Democratic Temperament

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Chapter 3
Sources of Respect

I

Sustaining friendly relationships among citizens as they resolve their disputes democratically requires mutual respect. Justice Learned Hand interpreted “the spirit of liberty” as “the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women.” Without some degree of unity among individuals and groups, politics—the peaceful resolution of conflict—breaks down and differences are resolved, if at all, by the weaker yielding to the superior power. Unity’s effects might be attained by suppressing disagreements or invoking a hegemonic identity (“to be a good citizen you must believe this and practice that”), or, and this ideal is far more difficult to achieve, genuine unity could be created by encouraging citizens to cherish their commonalities and to esteem people of different colors, religions, classes, income levels, degrees of power, genders, ideologies, and sexual preferences. One could imagine the following exhortation, “By virtue of our citizenship in this country, we share a common past, laws, language, and institutions, although we also belong to particular groups with unique histories, customs, and languages, that make distinctive contributions to the collectivity.”

The historical context in which William James thought about these matters is significantly similar to the present. U.S. foreign policy frequently manifests the racism and xenophobia that James saw in U.S. interventions in Cuba, the Philippines, Venezuela, and Haiti, and at home, there are echoes of the intense class warfare of the late nineteenth century; flashpoints for hostility then and now include race, religion, region, gender, sexuality, and ideology. Just as immigrants from Germany, Eastern Europe, and Ireland once altered the ethnic composition of the United States, a corresponding transformation is now occurring as a result of immigration from Mexico, Central America, Cuba, Africa, and Asia. Cuban immi-
grants clash with African Americans in Miami for political power, and the tension between blacks and Jews has been intense since the demise of the civil rights movement. In Crown Heights, Brooklyn, blacks and Orthodox Jews battle for scarce city resources that neither control, and in 1994 a prominent Yale historian of slavery chose not to speak at Howard University because he feared anti-Semitic heckling.  

Racial, religious, and ethnic tensions are expressed in ideological debates over affirmative action, the means of fairly representing minorities in Congress, the content of school curricula, and the use of languages other than English in education and public affairs. Clashes over homosexuality have been waged more openly than ever before in schools, the military, and street assaults on gays and lesbians, and a women's educational and cultural retreat started by two lesbians in Mississippi became an armed camp in response to threats from hostile neighbors. In reaction to the decline of culturally sanctioned truths and a multiplicity of perspectives, some political and religious movements express their positions as indisputable and nonnegotiable. The militia movement, neo-Nazis, Black Muslims, and certain fundamentalist Jewish and Islamic sects combine absolutism, hatred, and violence. Women have been murdered in Algeria for not wearing the veil. Even "moderates" divide the world into the righteous and the damned: some of the groups just listed have become pariahs for the rest of us.

Given the fact that previous grounds of unity—such as respect for law or acquiescence to hierarchies dominated by whites, males, and Protestants—are eroding, will domestic conflicts become increasingly violent? Will the United States go the way of Algeria, Egypt, and the former Yugoslavia? The Los Angeles riots, terrorist bombings, and attacks on abortion clinics are worrisome signs.

What institutions, customs, ideology, or temperament could unify or at least dampen the hostility in our diverse society? All answers to that question will meet with skepticism. One consequence of the philosophic dispute over relativism and subjectivism (does truth exist outside of individual or cultural preference and self-interest?) has been the abandonment of the old ideal of neutrality, i.e., one should and can find a position untainted by interest that represents the common good. Today, every claim made in the name of the common good is exposed for its selfish interests or will to power.
The Federalist founders claimed to have discovered a substitute for unity: divide the people so that no one faction can predominate while increasing the scale of government and using checks and balances to distance political institutions from popular will. The powerful, centralized state fills one function of unity when it suppresses conflict through the army, police, courts, and incarceration system. Madisonian means of resolving discord are less available to direct democracies; refusing to transfer power to the state gives citizens more personal responsibility and requires them to enter into political relationships with fellow citizens. A democracy cannot abolish disagreements or strong feelings among citizens, but both must be tempered if they are not to erupt into violence.

The United States has resources in its theoretical and political traditions to help in the creation of a multicultural society in which groups negotiate their differences without demonizing each other. According to literary critic Giles Gunn:

While pragmatic criticism advocates no particular policies, it does possess a specifiable politics. It is a politics distinguished by the democratic preference for rendering differences conversable so that the conflicts they produce, instead of being destructive of human community, can be potentially creative of it; can broaden and thicken public culture rather than depleting it.

It may not be much of an exaggeration to say that the pragmatic criticism described by Gunn was largely invented by William James, although he went beyond Gunn’s ideals to delineate the kinds of conditions, prerequisites, and behaviors that are needed in order to render differences conversable.

James exemplified mutual respect, sometimes even embarrassing his friends with his openness to advocates of eccentric causes such as parapsychology. In an obituary that identified democracy with egalitarian tolerance, Walter Lippmann declared that James was simply keeping America’s promise: he was actually doing what we, as a nation, proclaimed that we would do. He was tolerant; he was willing to listen to what seems preposterous, and to consider what might, though queer, be true. And he showed that this democratic
attitude of mind is every bit as fruitful as the aristocratic determination to ignore new and strange-looking ideas. James was a democrat. He gave all men and all creeds, any idea, any theory, any superstition, a respectful hearing. . . . It is an encouraging thought that America should have produced perhaps the most tolerant man of our generation. 

