different life chances. Rorty discusses the same danger of America being divided into hereditary castes in *Achieving our Country*, 98

feeling legitimates the consolidation of wealth and contributes to the development of “hereditary economic castes.” But the super-rich are different from the rest of “us,” right? Not necessarily, since Rorty offered a very similar analysis of the behavior of the entire American middle (or upper-middle) class. “It is as if, sometime around 1980, the children of the people who made it through the Great Depression and into the suburbs had decided to pull up the drawbridge behind them. They decided that although social mobility had been appropriate for their parents, it was not to be allowed to the next generation. These suburbanites seem to see nothing wrong with *belonging to a hereditary caste...*(AOC 86).”

While Rorty wrote about the hereditary castes of the super-rich as a frightening possibility the future might hold, he wrote about the hereditary castes of the well-off suburbanites as something that had already come about.³⁴ He worried not whether hereditary castes might form in the future, but “if the formation of hereditary castes *continues* unimpeded...” (AOC 87).³⁵ And he worried not if the United States would *some day* be split apart into groups defined by family, but rather accepted that the split had already occurred, and worried instead whether Europe would follow our lead and “create such castes not only in the United States, but in all the old democracies...” (AOC 87).

Rorty did not bring this economic analysis of the consequences of family feeling and parental care, in which wealth and power are consolidated and preserved for one’s children rather than other members of the community, to bear on his family-outward theory of moral development. He never considered whether family-centered economics might suggest that family-centered morality offers, as Dewey might suggest, “a consecration of the *status quo*.”

³⁴ Habermas noted as well that the modern conjugal family, though it conceived of itself in terms of a “community of love,” was also a mechanism for the consolidation of wealth and the passing on of strict standards of behavior. “[T]he conjugal family’s self-image of its intimate sphere collided even within the consciousness of the bourgeoisie itself with the real function of the bourgeois family [...]. As a genealogical link it guaranteed a continuity of personnel that consisted materially in the accumulation of capital and was anchored in the absence of legal restrictions regarding the inheritance of property. As an agency of society it served especially the task of that difficult mediation through which, in spite of the illusion of freedom, strict conformity with societally necessary requirements was brought about” (Habermas 1991, 47). Stevens also explores this aspect of the modern family, and the way the laws of the state have traditionally assisted in this familial accumulation of capital (32, 264).

³⁵ Emphasis added.

5. *West and the path to parenthood*

Cornel West would trace an analogous path through the concerns of pragmatism to the answers provided by parenthood. Turning, with his book *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, from black protestant theology to the tradition of pragmatist philosophy in the United States, West began to admire the pragmatist attempt to find a middle ground between “rapacious individualism and... authoritarian communitarianism. To walk a tightrope between individualism, hedonism and narcissism...and...conceptions of community that impose values from above, thereby threatening precious liberties” (BEM 32-33). But West would go on to articulate a romantic quest for personal wholeness and political harmony centered on parenthood, and to suggest political measures that limit personal freedom and enlarge the scope of state power.

West argues for a version of democratic citizenship that maintains a productive tension between the hopeful and utopian impulses of romanticism, and the skepticism, openness and suspicion of fundamentalism of political contest. He worries about the authoritarian impulses that might result from romanticism and about the nihilism that lurks on the other end of the spectrum. But it is possible to detect in his work a competing desire that such tensions be resolved – that a single solution be discovered which can redeem politics and provide a respite from the difficulties of contest. West’s impulse to find a source of unity and harmony was something that Rorty noticed in the 1980s, before either West or Rorty began to write extensively about family and parenthood. It is possible to see in this exchange the shared interests that would lead each to give parenthood a prominent and problematic place in their thinking, as well as the differences that would determine the divergent ways that they would put ideas about parenthood to use.

