

Symposium: Robert B. Pippin, *Henry James and Modern Moral Life**

Responses to Conway, Mooney, and Rorty

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I

Dan Conway has highlighted two important points and I would like to try to draw some connections between the two. One concerns the nature of modern social *dependencies*, what is lost when such dependence is denied or evaded, what is gained when it is acknowledged and embraced. I have posed this issue by making use of the Hegelian language of recognition, misrecognition, mutuality, independence and dependence, and so forth, and thereby claimed in James's name that the issue at stake is the achievement of a kind of freedom. Paradigmatically, in the cases of Strether and Isabel, this amounts to something like 'having a life of one's own', or being able to recognize oneself in one's deeds and projects. This will raise a question about the nature of the freedom at stake here (an 'expressivist' understanding), a question raised by Ed Mooney that I address in the next section. Conway also takes note of such a claim about an 'achievement' and notes the relevance of the Nietzschean notion of '*becoming* who one is', wherein having become a self, a subject who leads a life, has a life of one's own, can be considered the central aspect of freedom and cannot be considered a fixed result achieved or a stable truth revealed. Such a link between such becoming and such social dependence is the topic I want to stress. Conway's summary of the points:

According to this interpretation, James locates the modern freedom of self-determination in what might be called an enhanced capacity for receptivity, whereby one derives one's own identity and self-possession from the accumulated totality of one's shared 'mutualities' with others. One becomes what one is, to borrow a Nietzschean slogan, by opening oneself in full vulnerability to the moral claims of others. (p. 326)

Although in the book I have tried to allow the details of James's narratives to bear the weight of any claim about the conditions necessary for the

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achievement of such freedom (and the reasons which would justify the claim that freedom *is* a kind of achievement, a social achievement, and not a matter of individual power, or an individual faculty like the will), it might be useful to state the full dimensions of such conditions more explicitly or in fuller philosophical regalia. (This runs the risk of suggesting that James is being squeezed into these philosophical boxes, but I can only refer to *Henry James and Modern Moral Life (HJMML)* for evidence that this is not the case.)

As with Hegel and his followers, the basic claim is that appreciating properly the original or fundamental *historicality* and *sociality* of human life is the essential, ineliminable, component in understanding human life, in fashioning an account adequate to human life as it is lived, as it makes whatever sense it does for us, experientially. A claim for the explanatory priority of such assumptions is meant to counter contrasting claims for the explanatory priority of, respectively, nature (and human nature) and individuality (as in methodological individualism). By historicality I mean the claim that the most important human phenomena (such as all aspects of our normative self-direction, our ideals and so forth) are essentially temporal, or are phenomena that cannot be understood except as moments in a time, the before and after of which are essential to understanding the kind of claim the norms come to have on us, essential to their determinate sense and their normative status. The importance of art making or art collecting or social status of a certain kind in James's novels has to be treated like that, for example. We could treat such claims, made by characters, sometimes with a great deal of sympathy by James, sometimes not, as simply claims to be evaluated, as if in the argumentative space of a Platonic eternity. But James treats such norms more as aspects of a historically dynamic or diachronic set of social conventions, so much so that we would not understand, say, Adam Verver's collecting, if we tried to think of such an ideal just as a norm or a value, comparable without further ado to Renaissance or French court culture ideals. We would not be able to understand what he was after, just what it was he was doing *in* collecting (and so what collecting meant to him), if we so isolated the norm from such a temporal story, ignored its place as a moment within that story (the story about the New World's relation to Old Masters).

By the priority of sociality, I mean to point to some sort of mereological, or part/whole claim, something like the famous claim for understanding the social whole on the model of organic unity, at least by analogy. If one considers the element outside this whole, one will lose proper sense of what it is. As in Aristotle's famous example, the examination of a severed hand is not the examination of *a hand*. In more Hegelian terms, we distort the nature of human sociality if we see social practices, conventions, and the like as results of simultaneously held individual commitments, as if the content of such commitments could be understood apart from, independently of, the expectations, possible reactions, oppositions, and so forth within a

community of subjects. (The claim is that whatever sense they have just *is* the course of such circulation in society.) And, for proponents of this priority of sociality view, we cannot understand such social commitments and practices as results of individual acts of commitment and sustaining commitments (say, as legitimated by such putative acts of commitments) because participation in such a social world is *transformative*. Subjects *in* such a whole, as such participants, cannot be understood by appeal to what they are, understand about themselves, commit to, prior to or in independence of such participation.