W. E. B. Du Bois revered James for being first among Harvard’s transformative national intellectual leaders, “unshackled in thought and custom who were beating back bars of ignorance and particularism and prejudice.”

Perfect harmony was not James’s ideal; he believed that conflict was healthy. So he did not endeavor, even at the level of theory, to discourage the social struggles of late-nineteenth-century American society, but in order to preserve democratic institutions, he sought to reduce hatred and misconceptions in confrontations between capital and labor, natives and immigrants, blacks and whites, men and women. In protesting U.S. intervention in the Philippines and Cuba and condemning the Spanish-American War, James wanted to curb the feelings of superiority toward other countries that fueled American imperialism. Not only does imperialism violate abstract principles of right, but James believed that tolerance and self-determination are embodied in the Declaration of Independence, and thus constitutive of the American political spirit, and imperialism corrupts that spirit.

In analyzing the causes of corruption, James did not find fault with either liberalism or American political institutions, which at their best preserve liberty. Grasping social psychology shaped by ideologies and values, leadership and social structures, was for James crucial to exposing the root of the problem. In despair over the Spanish-American War, James said:

Seriously speaking, this whole business has thrown a most instructive light on the way in which history is made, and has illustrated to perfection the psychologie des foules [crowd psychology]! The basis of it all is, or rather was, perfectly honest humanitarianism, and an absolutely disinterested desire on the part of our people to set the Cubans free. . . . On this, various interests worked for their purposes in favor of war.

He identified a common source of domestic political violence and imperi-
alism: both result, at least in part, from a "blindness" that creates contempt for cultures and outlooks other than one's own. He analyzed the causes of this blindness and indicated an approach to overcoming it.

II

James's conception of mutual respect combined tolerance, based on the faith that others are equal in value and possess a share of truth, with the conviction that failure to perceive this equality results from an inevitable cultural process. If incognizance is impossible to dispel, every effort should be made to withhold judgment. "International comparisons are a great waste of time—at any rate, international judgments and the passing of sentences are. Every nation has ideals and difficulties and sentiments which are an impenetrable secret to one not of the blood. Let them alone, let each one work out its salvation on its own lines."17 James specified the greatest danger to other cultures as being imperiousness, arguing that we must not

be forward in pronouncing on the meaninglessness of forms of existence other than our own; and [the result of the inquiry into the causes of blindness] commands us to tolerate, respect, and indulge those whom we see harmlessly interested and happy in their own ways, however unintelligible these may be to us. Hands off: neither the whole of truth, nor the whole of good, is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands.18

James's tolerance was not anarchic; he insisted that antagonists should remain within the boundaries of the law. American democracy is based on two inveterate habits carried into public life. . . . They can never be too often pointed out or praised. One of them is the habit of trained and disciplined good temper towards the opposite party when it fairly wins its innings—it was by breaking from this habit the slave States nearly wrecked our Nation. The other is that of fierce and merciless
resentment towards every man or set of men who break the public peace—it was by holding to this habit the free States saved her life.¹⁹

One might wonder if James here reveals that his concept of democracy is founded on the coercion feared by a postmodernist such as Connolly, but it should be remembered that James’s rhetoric is colored heavily by the Civil War experience so that he was thinking not only of people who break the peace but of those who would destroy the union.²⁰ Commitment to democratic rules of settling disputes was, for James, one element of mutual respect along with appreciation of others, self-criticism, and an acknowledgment of an innate inability to fathom others fully.

Mutual respect is the ideal relationship among citizens in a democracy, but we need not go to democratic dreamland: to respect every position—for example, to deny that the Holocaust occurred or to posit the genetic inferiority of African Americans—is to sanction evil. New Yorker critic Adam Gopnick parodied a mad objectivity that could be confused with mutual respect:

You sometimes have the depressing feeling that if the Beer Hall Putsch took place in America today there would be an investigation in the news magazines of Hitler’s claim (“Though Hitler’s charge that Jews control the media remains unproved, it has sparked a welcome debate on the relationships between Jews and other Germans. In the long run, this may be the best thing to come from this miserable incident”).²¹

James placed limits on tolerance:

The first thing to learn in intercourse with others is non-interference with their own peculiar ways of being happy, provided those ways do not assume to interfere by violence with ours. No one has insight into all the ideals. No one should presume to judge them off-hand. The pretension to dogmatize about them in each other is the root of most human injustices and cruelties, and the trait in human character most likely to make the angels weep.²²

Democratic action requires mutual respect because it makes peaceful disagreement viable. Mutual respect implies a friendly attitude toward one’s
fellow citizens, including political opponents. That friendly attitude includes a theory of truth, a tendency to dismiss hierarchies as indicators of who merits respect, and an appreciation for the variety of contributions made by various people in a society.

