Richard Rorty is America's most controversial philosopher. His books, which include Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Contingency, Irony and Solidarity, and Consequences of Pragmatism, defend the possibility of durable ethical and political allegiances that do not ground themselves in transcendental truths. Rorty teaches now at the University of Virginia and has taught at Princeton and Wellesley College. He holds degrees from Yale and the University of Chicago.

If there is anything to the idea that the best intellectual position is one equidistant from the right and from the left, I am doing very nicely. I am often cited by conservative culture warriors as one of the relativistic, irrationalist, deconstructing, sneering, smirking intellectuals whose writings are weakening the moral fiber of the young. Neal Kozody, writing in the monthly bulletin of the Committee for the Free World, an organization known for its vigilance against symptoms of moral weakness, denounces my "cynical and nihilistic view" and says "it is not enough for him [Rorty] that American students should be merely mindless; he would have them positively mobilized for mindlessness." Richard Neuhaus, a theologian who doubts that atheists can be good American citizens, says that the "ironist vocabulary" I advocate "can neither provide a public language for the citizens of a democracy, nor contend intellectually against the enemies of democracy, nor transmit the reasons for democracy to the next generation." My criticisms of Allan Bloom's Closing of the American Mind led Harvey Mansfield—recently appointed by President Bush to the National Council for the Humanities—to say that I have "given up on America" and that I "manage to diminish even Dewey." (Mansfield recently described Dewey as a "medium-sized malefactor.")

Yet Sheldon Wolin, speaking from the left, sees a lot of
similarity between me and Allan Bloom: Both of us, he says, are intellectual snobs who care only about the leisureed, cultured elite to which we belong. Neither of us has anything to say to blacks, or to other groups who have been shunted aside by American society. Wolin’s view is echoed by Terry Eagleton, Britain’s leading Marxist thinker. Eagleton says that “in Rorty’s ideal society the intellectuals will be ‘ironists,’ practicing a suitably cavalier, laid-back attitude to their own belief, while the masses, for whom such self-ironizing might prove too subversive a weapon, will continue to salute the flag and take life seriously.” Der Spiegel said that I “attempt to make the yuppie regression look good.” Jonathan Culler, one of Derrida’s leading American disciples, says that my version of pragmatism “seems altogether appropriate to the age of Reagan.” Richard Bernstein says that my views are “little more than an ideological apologia for an old-fashioned version of cold war liberalism dressed up in fashionable ‘post-modern’ discourse.” The left’s favorite word for me is “complacent,” just as the right’s is “irresponsible.”

The left’s hostility is partially explained by the fact that most people who admire Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida as much as I do—most of the people who either classify themselves as “postmodernist” or (like me) find themselves thus classified willy-nilly—participate in what Jonathan Yardley has called the “America Sucks Sweepstakes.” Participants in this event compete to find better, bitterer ways of describing the United States. They see our country as embodying everything that is wrong with the rich post-Enlightenment West; they see us as living in what Foucault called a “disciplinary society,” one dominated by an odious ethos of “liberal individualism” that produces racism, sexism, consumerism, and Republican presidents. By contrast, I see America pretty much as Whitman and Dewey did, as opening a prospect on illimitable democratic vistas. I think that our country—despite its past and present atrocities and vices, and despite its continuing willingness to elect fools and knaves to high office—is an example of the best kind of society so far invented. To think that is, in leftist eyes, about as politically incorrect as you can get.

The right’s hostility is largely explained by the fact that rightist thinkers don’t think that it is enough just to prefer democratic societies. One also has to believe that they are Objectively Good, that the institutions of such societies are grounded in Rational First Principles. Especially if one teaches philosophy, as I do, one is expected to tell the young that their society is not just one of the better ones so far contrived, but one that embodies Truth and Reason. Refusal to say this sort of thing counts as “the treason of the clerks”—as an abdication of professional and moral responsibility. My own philosophical views—views I share with Nietzsche and Dewey—forbid me to say this kind of thing. I do not have much use for notions like “objective value” and “objective truth.” I think that the so-called “postmodernists” are right in most of their criticisms of traditional philosophical talk about “Reason.” So my philosophical views offend the right as much as my political preferences offend the left.