West saw Rorty’s critique of analytic philosophy as backward looking and self-satisfied – happy to tear down ideas but not eager to build alternatives in their place. This frustrated West because he believes the American tradition of pragmatism might offer valuable ideas for thinking about contemporary democratic citizenship – the sort of hopeful and future-oriented yet self-critical and anti-authoritarian citizenship that West favors. West explores this possibility more extensively in *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, his book on the pragmatist tradition. West argues that the tradition of American pragmatist philosophy offered resources “to reinvigorate our moribund academic life, our lethargic political life, our decadent cultural life, and our chaotic personal lives for the flowering of many-sided personalities and the flourishing of more democracy and freedom” (AEP 5).

What West likes most about the American pragmatist tradition is very similar to what Rorty praised in it: its thinkers attempt to articulate hopeful and progressive political projects that respond to the actual circumstances of the moment rather than “metaphysical” and “epistemological” questions. In other words pragmatism offers a compelling argument for the politics of contest, balanced by the hopeful spirit of the romantic. In doing so, West believes, the pragmatic tradition can prove itself far more useful than the sort of philosophy that seeks to be “a tribunal of reason which ground claims about Truth, Goodness and Beauty” (AEP 4). But West believes pragmatism has often failed to meet its potential and has stagnated in contemporary times. He hoped his book would “speak to the major impediments to a wider role for pragmatism in American thought” (AEP 7).³⁶

As mentioned above, Rorty found much to appreciate in the West volume that criticized him. But Rorty also identified in West’s thought a “basic tension [...] between a wish to evade philosophy and a hope that something rather like philosophy will take its place.”³⁷ Following West, Rorty referred to this “something rather like philosophy” as the “prophetic,” and linked it with the sort of “social hope” that would come up so often in Rorty’s own later philosophy. And though he had yet to do so himself, Rorty seemed to endorse West’s efforts to articulate a “prophetic pragmatism.” As Rorty put it, “[Pragmatism] is socially useful only if teamed up with prophesies – fairly concrete prophecies of a utopian social future.”³⁸

But while Rorty acknowledged the importance of articulating social hope, he was critical of one particular way that West went about it – the hope for a deeper theory of oppression. “I agree with West that what the American Left most needs is prophecy – some sense of a utopian American future.... Sometimes (as in Rousseau, Dewey, and Unger) theory has been the helpful auxiliary of romance. But just as often it has served to blind the intellectuals to the

³⁶ In this vein West offers a critical overview of the tradition picking out the aspects of each thinker that he finds most useful, and pointing out problems that prevented thinkers from fulfilling the potential their ideas possessed. Thus Emerson is praised as a prophet of self-creation, but criticized for elevating personal integrity over political projects – “human personality disjoined from communal action” (AEP 40). Peirce is commended for balancing individualism with a sense of the “higher duties” to the community imposed by the Christian notion of love. Dewey is appreciated for his activism, but criticized as blind to the depth of the problems of the underclass. West thought Hook and Mills veered too far toward pessimism, while Niebuhr’s religious and “tragic” sensibility might provoke a hopeful and heroic approach to seemingly insurmountable problems.

³⁷ Rorty 1991, 75.

³⁸ Rorty 1991, 77.

new possibilities that romantics and prophets have envisioned.”³⁹ In particular, Rorty worried that West’s search for a more complete “worldview” was hindering his appreciation of specific, partial, contingent political claims and movements. Thus Rorty did not see much promise in West’s hopes to discover “a unified theory of oppression... [integrating] issues of race, class and gender.”⁴⁰ It annoyed Rorty that West would temper his appreciation of a particular pragmatist and romantic political project – like the one articulated by Roberto Unger in his *Politics* – by calling it “Eurocentric and patriarchal” because it does not “grapple with forms of racial and gender subjugation” (AEP 223). Rorty worried that West might undermine his own appreciation of pragmatism’s greatest source of political potential – the willingness to articulate claims and visions for a community without reference to universal, metaphysical and timeless truths or conceptions of the good – through his attraction to such a unified theory of oppression. West believed that Rorty had accepted contest, but only so far as it is trivial – linguistic, conversational, personal, ironic. Rorty, on the other hand, suspected that West’s embrace of contest was endangered by his longing for a deeper unification or a final answer.