In certain moods, James professed that virtually everyone detects part of the truth and no one apprehends the whole. A stranger's ideas, way of life, character, or culture probably have something worthy in them that we often cannot recognize since they differ from our own portion of the truth. One therefore should strive to observe the world, especially in a confrontation, from the other's point of view, even learning from them if possible. "Respect has to be treated as a very difficult demand because in a society where you emphasize toleration of diversity you are going to have to do a lot of respecting," remarks Wolin. "That is more than simply the type of respect one must show in personal relationships. Respect is strained when one has all kinds of groups, ideologies, and interests to think about, with all their various spokespersons. And that also makes it difficult to see the world from their point of view because in the context of differences you've often got a bewildering variety of points of view."

James opposed our common tendency to designate the voices of some groups as worth hearing while ignoring others altogether. Some people turn deaf ears to women, blacks, the working class, New Age devotees, evangelists, politicians, professors, and journalists. Some accept nothing as true if it cannot be validated by mainstream science. For example, in a reversal of common sentiments, the father of a friend of mine was so convinced by a study he had read of marijuana's benefits that he refused to acknowledge, even when it was described to him from experience, the damaging effects of his own son's addiction to the drug. In contrast, James tried to listen to everyone, including advocates of weird theories and partisans of lost causes, with an open mind.

To engage James on this issue requires confronting an ancient problem in political theory: What is the value of a citizen? From the standpoint of the community, are all citizens of the same worth? Do they deserve the same rewards? In The Politics, Aristotle contended that "the good in the sphere of politics is justice; and justice consists in what tends to promote the common interest. General opinion makes it consist in some sort of equality. . . . [I]t considers that persons who are equal should have assigned to them equal things. . . . [Y]es; but equals and unequals in what?"
Superior people should receive superior rewards, but Aristotle asks what makes a superior person. Surely not complexion or height. He concludes that "claims to political rights must be based on the ground of contribution to the elements which constitute the being of the state. There is thus good ground for the claims to honour and office which are made by persons of good descent, free birth, or wealth" (bk. 3, chap. 12, 8). He rejects the assertion, which he labels "democratic," that the people who are equal in one thing should have an equal share of all things (bk. 3, chap. 13, 1).25

James may have come close to Aristotle's formulation in holding that while everyone can and should make a contribution to the country, those contributions are of different worth. He tried to avoid esteeming exclusively the working class or the elite. He favorably quoted Tolstoy's praise for those at the bottom of society—"If I could show you these men and women, all the world over, in every stage of history, under every abuse of error, under every circumstance of failure, without hope, without help, without thanks, still obscurely fighting the lost fight of virtue, still clinging to some rag of honour, the poor jewel of their souls!"—and responded:

All this is as true as it is splendid and terribly do we need our Tolstois and Stevensons to keep our sense for it alive.... [Yet] Tolstoi overcorrect[s] our social prejudices, when he makes his love of the peasant so exclusive, and hardens his heart towards the educated man as absolutely as he does.... Is it so certain that the surroundings and circumstances of the virtue do make so little difference in the importance of the result? Is the functional utility, the worth to the universe of a certain definite amount of courage, kindliness, and patience, no greater if the possessor of these virtues is in an educated situation, working out far-reaching tasks, than if he be an illiterate nobody, hewing wood and drawing water, just to keep himself alive? Tolstoi's philosophy, deeply enlightening though it certainly is, remains a false abstraction. It savors too much of that oriental pessimism and nihilism of his, which declares the whole phenomenal world and its facts and their distinctions to be a cunning fraud.26

One discerns in this approach to equality James's odd mixture of egalitarianism and patrician arrogance, radical critique of and respect for the status
quod James called for an appreciation of both the workers' and the non-workers' contributions. Intelligence, intellectual innovation, vigor, character, and occupation all are significant, James insisted. Yet great skill and courage in brain surgery or diplomacy are more praiseworthy than the same attributes in plumbing, essential as the latter might be. This is the point at which James broke with Tolstoy, who came to value the life and work of peasants while condemning every other type of life, including the novelist's. James's individualism led him to add that one's place, occupation, membership, dress, and wealth are not certain indicators of merit, which should be judged not solely on the type of contribution one makes but on the effort one expends to make it as well.  

The acceptance of inequality erodes the democratic temperament and replaces it with passivity. We have grown accustomed to hierarchies in everyday life: bosses, owners, boards of directors, and the wealthy give orders to the managers, workers, and secretaries who carry them out. All people are allowed to vote and receive a fair trial, which perpetuates the legitimating illusion of equal power despite the grinding reality of inequality. Marx articulated the essence of the situation: "The state abolishes, after its fashion, the distinctions established by birth, social rank, education, occupation, when it decrees that birth, social rank, education, occupation are non-political distinctions; when it proclaims, without regard to these distinctions, that every member of society is an equal partner in popular sovereignty."  