I am sometimes told, by exasperated people on both sides, that my views are so weird as to be merely frivolous. They suspect that I will say anything to get a gasp, that I am just amusing myself by contradicting everybody else. This hurts. So I have tried, in what follows, to say something about how I got into my present position—how I got into philosophy, and then found myself unable to use philosophy for the purpose I had originally had in mind. Perhaps this bit of autobiography will make clear that, even if my views about the relation of philosophy to politics are odd, they were not adopted for frivolous reasons.

When I was twelve, the most salient books on my parents’ shelves were two red-bound volumes: The Case of Leon Trotsky and Not Guilty. These made up the report of the Dewey Commission of Inquiry into the Moscow Trials. I never read them
with the wide-eyed fascination I brought to books like Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*, but I thought of them in the way other children thought of their family’s Bible: They were books that radiated redemptive truth and moral splendor. If I were a really good boy, I would say to myself, I should have read not only the Dewey Commission reports but also Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution*, a book I started many times but never managed to finish. For in the 1940s the Russian Revolution and its betrayal by Stalin were, for me, what the Incarnation and its betrayal by the Catholics had been to precocious little Lutherans four hundred years before.

My father had almost, but not quite, accompanied John Dewey to Mexico as P.R. man for the Commission of Inquiry that Dewey chaired. Having broken with the American Communist Party in 1932, my parents had been classified by the *Daily Worker* as “Trotskites,” and they more or less accepted the description. When Trotsky was assassinated in 1940, one of his secretaries, John Frank, hoped that the GPU would not think to look for him in the remote little village on the Delaware River where we were living. Using a pseudonym, Frank was our guest in Flatbrookville for some months. I was warned not to disclose his real identity, though it is doubtful that my schoolmates at Walpack Elementary would have been interested in my indiscretions.

I grew up knowing that all decent people were, if not Trotskyites, at least socialists. I also knew that Stalin had ordered not only Trotsky’s assassination but also Kirov’s, Ehrlich’s, Alter’s, and Carlo Tresca’s. (Tresca, gunned down on the streets of New York, had been a family friend.) I knew that poor people would always be oppressed until capitalism was overcome. Working as an unpaid office boy during my twelfth winter, I carried drafts of press releases from the Worker’s Defense League office off Gramercy Park (where my parents worked) around the corner to the home of Norman Thomas (the Socialist Party’s candidate for president) and also to A. Philip Randolph’s office at the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters on 125th Street. On the subway, I would read the papers I was carrying.

They told me a lot about what factory owners did to union organizers, plantation owners to sharecroppers, and the white locomotive engineers’ union to the colored firemen (whose jobs white men wanted, now that diesel engines were replacing coal-fired steam engines). So at twelve I knew that the point of being human was to spend one’s life fighting social injustice.

But I also had private, weird, snobbish, incommunicable interests. In earlier years these had been in Tibet. I had sent the newly enthroned Dalai Lama a present, accompanied by warm congratulations to a fellow eight-year-old who had made good. A few years later, when my parents began dividing their time between the Chelsea Hotel and the mountains of northwest New Jersey, these interests switched to orchids. Some forty species of wild orchids occur in those mountains, and I eventually found seventeen of them. Wild orchids are uncommon, and rather hard to spot. I prided myself enormously on being the only person around who knew where they grew, their Latin names, and their blooming times. When in New York, I would go to the 42nd Street Public Library to reread a nineteenth-century volume on the botany of the orchids of the eastern U.S.

I was not quite sure why those orchids were so important, but I was convinced that they were. I was sure that our noble, pure, chaste North American wild orchids were morally superior to the showy, hybridized, tropical orchids displayed in florists’ shops. I was also convinced that there was a deep significance in the fact that the orchids are the latest and most complex plants to be developed in the course of evolution. Looking back, I suspect that there was a lot of sublimated sexuality involved (orchids being a notoriously sexy sort of flower), and that my desire to learn all there was to know about orchids was linked to my desire to understand all the hard words in Krafft-Ebing.