Now it might seem odd to discuss James in the light of philosophical claims like these, which call to mind Aristotle on the *polis*, Hegel on Spirit, Heidegger on world and so forth, but James's plots are much more about such social participation, anticipation, conflict, and the like than about the psychology of individuals as such, and his characters are locked in such tight relations of mutual dependence that it is often hard to separate putative claims to self-knowledge from expectations about the reactions of others. Or so I try to show.

Such claims about the priority of human sociality express in more general terms the claims in *HJMML* about social dependence and would form the basis of a philosophical case that the achievement of independence ('one's own life') is a form of, a variation on such dependence, not its contrary. Such essential dependence can also help one understand not only a general thesis about the historicity of social communities but the historicity of a life as well, something brought out by Conway's reference to Nietzsche's injunction to 'become' who you are. This already on the face if it is a paradoxical notion, a tension prominent in an observation by Oscar Wilde. He noted that for antiquity and for long afterwards, the great imperative in human life was 'Know thyself'. This was the path to wisdom given by the oracle at Delphi, and was often cited by Socrates as his greatest task in life.¹ However, said Wilde, for us moderns, the major life task was much different; it is: 'Become who you are.' And it is this imperative, not the Socratic, that has been of central concern in a strand of modern European and American philosophy (sometimes called a 'romantic' strand) that stretches from Rousseau through Hegel, Emerson, Thoreau, Nietzsche (with whom the phrase is probably most associated), Heidegger, and Sartre.

But this formulation of a *contrast* between the two maxims is paradoxical for obvious reasons. How can such imperatives be separated and contrasted? Doesn't one have to *know* who one is before one can struggle to *become* who one is? The answer given by philosophers like Nietzsche and novelists like James (and Proust)² is: No; it is only *in* trying to become who one is that one finds out (in a way inseparable from the reactions and oppositions of others) who one *really* is. And, adding to the paradoxical nature of the issue, this finding out does not 'discover' a true, abiding self thereby revealed in action.

It is what one has done that counts as the revealed substance of that true, but ever becoming self (all if some coherent point of view on such actions can be achieved). More straightforwardly, a mere self-image, self-description, ego-ideal, and so forth does not count, just as a belief one has about oneself, as self-knowledge, that obviously necessary condition for self-realization. (And here, by self-knowledge, I mean not the direct awareness of one's own states and feelings and attitudes, but something like knowledge of one's practical identity, what is sometimes referred to as one's character. It is what is at stake *in extremis* when someone might say: I couldn't live with myself if I did that; or, more commonly, I don't know why I did that; I don't recognize myself in that deed.) Many people, after all, have self-images that *they* count as solid self-knowledge, but which are better described as self-indulgent fantasies or delusions.

And so the suggestion of such maxims as 'Become Who You Are' is that this possibility of a gap between self-image and reality must be *overcome*, that being who you are is always a becoming, a *struggle* to be. This gap can either be some sort of barrier to becoming who you are, where that struggle is based on already achieved self-knowledge, or it could be based on a gap between self-image and self-knowledge. (Self-knowledge, on this view, should in both senses be understood as a product of long experience, not a moment of epiphanic insight. It is a retrospective of what we learn in some struggle to become who we believe we are.)

And clearly, a great part of such a struggle concerns our proper relation to people around us, concerns our social self. A self-image, for example, that is not at all reflected or accepted in practice by others, or especially that is contradicted by the way one is treated or regarded, would have to count as some sort of failure to become who one is. An obvious example: the reputedly large number of our contemporaries who think of themselves as poets, or novelists, or writers or artists but whose work (the objectification of such a self-understanding) is universally rejected. (At a certain level of rejection, that is, being such a bad writer has to count as not being a writer at all.)³ And the case is even more obvious in those who profess such self-knowledge, but who have not 'yet' begun to write, who know somehow that in their inner being a writer lurks, waiting only for the time and leisure to escape. A self-image *never* realized, never expressed in action, has to count as more a fantasy than a piece of self-knowledge, even though when expressed in such action, the public deed cannot be said to be exclusively owned by the subject, to have the meaning that the subject insists on. One's self-image becomes a social fact through action, and its meaning can then no longer be tied to the intention of the agent alone. This is, of course, exactly why many people forever postpone such action; never write that book, send off that manuscript, finish that dissertation.