Despite freedom to criticize the state, you disagree with the boss at your peril, particularly if you lack tenure or a union contract. In a participatory democracy, legal equality, even as an ideal, is insufficient: the goal should be to equalize power both in politics and in everyday life. Such equalization is both a condition and a result of mutual respect. You would not attempt to give your fellow citizens power unless you had a generous attitude toward them. James did not appeal for the transformation of the United States into a radical democracy, but his commitment to mutual respect and participation is in the spirit of radical democracy. A political meaning of "respect" might be as follows: Even if I disagree with your views and work against their realization, I will try not to hate you. I will try to fathom your way of viewing the world and will think about what you say rather than punish you for speaking your ideas or ignore the fact that you have spoken.
A disrespectful teacher ignores or openly disdains the comments of students. The recommendation that every person should be heard runs counter to the idea that only a few people matter because of their education, wealth, color, or status. Philosopher Maurice Natanson expressed something like this, during an interview, in discussing his teacher Alfred Schutz:

I learned a lot about human existence from Schutz precisely in terms of what's at issue when you're dealing with another person. And at one point he told me, “Natanson, these are human beings.” You say, “Well, Professor So-and-So’s done this, and this person’s done that; there’s this quarrel and that difficulty.” But basically it isn't whether the paper was given the right grade, or whether you did the right thing, or the position you took was this, that or the other. It was basically that you’re dealing with persons, and that’s what I came to realize. 

Natanson's formulation implies, as does a theory of radical democracy, that people have intrinsic worth despite criticisms of them and regardless of their social roles.

In a democracy, each citizen is entrusted with some power to decide the direction of the polity, and therefore citizens are not nonentities and are more than possible converts or political targets; potentially, they are one's teachers. According to Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., while working for change we should try to sympathize with and even love our opponents. King preached, “The Christian virtues of love, mercy and forgiveness should stand at the center of our lives.” Love of one’s enemies “might well be the salvation of our civilization.” Even though respecting someone does not require liking them or admiring them, creating respect is still a political goal. Christopher Lasch disagrees:

We are determined to respect everyone, but we have forgotten that respect has to be earned. Respect is not another word for tolerance. . . . Respect is what we experience in the presence of admirable achievements, admirably formed characters, natural gifts put to good use. It entails the exercise of discriminating judgment, not indiscriminate acceptance.
I appreciate Lasch’s use of “respect” but cannot completely accept it because democracy is built on respect of a certain kind for everyone—even the unpleasant, the unlearned, the untalented, and the failed.

It is hard to define what kind of respect. One wants to avoid deprecating all those with whom one disagrees without pretending to “respect” every person and position no matter how wicked. In commenting on the manuscript version of this book, Carey McWilliams proposed that democratic respect may lie in holding everyone accountable to the appropriate standards. This idea seems plausible until one encounters a bizarre theory of respect in an prominent American public policy text, Mickey Kaus’s The End of Equality. Kaus believes “social equality” as a goal is superior to “monetary equality” because of the impossibility and negative effects of redistributing wealth, whereas social equality would guarantee that people are respected regardless of their income. He then details as appropriate standards for respect work, politeness, and the fulfillment of obligations; in other words, people who do not work are unworthy of respect. Kaus’s contempt is directed not at the idle rich or nonworking spouses in the middle and upper classes, but at the “threatening” black underclass, which he presumes would vanish in a good society. One could say that Kaus does not fairly apply his own standards or the right standards of respect, but what are the right standards for writing off people as citizens and human beings?

Christian theologians have wrestled with the same dilemma: at their worst, they have condemned to hell atheists, non-Christians, and non-church members; at their most generous, they have offered forgiveness and love to every human being no matter how low one has fallen in society or how vile one’s crimes. Perhaps that latter religious goal is politically impossible because societies require common ideals, laws, and limits on membership. “If you do such and such, God may forgive you, but we cannot.”

Nevertheless, countries that would be democracies must promote respect even for political opponents. This attitude, in which respect permits peaceful disagreement, is illustrated by the speech of Nelson Mandela upon winning election as the first president of postapartheid South Africa.

I would . . . like to congratulate President de Klerk for the strong showing the National Party has displayed in this election. I also want to congratulate him for the many days, weeks and months and the four
years that we have worked together, quarreled, addressed sensitive problems and at the end of our heated exchanges were able to shake hands and to drink coffee. . . . The calm and tolerant atmosphere that prevailed during the election depicts the type of South Africa we can build. . . . We might have our differences, but we are one people with a common destiny in our rich variety of culture, race and tradition.36

Mutual respect can be furthered by attempting to imagine the viewpoint of opposition groups and individuals. What is their history and present situation? Under what pressures do they labor? How do they interpret the controversy? Realizing that no group is monolithic, what are the lines of disagreement within that group? It may be easy in a pejorative sense to identify others’ contradictions—“If they believe in peace, why do they stir up trouble?” “They oppose abortion because it destroys life but they support the National Rifle Association and the death penalty”—but it is more difficult to give a generous account of an adversary’s position. What are the strongest, most appealing arguments to be made for the other side?37

The effort to comprehend is not identical to respect and toleration. Some people should be understood—neo-Nazis or members of the Ku Klux Klan, for example—if only for self-protection, but they should be neither respected nor, depending on their actions, tolerated. Toleratation, when appropriate, is a minimal relationship toward others; respect is more substantial.38 In traditional liberalism, toleration implies letting others alone; you need not consider the views of your opponents, just allow them to be expressed. You can tolerate others while ignoring them.39 Tolerance is preferable to unjustified persecution, but respect goes further.