I was unevenly aware, however, that there was something a bit dubious about this esotericism—this interest in socially useless flowers. I had read (in the vast amount of spare time given to a clever, snotty, nerdy only child) bits of *Marius the Epicurean* and also bits of Marxist criticisms of Pater’s aestheticism. I was
afraid that Trotsky (whose Literature and Revolution I had nibbled at) would not have approved of my interest in orchids.

At fifteen I escaped from the bullies who regularly beat me up on the playground of my high school (bullies who, I assumed, would somehow wither away once capitalism had been overcome) by going off to the so-called “Hutchins College” of the University of Chicago. (This was the institution immortalized by A. J. Liebling as “the biggest collection of juvenile neurotics since the Children’s Crusade.”) Insofar as I had any project in mind, it was to reconcile Trotsky and the orchids. I wanted to find some intellectual or aesthetic framework that would let me—in a thrilling phrase I came across in Yeats—“hold reality and justice in a single vision.” By “reality” I meant, more or less, the Wordsworthian moments in which, in the woods around Flatbookville (and especially in the presence of certain coralroot orchids, and of the smaller yellow lady-slipper), I had felt touched by something numinous, something of ineffable importance, something really real. By “justice” I meant what Norman Thomas and Trotsky both stood for, the liberation of the weak from the strong. I wanted a way to be both an intellectual and spiritual snob and a friend of humanity—a nerdy recluse and a fighter for justice. I was very confused, but reasonably sure that at Chicago I would find out how grown-ups managed to work the trick I had in mind.

When I got to Chicago (in 1946), I found that Hutchins, together with his friends Mortimer Adler and Richard McKeon (the villain of Fisig’s Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance), had enveloped the University of Chicago in a neo-Aristotelian mystique. The most frequent target of their sneers was John Dewey’s pragmatism. That pragmatism was the philosophy of my parents’ friend Sidney Hook, as well as the unofficial philosophy of most of the other New York intellectuals who had given up on dialectical materialism.

But according to Hutchins and Adler, pragmatism was vulgar, “relativistic,” and self-refuting. As they pointed out over and over again, Dewey had no absolutes. To say, as Dewey did, that “growth itself is the only moral end” left one without a criterion for growth, and thus with no way to refute Hitler’s suggestion that Germany had “grown” under his rule. To say that truth is what works is to reduce the quest for truth to the quest for power. Only an appeal to something eternal, absolute, and good—like the God of St. Thomas or the nature of human beings, as described by Aristotle—would permit one to answer the Nazis, to justify one’s choice of social democracy over fascism.

This quest for stable absolutes was common to the neo-Thomists and to Leo Strauss, the teacher who attracted the best of the Chicago students (including my classmate Allan Bloom). The Chicago faculty was dotted with awesomely learned refugees from Hitler, of whom Strauss was the most revered. All of them seemed to agree that something deeper and weightier than Dewey was needed if one was to explain why it would be better to be dead than to be a Nazi. This sounded pretty good to my teen-age ears. For moral and philosophical absolutes sounded a bit like my beloved orchids—numinous, hard to find, known only to a chosen few. Further, since Dewey was a hero to all the people among whom I had grown up, scorning Dewey was a convenient form of adolescent revolt. The only question was whether this scorn should take a religious or a philosophical form, and of how it might be combined with striving for social justice.

Like many of my classmates at Chicago, I knew lots of T. S. Eliot by heart. I was attracted by Eliot’s suggestions that only committed Christians (and perhaps only Anglo-Catholics) could overcome their unhealthy preoccupation with their private obsessions, and so serve their fellow humans with proper humility. But a prudish inability to believe what I was saying when I recited the General Confession gradually led me to give up my awkward attempts to get religion. So I fell back on absolutist philosophy.

I read through Plato during my fifteenth summer, and convinced myself that Socrates was right—virtue was knowledge. That claim was music to my ears, for I had doubts about my own moral character and a suspicion that my only gifts were
intellectual ones. Besides, Socrates had to be right, for only then could one hold reality and justice in a single vision. Only if he were right could one hope to be both as good as the best Christians (such as Alyosha in The Brothers Karamazov, whom I could not—and still cannot—decide whether to envy or despise) and as learned and clever as Strauss and his students. So I decided to major in philosophy. I figured that if I became a philosopher I might get to the top of Plato’s “divided line”—the place “beyond hypotheses” where the full sunshine of Truth irradiates the purified soul of the wise and good: an Elysian field dotted with immaterial orchids. It seemed obvious to me that getting to such a place was what everybody with any brains really wanted. It also seemed clear that Platonism had all the advantages of religion, without requiring the humility that Christianity demanded, and of which I was apparently incapable.