And yet, on the other hand, we might also know people whose self-image,

whose identity, has been formed so extensively by the expectations and demands and reactions of others, that, while their own self-image *does* 'circulate' successfully in society, their view of themselves *is* well mirrored in how they are regarded and treated, it appears necessary to say that one has become the person 'they' want one to become, that one does not have one's own identity, has not become who *one* is. Such slavish conformism (which, starting with Rousseau, on through Nietzsche and Heidegger, and most recently in the work of Foucault, has been the subject of great philosophical anxiety) has to count as just as much a failure to become who one is as the fantasy-indulging narcissist we just discussed.

Becoming who you are then is largely a matter of negotiating a way between such romantic fantasies of independence and autonomy on the one hand, and the dangers of such social conformism on the other, and the negotiating and so becoming is constantly ongoing, never resolved. The great model for actually doing so in James is the conversation, a model at once of such dependence and ineliminable social relatedness and of the initiatives, reactions, re-formulations, and clarifications that James counts as becoming who you are. It is an extraordinary phenomenon when it works well (as with Strether and Maria Gostrey), but also revealing when it works imperfectly (as with the Prince and Maggie, or Densher and Kate). Conway is right too to suggest that it can work best of all in the relation between James and the reader, at least when the obvious trust and confidence James places in his readers is reciprocated.

II

Nietzsche once gave unusual credit to Plato, claiming that Plato invented the novel. Given Nietzsche's endless attacks on Plato and Christianity ('Platonism for the people'), such a compliment is hard to understand. It is a little easier though to understand what someone might mean by calling Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* the first philosophical novel. Hegel seemed to have invented a wholly different way of accounting for normative claims in human life, a way tied not so much to deduction from principles as to an intelligible, internally continuous development in actual life. The touchstone for the *Phenomenology* is 'experience' ('what it is like for us' from the first-person point of view) and the attempt is to show by reference and appeal to such experience why a certain form of life came to lose its claim to authority, how what had once been experienced as authoritative came to be experienced as only a partial picture of what we owe and require of each other. Given the partiality and one-sidedness of some such historical norm, Hegel thought he could show (could reconstruct) why adherents would come to experience some crisis in such a claim to authority, could,

that is, experience some equally authoritative but incompatible norm or some irrefutable skeptical attack. This leads him to suggest the grandest of grand narratives wherein human beings eventually come to a decisive self-consciousness – that they are the makers of their own laws, and that such laws are laws none the less. (This realization is what Hegel means, I think, by ‘modernity’. What would be the death of God in Nietzsche was the divinization of the human in Hegel.)

Whatever one thinks about such claims, Ed Mooney is right to note the importance of this narrative element in a post-Hegelian (let us say) understanding of the nature of normative authority. As he notes (as indicated earlier here) James’s emphasis on lies, deceit, and manipulation suggests at first a general Kantian sensibility. And in one sense it would be true to say that James treats vanity, egoism, indifference to those who depend on one (the horribly selfish parents in *What Maisie Knew*), the inflated self-importance of snobs and self-serving deceit all much more harshly than he treats the occasional moralism of characters like Henrietta Stackpole. Some ideal of reciprocity, moral equality, and a paradigmatic evil, egoism, are most often at issue. But in a way that I think of as continuous with the conception of philosophy that Hegel attempted to found in the *Phenomenology*, the claims of another for such respect are not treated as universal moral commands, unconditional obligations. In a way that parallels Hegel’s narrative account of what we have come most to care about (or not), James only presents the story of the kind of life in which such claims are respected and (much more often) the kind of life (as a whole, in all its dimensions) that results when they are ignored. I have claimed that what is thereby shown to be lost in this latter case is the one supreme good without which no other good can count as one’s own. Given the sort of dependence thesis sketched above, what one loses with the other treated as mere means is ‘one’s own life’, the conditions necessary for a life of one’s own having some content, the kind of secure content that results when whatever one attributes to oneself, binds oneself to, counts as a reason, comes to see, is also attributed by others to one, counted by others as one’s commitment, *seen* by others as well.