The difference between toleration and respect might be illustrated by imagining a college campus that for most of its history formally excluded women from the student body and restricted the number of blacks and Jews. The college might finally enroll those it once excluded or restricted yet never incorporate them into the dominant campus culture. On many campuses, virtually every public portrait is of white males, except for the occasional donor’s wife, who is also white. Many cafeterias serve no food influenced by the cooking of Asia, Africa, or South America, although students at the schools come from those places. Colleges have clubs for African Americans; international students; friends of gays, lesbians, bisexuals;
and women's groups as well as sites for Hillel and the Newman society, but
the dominant culture tends to remain straight, white, and male. There is
tolerance but not the mutual respect that would alter the character of the
community.

Political action with toleration but not respect is old-fashioned plural­
ism: each group struggles for power; some participants are broadened by
their participation, and some are affected by witnessing the activity; but
little interpenetration or learning takes place among different groups in
the society. Mutual respect does not demand admiration or affection; it
begins with tolerance, proceeds to recognition, and continues to knowl­
dge and transformation. James's contribution is not only to the expression
of that ideal but to an analysis of the impediments to creating and attain­
ing it.

III

At the root of what today would be called prejudice, racism, sexism, and
imperialism, James saw "blindness," by which he meant that the lives of
people different from us are rarely understood or appreciated. James at­
tempted to make contact with the ordinary and the commonplace without
being overly sentimental and realizing their limitations. The search for
what is common to common people, and making that into something
common to us all, is a crucial element of James's democratic thinking.\[40\]

I use the brief term labor-question to cover all sorts of anarchistic dis­
contents and socialistic projects, and the conservative resistances
which they provoke. So far as this conflict is unhealthy and regretta­
able—and I think it is so only to a limited extent—the unhealthiness
consists solely in the fact that one-half of our fellow-countrymen re­
main entirely blind to the internal significance of the lives of the other
half.\[41\]

If mutual respect is the ideal relationship for democratic citizens, "blind­
ness" is the great psychological obstacle to achieving it. When a group or
nation fails to see others' virtues or truths, it looks down on them, which
opens the door to violence and domination. Even though the rich and middle classes share the same society, they understand neither the plight nor the contributions of the working class and the poor—and the working class and poor misperceive the bourgeoisie.

James detected this blindness in himself and, in attempting to overcome it, confessed an inability to recognize the strengths of workers. In a related admission of obtuseness, he dramatized his reaction to the cleared land called a “cove” in the North Carolina mountains:

The impression of the coves on my mind was one of unmitigated squalor, but after a local resident informed him “we ain’t happy here unless we are getting one of these coves under cultivation” . . . [I] instantly felt that I had been losing the whole inward significance of the situation . . . In short, the clearing, which to me was a mere ugly picture on the retina, was to them a symbol redolent with moral memories and sang a very paean of duty, struggle, and success.42

James’s effort to grasp what was meaningful to the Carolinians foreshadowed James Agee’s attempt in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men to capture the inner experience of poor southern families during the Great Depression rather than portraying only their external squalor, as he had been sent to do.43

After designating incognizance as a major cause of social conflict and imperialism, James sought to pinpoint its causes, enumerating at least four: the origin of opinions in feelings; the tendency to transform differences into hierarchies; the emphasis on monetary success that obscures the worth of other goals; and the belief that our own views, ideals, and ways of life rest on an objective foundation.44 I discuss the last, the relationship of truth and action, in Chapter 4. As to the first, our opinions do not flow from a rational examination of the alternatives. Instead, philosophical, religious, and political standpoints originate in personalities and feelings.45 Reason therefore cannot be of paramount importance in overcoming blindness; hearing “reasonable” arguments against one’s position will rarely produce a change. Then too, our feelings are restricted in their objects: we feel most intensely our own pain and pleasure and only empathize with those around us. The misery of having a broken leg is much worse than the reaction to hearing a report, even from a friend, of the agony of
a broken leg. Generally, we care most about our own body, family, neighborhood, city or region, college or club, religion, country. The further you get from the self, the more difficult it is to sympathize. The loyalties of others for their friends, pets, schools, fraternities or sororities, and causes are often perplexing.

"Ancestral" prejudice, which reifies differences among social groups, is a second cause of blindness. Although we may have once understood that human beings are essentially equal in their ability to contribute to the common good and in believing their lives to be significant or meaningful, we come to regard the people with money, status, family connections, style, or the "right" color of skin as being of a higher human order. James discovered prejudices in himself and admitted that they were directed particularly against workers and poor southerners. He finally became aware that the heroism he feared to be passing out of American life is to be found in the lives of the working class—and that he had been unable to see that fact because "I had been steeping myself in pure ancestral blindness."

Concerning the third cause, wealth, too, creates blindness. James posited the existence of psychological connections among blindness, capitalism, and imperialism. The contempt for other cultures produced by capitalism sanctions interference. James did not quite condemn the pursuit of material success as immoral but in a Thoreauvian vein, maintained that it conceals the worth of other goals and experiences. Powerfully focusing the energy of many Americans and organizing their activities and time, seeking wealth is seen as a form of nirvana—and replaces all other goals.