For all these reasons, I wanted very much to be some kind of Platonist, and from fifteen to twenty I did my best. But it didn’t pan out. I could never figure out whether the Platonic philosopher was aiming at the ability to offer irrefutable argument—argument that rendered him able to convince anyone he encountered of what he believed (the sort of thing Ivan Karamazov was good at)—or instead was aiming at a sort of incommunicable, private bliss (the sort of thing his brother Alyosha seemed to possess). The first goal is to achieve total argumentative power over others—e.g., the ability to convince bullies that they should not beat one up, or the ability to convince rich capitalists that they must cede their power to a cooperative, egalitarian commonwealth. The second goal is to enter a state in which all doubts are stilled, but in which you no longer wish to argue. Both goals seemed desirable, but I could not see how to fit them together.

At the same time I was worrying about this tension within Platonism—and within any form of what Dewey had called “the quest for certainty”—I was also worrying about the familiar problem of whether it is possible to get a noncircular justification of any debatable stand on any important issue. The more philosophers I read, the clearer it seemed that each of them could carry their views back to first principles that were incompatible with the first principles of their opponents, and that none of them ever got to that fabled place “beyond hypotheses.” There seemed to be nothing like a neutral standpoint from which these alternative first principles could be evaluated. But if there were no such standpoint, then the whole idea of “rational certainty,” and the whole Socratic-Platonic idea of replacing passion by reason, seemed not to make much sense.

Eventually I got over the worry about circular argumentation by deciding that the test of philosophical truth was overall coherence, rather than deducibility from universally granted truths. But this didn’t help much. For coherence is a matter of avoiding contradictions, and St. Thomas’s advice—“When you meet a contradiction, make a distinction”—makes this pretty easy to do. As far as I could see, philosophical talent was largely a matter of proliferating as many distinctions as were needed to wriggle out of dialectical corners. More generally, it was a matter, when trapped in such a corner, of redescribing the nearby intellectual terrain in a way that made the terms used by one’s opponent seem irrelevant, or question-begging, or jejune. I turned out to have a flair for such redescriptions. But I became less and less certain that developing this skill was going to make me either wise or virtuous.

Since that initial disillusion (which climaxed about the time I left Chicago to get a Ph.D. in philosophy at Yale), I have spent forty years looking for a coherent and convincing way of formulating my worries about what, if anything, philosophy is good for. My starting point was the discovery of Hegel’s Phænomenology of Spirit, a book that I read as saying: Granted that philosophy is just a matter of out redescribing the last philosopher, the cunning of reason can make use of this sort of competition. It can use it to weave the conceptual fabric of a freer, better, more just society. If philosophy can be, at best, only what Hegel called “its time held in thought,” still, that might be enough. For by thus holding one’s time, one might
do what Marx wanted done—change the world. So even if there was no such thing as "understanding the world" in the Platonic sense—an understanding from a position outside of time and history—perhaps there was still a social use for my talents, and for the study of philosophy.

For quite a while after I read Hegel, I thought that the two greatest achievements of the species to which I belonged were The Phenomenology of Spirit and Remembrance of Things Past (the book that took the place of the wild orchids once I left Flatbrookville). Proust's ability to weave intellectual and social snobbery together with the hawthorns around Combray, his grandmother's selfless love, Odette's orchidaceous embraces of Swann and Jupien's of Charsus, and with everything else he encountered—to give each of these their due without feeling the need to bundle them together with the help of a religious faith or a philosophical theory—seemed to me as astonishing as Hegel's ability to throw himself successively into empiricism, Greek tragedy, Stoicism, Christianity, and Newtonian physics, and to emerge from each ready and eager for something completely different. It was the commitment to temporality that Hegel and Proust shared—the specifically anti-Platonic element in their work—that seemed so wonderful. They both seemed able to weave everything they encountered into a narrative without asking that that narrative have a moral, and without asking how that narrative would appear under the aspect of eternity.