This is not, as Mooney helpfully details in his section IV, the beginning of a claim to locate our moral dispositions in sympathetic responses. But it should be added, it is also not the beginning of an *argument* about why one should treat others as persons, free subjects, or that it all could be cited to argue someone out of egoism. Aside from the fact that it is implausible that we could mount a case that it was in some sense in our interest to preserve the freedom of our interlocutors, romantic partners, and fellow citizens (doing so for *that* reason would *be* treating them as the means the argument requires I ought not to do), we would also need some account, probably a narrative account, about why being able to produce such arguments or deduction from rational principle, had come to matter so much to us, what it

meant that such a consideration had come to be a decisive, trumping consideration.

By contrast neither Hegel nor James should be understood as trying to 'educate' readers, in the sense of convincing them of something they might initially have denied. James's fiction, like all fiction, is pretty much for those who already, if confusedly, 'get it', and it seeks to allow us to recognize, to experience, this dependence and its contribution to independence. In Hegelian language such products are already manifestations of Spirit, manifestations that can reveal various dead-ends, incompatible commitments, false idealizations and hypocrisies, but which can also reveal such felt dependencies without which becoming who one is would not be possible. (It is in *this* expressivist, rather than pedagogical, sense, I would say, that Conway's claim is apt: 'James simultaneously describes *and* determines the subtle, emerging truths of modern moral life' (p. 329).

But with what I take to be a general framework of agreement about issues such as these, Mooney raises two important questions. The first concerns a problem that also bothers Rorty and that has already been mentioned in the summary. If James is appreciating some altered state of things in the social world he describes, some new context within which a new way of appreciating what we owe to and require of each other can be said to be experienced (and where much of the difficulty required stems from relying on assumptions that no longer match the new state of affairs), just how much is claimed by calling that altered situation 'modernity'? Mooney's specific questions touch on the issue of 'alienation' as exemplary of modern unfreedom, and that will require the discussion below. But, in the first place, I would not want to deny that the phenomenon is inconceivably complex. Intellectual modernity – the rejection of the ancient and scholastic tradition by the likes of Bacon, Hobbes, and Descartes, and of the biblical and ancient tradition by Machiavelli – is one thing; social modernization is another; the modern moral tradition in philosophy – paradigmatically expressed, I think, by Kant's claim that we can be subject to no law that we do not author and subject ourselves to – is yet another; and an intensified self-consciousness about the altered state of modernity, especially in the arts, or in so-called modernism, is yet again another. A simplified list of the phenomena associated with modernity makes immediately clear that the Jamesean canvas is only a small corner within the swirl of the following: industrialization, urbanization, democratization of institutions, disenchantment of nature, and therewith the declining influence of natural law and natural hierarchy claims, nationalism and the nation state, the growing social authority of science, the declining public authority of religion, the assertion of rights claims (especially property rights), market economies, wage labor – and the list is easily expandable. But that small part of the canvas is, even if small, the site of tremendous changes in assumptions about authority, permissibility, and as

emphasized throughout here, forms of social dependence, and it corresponds to the form of life familiar to the political and cultural elite. More than anyone else, to anticipate Rorty's point, James and Proust are its chroniclers, almost as if the Homer and Virgil of the bourgeois world (if it were an epic and not such a prosaic world). Their new role and the importance of their share of the canvas are well put by Max Weber.

It is not accidental that our greatest art is intimate and not monumental. Nor is it accidental that today only within the smallest and most intimate circles, in personal human situations, in pianissimo, that something is pulsating that corresponds to the prophetic pneuma, which in former times swept through the great communities like a firebrand, welding them together.⁴

But Mooney is also concerned with what might be a too flexible invocation as the reigning ideal in all this 'freedom'. He notes:

If modernity is marked by aspirations to freedom that can be achieved only in acknowledgment and enactment of dependencies, why conclude that the reigning ideal is freedom? Why not conclude that the ideal (or at least the major reality we must struggle to attain) is not freedom but *dependence* – construed, say, as solidarity, friendship, familial loyalty, or love? Such an acknowledgment would bring in train a recognition of luck, uncertainty, and fragility. Acknowledgment of inescapable bonds to others and of vulnerabilities to fortune could be called, more grandly, an acknowledgment of finitude. (p. 343)

And,

If freedom presupposes and is suffused by intimate dependencies, it shows freedom to be a more elastic ideal than we may have supposed. Such elasticity allows it the coverage required of any value one might advance as the *master* ideal of an age. (p. 344)

As with the 'modernity' issue, we face the same problem of relying on a profoundly elusive term, and that elusiveness or elasticity understandably prompts caveats like Mooney's (which are reminiscent of many similar complaints by Isaiah Berlin about the over-use of the appeal to freedom).