So blind and dead does the clamor of our own practical interests make us to all other things, that it seems almost as if it were necessary to become worthless as a practical being, if one is to hope to attain to any breadth of insight into the impersonal world of worths as such, to have any perception of life's meaning on a large objective scale. Only your mystic, your dreamer, or your insolvent tramp or loafer, can afford so sympathetic an occupation which will change the usual standards of human values in the twinkling of an eye, giving to foolishness a place ahead of power, and laying low in a minute the distinctions which it takes a hard-working conventional man a lifetime to build up. You may be a prophet at this rate; but you cannot be a worldly success.
When almost all citizens are materialists, one must abandon society to appreciate ways of life organized around values other than money, success, and technological advancement.

We of the highly educated classes (so called) have most of us got far, far away from Nature. We are trained to seek the choice, the rare, the exquisite, exclusively, and to overlook the common. . . . The remedy under such conditions is to descend to a more profound and primitive level. . . . The savages and children of nature to whom we deem ourselves so much superior, certainly are alive where we are often dead . . . and could they write as glibly as we do, they would read us impressive lectures on our impatience for improvement and on our blindness to the fundamental static goods of life.52

James may have been substituting positive stereotypes of the “primitive” for negative ones; nevertheless, the purpose of promoting empathy with “primitives,” and insinuating that “savages” have an access to truth denied to the elite of Western civilization, is to undermine the proposition used to justify American imperialism that “advanced” societies should guide or control “primitive” ones.

In short, blindness toward other cultures is produced by the conviction that opinions have objective foundations, the parochial nature of feelings, the tendency to turn superficial differences into hierarchies, and the drive for material wealth. As a result, common action becomes impossible, and the divisions within a society that should be mediated or resolved politically become fierce. The questions then arise, What should be the grounding for mutual respect? What kind of society would induce people to overcome their blindness, seek commonality with their fellow citizens, and tolerate the citizens of other countries?

James’s proposals for overcoming blindness are implied in his analysis of its origins. In order to appreciate others’ lives and values we must become less materialistic, and in political struggles we must abandon the stance that our side has a monopoly on truth.53 Above all, we should acknowledge the formidable barriers to developing compassion for others, especially those much different than ourselves. It is too easy for the poor and working classes to see only the selfishness and softness of the bourgeoisie,
and all too likely that the American Brahmins will find nothing to admire in workers and poor people. Gazing from a train at workmen building a bridge, James had a democratic vision:

As I awoke to all this unidealized heroic life around me, the scales seemed to fall from my eyes; and a wave of sympathy greater than anything I have ever before felt with the common life of common men began to fill my soul. . . . In God’s eyes the differences of social position, of intellect, of culture, of cleanliness, of dress, which different men exhibit, and all the other rarities and exceptions on which they so fantastically pin their pride, must be so small as practically quite to vanish. . . . [Each person has difficulties to overcome.] The exercise of courage, patience, and kindness, must be the significant portion of the whole business. . . . [Whenever we think that distinctions mean too much] some new leveller in the shape of a religious prophet has to arise—the Buddha, the Christ . . . some Rousseau or Tolstoi—to redispel our blindness. Yet, little by little, there comes some stable gain; for the world does get more humane, and the religion of democracy tends toward permanent increase.\(^5^4\)

James himself attempted to be a democratic prophet and dispel the blindness that contributed to violence at home and imperialism abroad.

He argued in his essay “A Certain Blindness” that the people who care about something see its true value, and in making a judgment about it, the indifferent ones should defer to those who care.

The spectator’s judgment is sure to miss the root of the matter and to possess no truth. The subject judged knows a part of the world of reality which the judging spectator fails to see, knows more whilst the spectator knows less; and wherever there is a conflict of opinion and difference of vision, we are bound to believe that the truer side is the side that feels the more and not the side that feels the less.\(^5^5\)

The one with experience and care knows more. To explain this point, James employed an analogy from personal life, writing that a particular person may appear drab to everyone else, but to the one in love with them their strengths are revealed.\(^5^6\)
Surely poor Jill's palpitating little life-throbs are among the wonders of creation, are worthy of this sympathetic interest; and it is to our shame that the rest of us cannot feel like Jack. For Jack realizes Jill concretely, and we do not. [Jill responds to being known, however imperfectly, by seeing the best in Jack.] May the ancient blindness never wrap its clouds about either of them. . . . We ought, all of us, to realize each other in this intense, pathetic, and important way. . . . The vice of the ordinary Jack and Jill affection is not its intensity, but its exclusions and its jealousies. Leave those out, and you see that the ideal I am holding up before you, however impracticable to-day, yet contains nothing intrinsically absurd. 57

James was not proposing that romantic love should become the model for political relationships—it is impossible to care intensely about everyone—but that we should recognize the psychological barriers to appreciating other people fully. 58 Admitting how difficult it is to value outlooks and ways of life different from our own might take some steam out of conflict. For James, mutual respect results from egalitarianism, rejection of materialism, obedience to the law, and self-doubt. Turning from James's framework, there are alternative paths toward mutual respect.

IV

The topic of tolerance has become a major preoccupation of political theorists under such headings as "democracy and diversity," "multiculturalism," and "postmodernism and fundamentalism." Political theorists are doing their job by scrutinizing this critical issue in an era characterized by a breakdown of shared viewpoints and a rise of absolutist and fundamentalist movements. Questions of unity and disorder have been critical issues in the United States since the Puritans, and these issues became acute during the constitutional era and at the time of the Civil War. James's theory of mutual respect is in a tradition of which Abraham Lincoln was an important founder and in which sociologist Mary Parker Follett and political theorist John Schaar have been significant practitioners. Like them, William Connolly, a contemporary theorist deeply engaged with
postmodernism, wants to create a democratic society in which citizens are sufficiently unified to act politically without suppressing local and individual differences. Connolly is, however, critical of the communitarian elements of radical democracy.