6. *Parenthood and the attainment of unity*

Rorty was right to worry. Following this exchange, both theorists would start down the path that led each to give ideas about parenthood a prominent place in their political thought. One can sense in Rorty’s description of Foucault as “ice-cold” and “man on the moon” that he did not like how West had lumped them together by linking Foucault’s “paralyzing” anti-authoritarianism with Rorty’s commitment to irony. In turning to family and social hope, Rorty would try to warm his up his philosophy. Rorty began to think of parents’ love for their children as the source of “social hope” that provided the best motivation for political projects. And though he had been critical of West’s attraction to universals, Rorty would argue that the best way to expand the circles of concern that define communities was to tell sentimental family-centered stories about the lives of the poor, the foreign, and the weak – making the case that everyone is alike in their love for children. In thinking about family, Rorty would become more like the West he criticized.

But they would not become just alike. Rorty would treat the sentiments of parenthood and family feeling as natural and assumed – leaving them largely

³⁹ Rorty 1991, 78.

⁴⁰ Rorty 1991, 77.

unexamined and offloading the problematic question of socialization to teachers and professors. By keeping the actual experience of parenthood at a distance, Rorty found it uncomplicated to presume that an ever-expanding unity and moral universalism might be achieved through the shared experience of a child-centered hopefulness. West examines the role of parenthood in personal and political identity more closely. In bringing his existing set of concerns to bear on the role that parenthood might play in citizenship he would bring quest for unification – theoretical and otherwise – along with him. In doing so, he undermines his commitment to a productive tension between the politics of virtue and contest that he had developed in his other work.

Whereas Rorty attempted to insulate his commitment to contingency and irony from his family-centered universalism by splitting apart the public from the private realm, West has always been a lumper and not a splitter. Throughout his career West's instinct has been to combine insights and combine traditions in search of a more useful theory and orientation toward politics. For example, in ending his study of pragmatism, West summarizes that "prophetic pragmatism" would borrow from "Emerson's sense of vision... re-channel[led] through Dewey's conception of creative democracy and Du Bois' social structural analysis," and incorporate "the tragic sense found in Hook and Trilling, the religious version of the Jamesian strenuous mood in Niebuhr, and the tortuous grappling with the vocation of the intellectual in Mills" (AEP 212). Such a project would be combined with others. Thus Iris Marion Young, in describing the orientation West developed over his career, adopts the agglomerative label "genealogical materialist prophetic pragmatism," and describes its development in terms of "additions" of "ingredients" to a "theoretical mix"⁴¹

Young appreciates this aspect of West's work, and she is critical when she detects a shift from his "theoretical projects" and his later "popular and political" coauthored works.⁴² According to Young, West forgets his recipe of theoretical commitments when he turns to consider, with Hewlett, the family. She argues "that in his eagerness to offer solutions to America's persisting sources of suffering and cynicism, West has wrongly distanced himself from the sub-

⁴¹ Young, Iris Marion. "Cornel West on Gender and Family." In *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*. George Yancy, ed. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell 2001. p 180-182. West's enthusiasm for combining the perspectives of other thinkers has also been noted by his harshest critics. For example, Leon Weiseltier suggests that West's work amounts to "a long saga of positioning" (Leon Weiseltier "All or Nothing at All." *The New Republic*. March 6, 1995. p. 32).

⁴² Young, 179.

tlety of genealogical materialist prophetic pragmatism.”⁴³ But it was actually the turn to parenthood which struck West as a way to finally weld together issues of race, sex and class⁴⁴ – a project he had pursued for his whole career.