However, the vague boundaries of the term are an important fact to take note of in itself. It signals, I think, that while we may be convinced that freedom is what Joseph Raz has called an 'enabling' value,⁵ a condition necessary for anything else valued by me to *be* genuinely valued by me, and so have come to regard it as supreme and wholly non-negotiable, we have as yet achieved very little consensus about what a free life amounts to, how to determine whether what we might take to be 'acting as a free subject' *really* is. (Here are the beginnings of an anxiety about the mere illusion of subjectivity, of really leading the life we seem to be leading, stretching from writers like James and Proust to film-makers like Hitchcock.) In the nineteenth century alone, at various times, it looked as if I could be said to be free in any of the

following senses: if I had set a goal myself on the basis of reasons (freedom as autonomy, as rational agency); if I had psychologically *identified* wholeheartedly with my ends (freedom as the overcoming of a potential alienation); if I precisely had *not* identified with any role, and could take on and discard roles the way an actor takes on and discards roles (freedom as *irony*, as in Rameau's Nephew or Schlegel); if I had the means to achieve some end (freedom as *power*); if I had experienced no human impediments to my pursuits, to what I otherwise would do except for such constraints (freedom as *negative liberty*); or if I had experienced in my striving a development and growth (dynamic *self-realization*).

If it is possible even to begin to consider such options as competitors, we will need to be able to identify a common desideratum all are seeking to account for before we can begin adjudicating the claimants. And that itself will be immediately controversial, will look like one of the claimants. But I would suggest that the desideratum I identify in *HJMML* – that my deeds should both be, and be experienced as, expressions of me, as mine, that I can 'see myself' in the deed and so stand behind it as mine, is as reasonable and plausible a general desideratum candidate as any. Of course, it suggests questions of its own, since the formulation implies that the right way to understand the connection or link between a subject and her deeds is by means of the notion of expression (and not say, by appeal to a causal link). However complicated defending that may turn out to be, it seems quite possible to say that something like the failure of this link or experience is what is going wrong with Isabel and Milly and Strether and Marcher and so many of James's other characters. And it all suggests no easy or straightforward way to determine if deeds are genuinely expressive in this sense, and if so, how one might determine the content of such identity. Anxiety about the potential, uncomfortable indeterminacy of any such possible content is quite a common, pressing theme in James, especially in his stories. 'The Figure in the Carpet', 'The Aspern Papers', 'The Real Thing', 'The Sacred Fount', 'The Turn of the Screw', 'The Beast in the Jungle', 'The Jolly Corner', and many more reveal characters unwilling to deal with both the unavoidability and the tenuousness of, again, the social negotiations by means of which and only by means of which such a content could be, however provisionally, fixed; by means of which I 'become who I am'.

III

A different way to put this notion of mutuality and the inevitable stake one has in someone else being free would be to call to mind Rorty's quotation from Bayley about such mutual subjectivity, that beautiful passage about

James's way of 'overcoming loneliness', and 'sharing intimacy', 'like the secret converse of lovers whose understanding is not dependent on a single authority'. Exactly right, I think. (One is reminded, as perhaps the epigram for all James's great fiction, of Fenelon's famous line: 'Trust love. It takes everything; but it gives everything.') But how this might be possible – how, historically, the freedom of lovers from a 'single authority', even from all authority, might have come to be possible, and what it might look like – are separate questions. Rorty suggests that this bond of intimacy, as if some relation of love between reader and author, might help explain the unusually fierce devotion to James and Proust that has existed in the last century or so (at least among a certain sort of intellectual – I can testify from a wide range of experience that many philosophers and intellectuals hate Henry James and Marcel Proust and think that all the folderol about them is bizarre). Rorty suggests that this effect is best thought of in quasi-religious terms; or at least that there is a kind of redemption or transformation in the reception of James and Proust, but it all occurs all without 'redemptive truth'. (And I take it that Rorty's suspicion is that I have fallen victim to conflating these two things, to subsuming what ought to be an alternative to philosophy, an alternative to that sort of redemption, under philosophy itself.) There is a kind of redemption, in other words, without explicit content as such redemptive truth.