Connolly dispenses with state and national principles as a source of unity and draws on Nietzsche and Foucault in developing a position that is in some respects similar to that of James. They both see abandoning the claim to possess absolute truth as an important way to diminish antagonisms, and like James, Connolly designates such claims as a major source of domestic and international intolerance. The formation of a personal or national identity is inevitable, but inherently dangerous; to adopt an identity requires labeling those unlike oneself as “others.” To illustrate Connolly’s argument, I offer the following examples: Jews need the goyim (non-Jews) to help demarcate Judaism; Jews are the ones who do not drink milk with meat and do not work on the Sabbath. An expositor of Jewish customs explains:

It should . . . be noted that Jewish conduct has always been greatly influenced by the practices of the outside world, particularly the Gentile world. For example, the Talmud . . . suggests that Jews in mourning not wear black shoes because this was a distinctly Gentile practice. What prompted Jews to require the wearing of a headcovering at religious services was an aversion to the Christian practice of keeping heads uncovered during worship.

An important part of both black and white self-definition is knowing that each is not the other. The majority culture typically needs the minority in order to feel the simultaneous movements of connection among themselves and exclusion of outsiders. Differences easily slide into hostility. “I have become a highly disciplined student, unlike those lazy good-for-nothings who sit in the back of the class.” And one still hears statements like, “As an American, I am a citizen of the greatest country on earth; foreigners lack American freedom, democracy, wealth, and opportunity.” Such proclamations justifiably annoy citizens of other countries who trust in their own country’s virtues.

Because defining oneself against those who are different is an inherent part of identity formation, simply preaching tolerance as James did will
have little effect. According to Connolly, efforts to create a unified community, nation, or international order will strengthen a hegemonic identity that suppresses resistant elements, classifying them as deviant. Instead of unity, Connolly advocates, in a Jamesian spirit, learning to value ambiguity, difference, and conflict in an “adversarial” democracy. The usual relationships among those who disagree are “conquest, conversion, community, or tolerance,” but Connolly imagines a more dynamic possibility:

Sometimes one shows respect for another by confronting him with alternative interpretations of himself, sometimes by just letting him be, sometimes by pursuing latent possibilities of commonality, sometimes by respecting her as the indispensable adversary whose contending identity gives definition to contingencies in one’s own way of being.\(^\text{63}\)

Connolly puts his ideal another way: to negotiate differences with others is “to convert an antagonism of identity into an agonism of difference in which each opposes the other (and the other’s presumptive doctrines) while respecting the adversary at another level as one whose contingent orientations also rest on shaky epistemic grounds.”\(^\text{64}\) In other words, instead of fearing difference as if it were a disease and trying to cure it, antagonists should learn to welcome and even enjoy it. The premises of “agonistic” respect are twofold: first, one does not presume that one’s position is grounded in absolute truth, and second, one acknowledges the necessity of opposition in creating identity and therefore is grateful to one’s opponents for one’s individuality.

Even after conceding that contestation over identity is an inherent element of political struggle, it is difficult to imagine political relationships forged by gratitude for alternative interpretations of oneself.\(^\text{65}\) As president, Richard Nixon pictured himself as the country’s protector from enemies foreign and domestic, but Senators Sam Ervin and George McGovern and thousands of antiwar protestors presented Nixon with a much different description of his identity, for which he never seemed particularly thankful. Civil rights activists give white supremacists and liberals accounts of their actions other than the ones they give themselves: segregationists are racists, not upholders of democratic localism; moderates and gradualists are identified as part of the problem. When Vietnam War protesters, who felt like patriots and highly moral friends-of-humanity, were called Commu-
nist dupes and traitors, they found such accusations surprising and painful. Connolly warns that discovering ambiguities in oneself is in itself insufficient grounds for generous action, because sometimes awareness of those ambiguities creates a discomfort and an anxiety that lead to violence. For example, the homophobe who discovers he is attracted to other men might strike out against gays.66

In what sense is a conflict of identities generous or amicable? When the foe of abortion accuses a woman who is terminating her pregnancy of being a “murderer,” that is an adversarial but not a respectful interpretation of the woman’s identity. Connolly might counter that the very process of rebutting an adversary’s mislabeling is part of the identity formation for which one should be grateful. He illuminates a little-noticed element of political psychology, but his appealing suggestion to base generous relationships on gratitude for identity definition seems impossible to realize.