About twenty years or so after I decided that the young Hegel's willingness to stop trying for eternity, and just be the child of his time, was the appropriate response to disillusionment with Plato, I found myself being led back to Dewey. Dewey now seemed to me a philosopher who had learned all that Hegel had to teach about how to eschew certainty and eternity, while immunizing himself against pantheism by taking Darwin seriously. This rediscovery of Dewey coincided with my first encounter with Derrida (which I owe to Jonathan Arac, a colleague at Princeton). Derrida led me back to Heidegger, and I was struck by the resemblances between Dewey's, Wittgenstein's, and Heidegger's criticisms of Cartesianism. Suddenly things began to come together. I thought I saw a way to blend a criticism of the Cartesian tradition with the quasi-Heideggerian historicism of Michel Foucault, Ian Hacking, and Alasdair MacIntyre. I thought that I could fit all these into a quasi-Heideggerian story about the tensions within Platonism.

The result of this small epiphany was a book called Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. Though disliked by most of my fellow philosophy professors, this book had enough success among nonphilosophers to give me a self-confidence I had previously lacked. But Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature did not do much for my adolescent ambitions. The topics it treated—the mind-body problem, controversies in the philosophy of language about truth and meaning, Kuhnian philosophy of science—were pretty remote from both Trotsky and the orchids. I had gotten back on good terms with Dewey; I had articulated my historicist anti-Platonism; I had finally figured out what I thought about the direction and value of current movements in analytic philosophy. I had sorted out most of the philosophers whom I had read. But I had not spoken to any of the questions that got me started reading philosophers in the first place. I was no closer to the single vision that, thirty years back, I had gone to college to get.

As I tried to figure out what had gone wrong, I gradually decided that the whole idea of holding reality and justice in a single vision had been a mistake—that a pursuit of such a vision had been precisely what led Plato astray. More specifically, I decided that only religion—only a nonargumentative faith in a surrogate parent who, unlike any real parent, embodied love, power, and justice in equal measure—could do the trick Plato wanted done. Since I couldn't imagine becoming religious, and indeed had gotten more and more rauously secularist, I decided that the hope of achieving a single vision by becoming a philosopher had been a self-deceptive atheist's way out. So I decided
to try to write a book about what intellectual life would be like if one could manage to give up the Platonic attempt to hold reality and justice in a single vision.

That book—*Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*—argues that there is no need to weave together one's personal equivalent of Trotsky and one's personal equivalent of my wild orchids. Rather, one should try to abjure the temptation to tie in one's responsibilities to other people with one's relation to whatever idiosyncratic things or persons one loves, with all one's heart and soul and mind (or, if you like, the things or persons one is obsessed with). These two will, in some lucky people, coincide—as they do in Christians, for whom the love of God and the love of other human beings are inseparable, or Trotskyites, who are moved by nothing but the thought of justice. But they need not coincide, and one should not try too hard to weave them together. So, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre seemed to me right when he denounced Kant's self-deceptive quest for certainty, but wrong when he denounced Proust as a useless bourgeois wimp, a man whose life and writings were equally irrelevant to the only thing that really matters, the struggle to overthrow capitalism.

Proust's life and work were, in fact, irrelevant to that struggle. But that is a silly reason to despise Proust. It is as wrong-headed as Savonarola's contempt for the works of art he called "vanities." Single-mindedness of this Sartrean or Savonarolan sort is the quest for purity of heart—the attempt to will one thing—gone rancid. It is the attempt to see yourself as an incarnation of something larger than yourself (the Movement, Reason, the Good, the Holy) rather than accepting your finitude. The latter means, among other things, accepting that what matters most to you may well be something that may never matter much to most people. Your equivalent of my orchids may seem merely weird, merely idiosyncratic, to practically everybody else. But that is no reason to be ashamed of, or downgrade, or try to slough off, your Wordsworthian moments, your lover, your family, your pet, your favorite lines of verse, or your quaint religious faith. There is nothing sacred about universality that makes the shared automatically better than the unshared. What you can get everybody to agree to (the universal) merits no automatic privilege over what you cannot (the idiosyncratic).