This is true, I think, and have tried to point out, for example, that what Strether has experienced, come to learn, is not something that can be formulated as this or that truth.⁶ Whereas Rorty is worried in some way about the proper boundary lines between literature and philosophy, what I think is that the notion of an opposition between philosophy and literature doesn't illuminate very much, and that the notion of a decisive redemption has itself been entertained in James's fiction and rejected, 'rejected' in a way that is decisive and convincing whether one calls the 'demonstration' literary or philosophical. If that is so then there is such a thing as 'modern moral life' – *that* is what it is – but of course that is exactly what Rorty is also denying in his comments.

Now, the increasing reliance in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by more and more people on novels as a window to the moral and psychological complexities of human life; the fact that they learn most of the essential things they need to learn about human life from novels is of course a great theme *in* nineteenth-century fiction itself, and pretty much, when it is raised, regarded as quite problematic. The overwhelming majority of novels read then were and are still, as they were in the nineteenth century, romance or mystery novels. If there has been a 'transition', as Rorty has argued here and elsewhere, from a religious to a philosophical and now to a literary culture, a good case can be made that is very likely overall a net loss in any measure of civilized sensibility, a reduction of most of everything to the banalities of a country-western song. (And why, so optimistically, literature? Why not

television, popular films, videos, as the sorts of things a modern Plato, in building the *Republic*, would most worry about? Is it really plausible that contemporary America has become a 'literary' culture?)

For another thing, Rorty concedes the possibility of an 'upbeat' story about human freedom, but doesn't think we should make too much philosophical hay about it. Yet wouldn't it be likely that what he himself describes as 'transitions' from religious to philosophical and then literary sensibilities would be as wrenching, disorienting, and unsettling as any imaginable? We are, after all, talking about sources of authority, appealed to in various sorts of constraining and coercive ways, and any transition from one to the other is bound to be experienced with a great deal of cultural confusion, contestation, and pain.

Rorty, despite his own grand narrative (one which itself looks quite 'pro' the various transitions) wants to claim that the situation of reflective individuals in my Jamesian modernity should be understood as pretty much the situation of reflective intellectuals everywhere and every when, that what I call 'modernity' is just this 'situation of the intellectual'. But I think James is right when he suggests that there has never been a woman like Isabel Archer, that there is nothing of the sort of epic *Bildungsroman* that is *The Ambassadors* in, say, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, or in Dante, or in Homer (all for reasons like those suggested by Mooney). There are no people like Henrietta Stackpole before Puritan America's capitalist machine really gets chugging. Wouldn't it be likely that the fine art produced in such transitional eras would evoke a great unease about such displacing forms of cultural authority (again, given that we are talking about cultural expressions of power and so about those [often those 'lagging behind'] directly affected by such exercises of power on or against them). Wouldn't it seem that the very radicality of the transitions themselves would be enough to create doubt that what is coming our way is really *owed* any allegiance? One of the things that happen to Isabel Archer is that she gives up those heavy (German) philosophical books she was reading when her aunt called, and turned instead to what Nietzsche once called an 'aesthetic justification of existence', what Rorty has called 'redemption'. But this leap of faith *destroys her*, and that fate would seem, at the very least, to 'raise a problem' about such ideals (or fantasies) of redemption.

I am not exactly sure here how to respond to the general, skeptical points Rorty makes about the modernity theme, because I am not sure exactly what is at stake for Rorty in his own version of 'the modern problem', the problem of freedom. There is, he claims, more and more 'spiritual freedom' in modernity (that is, to avoid unnecessary commitments, 'recently' rather than 'long ago') and perhaps a moderate increase in the actual power of subjects to affect the ends they set. But this just means, he wants to claim, 'more people being able to wield more and more alternative descriptions of things, of

people, of institutions, and the course of history'. And it is simply very probably a good thing to increase the amount of material or enabling freedom ('wealth and literacy and leisure') of as many people as possible so as to increase the range of this sort of spiritual freedom. But, he insists, there is also no 'philosophical' problem of freedom here, and nothing that we might say about 'modernity' contributes very much to all this. It would be especially misleading to try to suggest, he argues, that the absence of a political or transcendent dimension in James should invite us to speculate on the general insignificance of such aspirations themselves in 'modernity' as some decisive epoch.