However, West accomplishes this not through the sort of theoretical complexity that Young admired but by sentiment and shared transformative personal experience. West and Hewlett would like to use the experience of parenthood to transform American politics. Their book *The War Against Parents*, blurb-ed by several senators as well as the CEOs of both the NAACP and Toys “R” Us, focuses on the way having children can effect a self-transformation that can then change the way a person thinks about and participates in politics. It is the depth of this personal experience and its transformative potential that allows it to transcend the divisions that West hoped to overcome. “By giving moral heft to the art and practice of parenting and by crafting a political agenda capable of delivering new and substantial support to parents, we have found a repository of comfort and strength that has the potential to bridge the deep divides of race, gender and class” (WAP xi). The authors use themselves as an example. To an extent that is unusual in an academic work, Hewlett and West focus upon the relationship between the authors – the experiences that brought them together and that qualify them to write about the topic. The book begins, “Ours is a special partnership. A black man and a white woman come together to confront our nation’s war against parents and our consequent inability to cherish our children. Such a collaboration is rare and precious...And our work together is not merely some cloistered, scholarly endeavor but involves high stakes political action. It requires nothing less than the launching of a new political movement.... (WAP xi).”

What allows Hewlett and West to come together is not the effort to solve difficult problems by juxtaposing different perspectives, but rather a common experience: “...the fact is, our ‘blackness’ and ‘femaleness’ pale in the light of

⁴³ Young, 179. Young extended this criticism to include the set of “economistic” policy proposals offered by West and Unger in *The Future of American Progressivism*. Young is frustrated, for example, that despite “gestures acknowledging how racist, sexist and heterosexist structures intersect with economic class, [West and Unger] do not offer a description of the workings of privilege and disadvantage in America that integrates these different structural axes” (186). Her criticism of West and Unger echoes very closely the terms that West had used to critique Unger’s *Politics* (AEP 223).

⁴⁴ While West sometimes includes sexual orientation as another social divide and locus of discrimination or oppression in his other works, he does not discuss it in *The War Against Parents*. Though they mention gay parents a few times, the authors defend the idea that the best parents for any child are the biological parents.

an even more fundamental identity: that of being a parent. After all, we share the bedrock stuff: we are crazy about our kids” (WAP xii).

So Hewlett and West’s political project is about the building of consensus out of democratic variety, but it does so through the exploitation of a more fundamental similarity. This is also the case for the population of parents at large. “Strange as it may seem, the identity of being a parent – unlike those based on race, gender or class – is relatively undeveloped in American society, and enormous potential lies in identifying people first and foremost as parents” (WAP xii). Just as, despite their different backgrounds, the authors found they shared a fundamental outlook because they have “the bedrock stuff” in common, the authors believe the American population of parents has uniform opinions if a person knows where to look. Hewlett and West argue that parents in American society only seem to have different opinions on matters of public concern because politicians “like to use parents as political footballs in their ideological games, magnifying differences and dividing a constituency that is already weak and vulnerable” (WAP 216). The authors present the results of a poll they conducted to show that if you ask the right questions there is “a remarkable degree of consensus among parents...,” and that “there is *enormous unity across race, class, and gender*” (WAP 215-216).⁴⁵

This unity also carries across generations, allowing Hewlett and West to sympathize with their parents’ suspicions regarding liberalism, feminism, self-realization and non-familial sources of emotional fulfillment. They worry, for example, that feminists spread the idea that “the enormous quantity of other-directed energy absorbed by families gets in the way of freedom of choice and ultimately self-realization...which is why radical feminists tend to see motherhood as a plot to derail equal rights and lure women back to subservient, submissive roles in the family” (WAP 95). And this unity across generations also extends forward toward the future, allowing Hewlett and West to believe that parents should be able to represent their children’s interests by literally casting votes for them. “This makes intuitive sense: today’s elections will affect today’s children well into maturity, and they should have an opportunity to influence that future, if only through their parents. But the measure also has immense practical ramifications: overnight it would almost double the potential size of the parent vote” (WAP 240-241).⁴⁶ The authors see no problem with the assumption that parents can be trusted to offer an enlightened representa-

⁴⁵ Emphasis in the original.