This means that the fact that you have obligations to other people (not to bully them, to join them in overthrowing tyrants, to feed them when they are hungry) does not entail that what you share with other people is more important than anything else. What you share with them when you are aware of such moral obligations is not, I argued in *Contingency*, "rationality" or "human nature" or "the fatherhood of God" or "a knowledge of the Moral Law," or anything other than ability to sympathize with the pain of others. There is no particular reason to expect that your sensitivity to that pain, and your idiosyncratic loves, are going to fit within one big overall account of how everything hangs together. There is, in short, not much reason to hope for the sort of single vision that I went to college hoping to get.

So much for how I came to the views I currently hold. As I said earlier, most people find these views repellent. My *Contingency* book got a couple of good reviews, but these were vastly outnumbered by reviews saying that the book was frivolous, confused, and irresponsible. The gist of the criticisms I get from both left and right is pretty much the same as the gist of the criticisms aimed at Dewey by the Thomists, the Straussians, and the Marxists, back in the thirties and forties. Dewey thought, as I now do, that there was nothing bigger, more permanent and more reliable, behind our sense of moral obligation to those in pain than a certain contingent historical phenomenon—the gradual spread of the sense that the pain of others matters, regardless of whether they are of the same family, tribe, religion, nation, or intelligence as oneself. This idea, Dewey thought, cannot be shown to be true by science, or religion, or philosophy—at least if "shown to be true" means "capable of being made evident to anyone, regardless of background." It can be made evident only to people whom it is not
too late to acculturate into our own particular, late-blooming, historically contingent form of life.

This Deweyan claim entails a picture of human beings as children of their time and place, without any significant metaphysical or biological limits on their plasticity. It means that a sense of moral obligation is a matter of conditioning rather than of insight. It also means that the notion of insight (in any area, physics as well as ethics) as a glimpse of what is there apart from any human needs and desires cannot be made coherent. As William James put it, “the trail of the human serpent is over all.” More specifically, our conscience and our aesthetic taste are, equally, products of the cultural environment in which we grew up. We decent, liberal, humanitarian types (representatives of the moral community to which both my reviewers and I belong) are just luckier, not more insightful, than the bullies with whom we struggle.

This view is often referred to dismissively as “cultural relativism.” But it is not relativistic, if that means saying that every moral view is as good as every other. Our moral view is, I firmly believe, much better than any competing view, even though there are many people whom you will never be able to convert to it. It is one thing to say, falsely, that there is nothing to choose between us and the Nazis. It is another thing to say, correctly, that there is no neutral, common ground to which a philosophical Nazi and I can repair to argue out our differences. That Nazi and I will always strike each other as begging all the crucial questions, arguing in circles.

Socrates and Plato suggested that if we tried hard enough we should find beliefs that everybody found intuitively plausible, and that among these would be moral beliefs whose implications, when clearly realized, would make us virtuous as well as knowledgeable. To thinkers like Allan Bloom (on the Strauss side) and Terry Eagleton (on the Marxist side), there must be such beliefs—unwobbling pivots that determine the answer to the question “Which moral or political alternative is objectively valid?” For Deweyan pragmatists like me, history and anthropology are enough to show that there are no unwobbling pivots, and that seeking objectivity is just a matter of getting as much intersubjective agreement as you can.

Nothing much has changed in philosophical debates about whether there is more to objectivity than intersubjectivity since the time I went to college—or, for that matter, since the time Hegel went to seminary. Nowadays we philosophers talk about “moral language” instead of “moral experience,” and about “contextualist theories of reference” rather than “the relation between subject and object.” But this is just froth on the surface. My reasons for turning away from the anti-Deweyan views I imbibed at Chicago are pretty much the same reasons Dewey had for turning away from evangelical Christianity and from the neo-Hegelian pantheism he embraced in his twenties. They are also pretty much the reasons that led Hegel to turn away from Kant, and to decide that both God and the Moral Law had to be temporized and historicized to be believable. I do not think that I have more insight into the debates about our need for “absolutes” than I had when I was twenty, despite all the books I have read and arguments I have had in the intervening forty years. All they did was to let me spell out my disillusionment with Plato—my conviction that philosophy was no help in dealing with Nazis and other bullies—in more detail, and to a variety of audiences.