I still think that there are two problems left. One is exactly what we ought to say to someone who doesn't care if there come to be fewer and fewer rather than more and more opportunities for spiritual freedom or for what Rorty calls 'self-creation'. The question of the authority of the claim that there ought to be such spiritual freedom has not gone away. The other is the problem mentioned earlier, as endemic to the modern novel as to modern philosophy, that, for the reasons suggested in the previous section, we don't know what a free life amounts to. And there is plenty of evidence in the modern novel that the implications of this lack of consensus are quite complicated, sometimes catastrophic.

I might also allow myself a more general remark, and say that, for all the extraordinary richness and incalculably wide influence of Rorty's own narration of the course and fate of modern philosophy, this is the element that has always seemed to me oddly missing: the pain and disorientation and uncertainty that was provoked by the final emergence of the shape of mass, secular, technologically ever more complicated, democratic, capitalist societies, as they began to assume their decisive final shape in the nineteenth century. (I have already mentioned the theme that I think most at stake in such a transition and in the German philosophy I am interested in, a growing, historically sensitive anxiety about the possibility of subjectivity or agency; freedom. If one thinks of Nietzsche as a great figure in whatever this last, modernist transition is, however we finally describe it, it is immediately obvious how hard it has been to come to terms with it [and with him]. His twin roles as avant-garde liberator and prophet, and as demonic nihilist and the destroyer of modern aspiration to self-sufficiency are well known.) But Rorty often writes as if these historical transformations amount to a rapid changing of the subject, a shift in interest from this to that, with most of 'this' simply left behind.

But such a shift and the uncertainties and skepticism it can create are at the center of everything in James's fiction and prose as a whole. (I think this is true of Proust as well, since the great 'historical theme' is everywhere in that novel as well, with the loss of and nostalgia for Combray, the airplanes of World War I roaring overhead, and especially the end of the social reign of

the great Guermantes, displaced by, and depressingly, really, no different from, the horridly bourgeois Verdurins.) Both Proust and James, together with Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* and Robert Musil's *Man Without Qualities*, present us something that we have to face if we are to face honestly what has happened to us. (Only Nietzsche and Wittgenstein and Heidegger have, I think, the same sort of historical urgency as philosophers.) I tried to argue in detail in *HJMML* that it is most at issue in books like *The American Scene* and *The Awkward Age* and *What Maisie Knew* and many others. Decaying Europeans and on-rushing wealthy, powerful Americans amount much more to a collision than a changing of the subject. And this general notion of modernization as a kind of spiritual loss, even if, while disenchanting, also liberating and necessary, is hardly limited to these novelists, and I find it hard to fit that moment into the schema Rorty has given us here and elsewhere. It is some aspect of this sort of mood, let us say, that has been so prominent in so much European high culture of the last hundred years, and it is the context of that culture that has made Nietzsche's *Götterdämmerung*, Nihilism, and 'God is dead' rhetoric so prophetic and so important. Everywhere the figures and images are of death and loss, and the language is the language of mourning, or even melancholia.⁷ Something, I would submit, is going on in all this hubbub, and whatever it is, it does not seem adequately answered by our becoming more sensitive to the temptations of our own egoistic delusions and becoming more sensitive to 'the needs of others engaged in the same enterprise of self-creation'. I take part of the value of James to be to have shown us that we don't yet really understand well our stake in this sort of receptivity to others, in what sense (and how much) it matters, and even, what it might be.

NOTES

- 1 It did not, or course, have the same implication in antiquity as it might have to us; it had much less the sense of 'avoid self-deceit', and much more the sense of 'avoid ignorance about what it is to be a human being and what happiness for such a creature consists in'.
- 2 These remarks are similar to the introductory remarks of a paper on Proust called 'On Becoming Who One Is (And Failing): Proust's Problematic Selves', forthcoming in a Routledge collection on *Philosophical Romanticism*, edited by Nikolas Kompridis.
- 3 This is of course the relevant issue in Proust's novel, since the entirety of the plot amounts to: Marcel becomes a writer.
- 4 Max Weber, 'Science as a Vocation', in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 155.
- 5 In his 2001 Tanner Lectures on Human Value, 'The Practice of Value', forthcoming by Oxford University Press.
- 6 This is a topic worthy of consideration in itself and deeply tied to a number of themes in Hegel. I try to sketch out a Hegelian response to such issues in modernism, in abstract art especially, in an article forthcoming in *Critical Inquiry*, 'What Was Abstract Art (From the Point of View of Hegel)'.

⁷ See chapter 6 in the second edition of my *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 144–59.

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