⁴⁶ Had this suggestion been incorporated into the 2008 election, it likely would have cost Obama, who West campaigned for, his victory. People with school age children slightly favored McCain (according to a CNN analysis of the exit polls).

tion of their children's interests in the election booth, since "the data from our survey...[reveals that] parents display a vision that is extremely responsible. They have no desire to offload their kids; on the contrary, they are struggling to take back territory and function. Without necessarily knowing the theory or the jargon, they understand that the parent-child bond is precious and that it is imperiled in new and serious ways" (WAP 219).⁴⁷

In discovering a long-elusive unity across race, class, gender, and generations through the experience of parenthood, Hewlett and West appear to have developed a unified theory of virtue – describing how the experience of parenthood instills the "most sublime and selfless feelings," "heroic energies" and renders parents "extremely responsible" (WAP xvi, 25, 219) – rather than the unified theory of oppression West long sought. But oppression looms nearby. The parent-child bond is precious but it is also "imperiled." This oppression is implied by the title of the book; *The War Against Parents* focuses less upon parents than on the hostile culture that opposes them. Because of this oppression heroic energies sometimes lag, and sometimes disappear. The book's opening lines, quoted above, suggest, "a black man and a white woman come together" not so much because they love their kids, but because they can't: they are united by an "inability to cherish our children" (xii). They acknowledge that they "share a load of impotence and guilt – and mounting rage – with other parents" (xii).

The authors are eager to pass this guilt on to someone else. Their book uncovers new culprits: "One of the best kept secrets of the last thirty years is that big business, government, and the wider culture have waged a silent war against parents, undermining the work they do" (WAP xiii). This is a very particular sort of unity then, one of victimization, which allows West to recapture the spirit of the Marxist philosophy he explored in *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*. Describing Marx's ideas as "fecund criticism" and "pack[ed] with life juices so that it will not only condemn, but give birth," West quotes Marx's description of what gives the working class its unique *status* in history. The proletariat is, "a sphere of society having an universal character because of its universal suffering and claiming no *particular wrong*

⁴⁷ Despite the absence of any desire to "offload their kids," parents did become fascinated by events that followed Nebraska's passage of a "safe-haven" law that lifted any legal penalties if a parent choose to abandon a child at a church or hospital. While the law was intended to prevent young mothers from leaving newborns in dumpsters or trash cans, a number of parents took advantage of the law to turn over to the state older children including teenagers. A *New York Times* article on the subject was one of the most read articles online that month. Eckholm, Erik, "Older Children Abandoned Under Law for Babies." *The New York Times*. October 2, 2008.

but *unqualified wrong* is perpetrated on it; a sphere that can invoke no *traditional* title but only a *human* title...a sphere...in short, that is the *complete loss* of humanity and can only redeem itself through the *total redemption of humanity*” (EDMT 42).”

Parents would come to play a similar role for West: united and universal because of their suffering, afflicted at the most existential levels of human existence, and for those reasons uniquely suited to lead us to redemption.⁴⁸

So, in thinking about the use of parenthood for citizenship, West manages to contradict many of the commitments that he has developed through a variety of projects in an unusually wide-ranging intellectual career. Throughout that work, West, like Rorty, incorporates aspects of both the virtue and contest conceptions of democratic citizenship. Rorty balanced virtue and contest notions of citizenship through a problematic division of spheres in which he confined self-creation and contest to a private realm, and suggested family feeling as the key to a virtuous orientation to politics – a division that his ideas about parenthood persistently helped to undermine. West’s inclination is in many ways the opposite of Rorty. If Rorty attempts to strike a balance between virtue and contest by pushing his ideas, see-saw style, to the far ends of the plank, West balances by straddling the middle – with, predictably, more dynamic results. West is willing to let his commitments to the values of virtue and contest come to bear on one another. He has sought to integrate these two traditions of thinking about citizenship, to preserve the strengths of both, and develop them in ways that are eclectic, searching and experimental. Throughout these efforts, West has tried to identify resources for the sort of democratic individuality he favors by identifying an amalgam of virtue and contest ideas in black theology, Marxism, American pragmatism and American politics more generally. In dealing with persistent problems that emerged through his work, he became attracted to parenthood as the experience that best informs citizenship. Imagined by West as a bastion of virtue in the face of a creeping nihilism, he discovers that parenthood threatens to reveal our failures. Described by West as an experience that instills openness and engagement, parenthood ultimately pulls West toward a politics of fear and fundamentalism.