At the moment there are two cultural wars being waged in the United States. The first is the one described in detail by my colleague James Davison Hunter in his comprehensive and informative Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America. This war is important. It will decide whether our country continues along the trajectory defined by the Bill of Rights, the Reconstruction Amendments, the building of the land-grant colleges, female suffrage, the New Deal, Brown v. Board of Education, the building of the community colleges, Martin Luther King’s civil rights movement, the feminist movement, and the gay rights movement. Following this trajectory would mean that America will continue to set an example of increasing tolerance and equality.
But it may be that this trajectory could be maintained only while Americans’ average real income continued to rise. So 1973 may have been the beginning of the end: the end both of rising economic expectations and of the political consensus that emerged from the New Deal. The future of American politics may be just a series of increasingly blatant and increasingly successful variations on the Willie Horton spots. Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here* may become an increasingly plausible scenario. Unlike Hunter, I feel no need to be judicious and balanced in my attitude toward the two sides in this first sort of culture war—the sides he calls “progressivist” and “orthodox.” I see the “orthodox” (the people who think that hounding gays out of the military promotes traditional family values) as the same honest, decent, blinkered, disastrous people who voted for Hitler in 1933. I see the “progressivists” as defining the only America I care about.

The second cultural war is being waged in magazines like *Critical Inquiry* and *Salmagundi,* magazines with high subscription rates and low circulations. It is between those who see modern liberal society as fatally flawed (the people handily lumped together as “postmodernists”) and those (including typical left-wing Democrat professors like myself) who see ours as a society in which technology and democratic institutions can, with luck, collaborate to increase equality and reduce suffering. This war is not very important. Despite the conservative columnists who pretend to view with alarm a vast conspiracy (encompassing both the postmodernists and the pragmatists) to politicize the humanities and corrupt the youth, this war is just a tiny little dispute within which Hunter calls the “progressivist” ranks.

People on the “postmodernist” side tend to share Noam Chomsky’s view of the United States as a nation run by a corrupt elite that aims at enriching itself by impoverishing the Third World. From that perspective, ours is not so much a country in danger of slipping into fascism as it is a country that has always been quasi-fascist. These people typically think that nothing will change unless we get rid of “humanism,” “liberal individualism,” and “technologism.” People like me see nothing wrong with any of these -isms, nor with the political and moral heritage of the Enlightenment—with the least common denominator of Mill and Marx, Trotsky and Whitman, William James and Vaclav Havel. Typically, we Deweyans are sentimentally patriotic about America—willing to grant that it could slide into fascism at any time, but proud of its past and guardedly hopeful about its future.

Most people on my side of this second, tiny, upmarket, cultural war have given up on socialism in light of the history of nationalized enterprises and central planning in Central and Eastern Europe. We are willing to grant that welfare-state capitalism is the best we can hope for. Most of us who were brought up Trotskyite now feel forced to admit that Lenin and Trotsky did more harm than good, and that Krenchky (the hapless social democrat whom Lenin shaved aside) has gotten a bum rap for the past seventy years. But we see ourselves as still faithful to everything that was good in the socialist movement. Those on the other side, however, still insist that nothing will change unless there is some sort of total revolution. Postmodernists who consider themselves post-Marxists still want to preserve the sort of purity of heart that Lenin feared he might lose if he listened to too much Beethoven.

I am distrusted by both the orthodox side in the important war and the postmodern side in the unimportant one because I think that the orthodox are philosophically wrong as well as politically dangerous, and that the postmoderns are philosophically right though politically silly. Unlike both the orthodox and the postmoderns, I do not think that you can tell much about the worth of a philosopher’s view on topics such as truth, objectivity, and the possibility of a single vision by discovering his politics, or his irrelevance to politics. So I do not think it counts in favor of Dewey’s pragmatic view of truth that he was a fervent social democrat, nor against Heidegger’s criticism of Platonic notions of objectivity that he was a Nazi, nor against Derrida’s view of linguistic meaning that his most influential American ally, Paul de Man, wrote a couple of anti-Semitic
articles when he was young. The idea that you can evaluate a writer's philosophical views by reference to his political utility seems to me a version of the bad Platonic-Straussian idea that we cannot have justice until philosophers become kings or kings philosophers.

Both the orthodox and the postmoderns still want a tight connection between people's politics and their views on large theoretical (theological, metaphysical, epistemological, meta-philosophical) matters. Some postmodernists who initially took my enthusiasm for Derrida to mean that I must be on their political side decided, after discovering that my politics were pretty much those of Hubert Humphrey, that I must have sold out. The orthodox tend to think that people who, like the postmodernists and me, believe neither in God nor in some suitable substitute, must feel that everything is permitted, that everybody can do what they like. So they tell us that we are either inconsistent or self-deceptive in putting forward our moral or political views.

I take this near-unanimity among my critics to show that most people—even a lot of purportedly liberated postmodernists—still hanker for something like what I wanted when I was fifteen: a way of holding reality and justice in a single vision. More specifically, they want to unite their sense of moral and political responsibility with a grasp of the ultimate determinants of our fate. They want to see love, power, and justice as coming together deep down in the nature of things, or in the human soul, or in the structure of language, or somewhere. They want some sort of guarantee that their intellectual acuity or their aesthetic sensitivity, and those special ecstatic moments that such acuity or sensitivity sometimes affords, are of some relevance to their moral convictions. They still think that virtue and knowledge are somehow linked—that being right about philosophical matters is important for right action.

I do not want to argue that there is no linkage—that philosophy is socially useless. Had there been no Plato, the Christians would have had a harder time selling the idea that all God really wanted from us was fraternal love. Had there been no Kant, the nineteenth century would have had a harder time reconciling Christian ethics with Darwin's story about the descent of man. Had there been no Darwin, it would have been harder for Whitman and Dewey to detach the Americans from their belief that they were God's chosen people, to get them to start standing on their own feet. Had there been no Dewey and no Sidney Hook, American intellectual leftists of the 1930s would have been as buffeted by the Marxists as were their counterparts in France and in Latin America. Ideas do, indeed, have consequences.

But the fact that ideas have consequences does not mean that we philosophers, we specialists in ideas, are in a key position. We are not here to provide principles or foundations or deep theoretical diagnoses, or a synoptic vision. When I am asked (as, alas, I often am) what I take contemporary philosophy's "mission" or "task" to be, I get tongue-tied. The best I can do is to stammer that we philosophy professors are people who have a certain familiarity with a certain intellectual tradition, as chemists have a certain familiarity with what happens when you mix various substances together. We can offer some advice about what will happen when you try to combine or to separate certain ideas, on the basis of our knowledge of the results of past experiments. By doing so, we may be able to help you hold your time in thought. But we are not the people to come to if you want confirmation that the things you love with all your heart are central to the structure of the universe, or that your sense of moral responsibility is "rational and objective" rather than "just" a result of how you were brought up.

There are still, as the nineteenth-century American pragmatist C. S. Peirce put it, "philosophical slop-shops on every corner" that will provide such confirmation. But there is a price. To pay the price, you have to turn your back on intellectual history and on what Milan Kundera calls "the fascinating imaginative realm where no one owns the truth and everyone has the right to be understood... the wisdom of the novel." You risk losing the sense of finitude, and the tolerance, that result
from realizing how very many synoptic visions there have been, and how little argument can do to help you choose between them. Despite my relatively early disillusionment with Platonism, I am very glad that I spent all those years reading philosophy books. For I learned something that still seems very important: to distrust the intellectual snobbery that originally led me to read them. If I had not read all those books, I might never have been able to stop looking for what Derrida calls "a full presence beyond the reach of play," for a luminous synoptic vision.

By now I am pretty sure that looking for such a presence and such a vision is a bad idea. The main trouble is that you might succeed, and your success might let you imagine that you have something more to rely on than the tolerance and decency of your fellow human beings. The democratic community of Dewey's dreams is a community in which nobody imagines that. It is a community in which everybody thinks that it is human solidarity, rather than knowledge of something not merely human, that really matters. The actually existing approximations to such a fully democratic, fully secular community now seem to me the greatest achievements of our species. In comparison, even Hegel's and Proust's books are optional, orchidaceous extras.