In his own right, Rorty has said that the best self-identity for citizenship in an ideal liberal state is one in which one sees “one’s language, one’s conscience,

⁴⁸ In that same book West quotes Marx regarding the essence of man’s species-life – that he “reproduces himself...actively and in a real sense, and he sees his own reflection in a world which he has constructed” (EDMT 58). This desire to reproduce yourself and to see your own reflection would come to play a large role in West’s exploration of the uses of parenthood for citizenship, as I will discuss below.

one's morality, and one's highest hopes as contingent products, [...]" (CIS 61). But Rorty did not seem to think that the human experience of hopes for one's children is really contingent. Given his broad generalizations, he did not even seem to think this hope was contingent on whether a person is a parent. He discussed these hopes as if they are universal. Rorty had suggested "We have to give up on the idea that there are unconditional, transcultural moral obligations, obligations rooted in an unchanging ahistorical human nature" (PSH xvi). Yet all of Rorty's ideas about the expansion of sympathies rest on the assumption of a universal and "natural" feeling of caring about our children. Rorty made his philosophical career as an anti-foundationalist, but for the purpose of politics he made caring about children foundational.⁴⁹

In this sense, Rorty's description of politics contributes to a conception of citizenship that has been criticized by Lauren Berlant, among others. Berlant describes a situation in which "a nation made for adult citizens has been replaced by one imagined for fetuses and children."⁵⁰ Under this modern American political condition, according to Berlant " [...] citizenship [is seen] as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values, especially as originating in or directed toward the family sphere. Personhood is [no

⁴⁹ Nancy Scheper-Hughes has offered several studies to suggest that such hopes are indeed contingent upon circumstances and not universal. In one she examines the practice in some rural Irish families of singling out one child to be discouraged from developing feelings of competence in life. That child, lacking confidence to strike out on his or her own, will stay at home to care for the parents when elderly. In another she examines the practice of letting particularly weak infants pass away among the shanty-town poor of Brazil. Because life is difficult, some of these women explained to Scheper-Hughes, not every child will want to undertake it. (*Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000; and *Death without Weeping: the Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). There are, of course, countless things that parents do which limit possibilities for their children's future. Rorty spent little time considering them.

⁵⁰ Berlant, Lauren. *The Queen of America goes to Washington City* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 1. Several examinations of the child-centeredness of contemporary American political culture exist. They include Berlant's *Queen of America*; George Lakoff's *Moral Politics*, (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press; 2nd edition. 2002), which argues that two competing visions of family are the cognitive source at the root of conservative and liberal views on most political issues; Nina Eliasoph's *Avoiding Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), which explores how political activists use child centered language to avoid the not just the appearance but the uncomfortable feeling that comes from being "too political;" and Michael Shapiro's *For Moral Ambiguity: National Culture and the Politics of the Family*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), which explores the way the rhetoric of "family values" moralizes American politics in a way that destroys contingency and openness.

longer valued as] something directed toward public life [...].”⁵¹ Berlant suggests that such an orientation is fundamentally conservative. Rorty’s tendency to fix a particular meaning upon the experience of parenthood in his own scheme of family-outward morality seems conservative as well.⁵² Rorty liked to cite Dewey’s statement that “moralities [...] either are, or tend to become, consecrations of the *status quo*” (CIS 69), but he seems to have little concern for how a child-centered public morality might consecrate our own *status quo* rather than contribute to the imagination of a different, better future.

⁵¹ Berlant, 5.

⁵² Simon Stow notes the way that Rorty undermines his own efforts to suggest literature can help instill an openness appropriate to democratic citizenship by insisting upon particular interpretations of literary works and dismissing alternative interpretations. Rorty does something analogous in his single-minded take on the political effects of the experience of parenting. *Republic of readers?: the literary turn in political thought and analysis*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007.

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