Like Connolly, John Schaar rejects some forms of unity as abstract, artificial, and dangerous. Schaar’s enemy is nationalism, yet he endorses the national covenant as formulated by Lincoln as the best framework for mutual respect, community, and democratic participation. In Schaar’s vision,

Americans, a motley gathering of various races and cultures, were bonded together not by blood or religion, not by tradition or territory, not by the walls and traditions of a city, but by a political idea. We are a nation formed by a covenant, by dedication to a set of principles and by an exchange of promises to uphold and advance certain commitments among ourselves and throughout the world. Those principles and commitments are the core of American identity, the soul of the body politic.67

Lincoln and Schaar both designate the Declaration of Independence as the source of common principles, and, again paraphrasing Lincoln, Schaar exhorts his fellow citizens to

see as the chief task of political life the task of political education: inculcate respect for valid laws as a “political religion”; retell on every possible occasion the story of the struggle; teach tirelessly the principles of the founding. The only guardian of the compact is an informed citi-
Schaar softens Lincoln a little, implying that only "valid" laws should be respected. When he recommends that the founding principles should be "taught tirelessly," he means "considered both appreciatively and critically." Although he repudiates nationalism, a national covenant necessarily excludes the people who do not subscribe to its principles. What is the membership status of those not committed to individual rights, independence, and equality of opportunity? Presumably political theorists, whose work it is to examine reigning values, would find it difficult to remain loyal members of a society if they did not subscribe to its covenant.

As Schaar explains, Lincoln sought unity among the multiple cultures and creeds of the citizens of the United States by asking for their commitment to national principles and obedience to the laws. If disagreements erupt into violent conflicts, both the "lawless in spirit" and their victims will disrespect the government. To safeguard against revolution, Lincoln entreated:

Let every American, every lover of liberty . . . swear by the blood of the Revolution, never to violate in the least particular, the laws of the country; and never to tolerate their violation by others. . . . Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap—let it be taught in schools, in seminaries; and in colleges;—let it be written in Primmers, spelling books, and in Almanacs;—let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in the legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation; and let the old and young, the rich and poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars.

Lincoln's covenant is problematic because first, like Schaar's, it seeks to establish a national identity; second, unlike Schaar's, it prohibits civil disobedience; and third, the strong state that will promulgate laws and promote their acceptance may spread passivity among the citizens. Schaar embraces Lincoln's formula because it overcomes "parochialisms of race
and religion, and... severs patriotic devotion from the cult of national power.” This interpretation may be wishful thinking: it could be argued that Lincoln helped create the cult of centralized power by giving, partly through the concept of a national covenant, a religious fervor to American nationalism and by serving as its highly attractive symbol. Could unity be nurtured among diverse and participatory American communities without inculcating national principles; might it emerge instead from a cross-cultural dialogue, a dialogue established on the critical study of one’s community, other communities, and national history and political ideas?

One traditional path to mutual respect was explicitly rejected by the Federalists and revived by Tocqueville, Follett, and Arendt: political participation in community. Whereas the Federalists linked action with contentiousness, a more democratic tradition has viewed participation as the simultaneous creation of a common life and the self-conscious appreciation of it. The initial motivation for becoming involved might be self-interest—people want their road repaired or their group to get a tax break—but through sustained interaction with their opponents they may come to appreciate them more and even value the democratic process itself. For this transformation to occur, the political contact must be face-to-face. Genuine dialogue creates common ground in what Follett called a “subtle process of the intermingling of all the different ideas of the group.” We come to see our connection with one another by putting forward our own ideas and being open to those of others. “Unity, not uniformity, must be our aim,” she counseled. “We attain unity only through variety. Differences must be integrated, not annihilated, nor absorbed.”

To summarize the different viewpoints of a statesman, a philosopher, a sociologist of the early twentieth century, and of a late-twentieth-century political theorist, all want to preserve popular action, unity, and diversity and affirm love for one’s own country and respect for other countries. Lincoln and James asserted that the institutions created by the Constitution are necessary to attain that balance; both advocated reverence for the laws as a central element in unity. Another approach to mutual respect, enunciated by Lincoln and Schaar, is founded on the incultation of a national covenant and a common set of values contained in the Declaration of Independence. This covenant would be imparted through public exhortation or, less coercively, in Schaar’s version, through the critical study of national history and political thought combined with an exami-
nation of other cultures, local and international. Connolly offers a different path to amiable relations among democratic citizens; he wishes they would result from a recognition that people unlike ourselves shape our identities. Finally, James, Follett, and Schaar thought of political participation as creating a foundation for mutual respect, and each of these theorists offers insight into the causes of cultural discord and the directions for overcoming it. A mixture of face-to-face political participation; humility about one’s own righteousness combined with hesitance to condemn others; and the study of national, international, and local cultures seem to be three appealing, noncoercive paths toward mutual respect.

I anticipate objections. Some readers will label James a “relativist” who might aid and abet such groups as Nazis, either by sanctioning their dogmas as being equal to anyone else’s or by fostering appeasement. This charge would reveal a complete misinterpretation of James’s position. He may have been generous in surmising that most people grasp part of the truth, but he was no fanatic. He recognized the existence of evil and thought that it should be combated, but he cautioned that sometimes we demonize those who disagree with us.

The Enlightenment promised that reason could unearth a truth that would be clear to all rational people, but James argued that reason offers no sure path to truth. Reason cannot disclose universal, unquestionable principles of right. Most people choose causes congruent with their personalities, so at best, reason may help us establish consistent principles and judge the consequences of our actions. Most of us act on faith mediated by some thinking and a modicum of evidence. Although we might not be able to prove it to an resolute opponent, we know that we are right about who should win an election or what to do about poverty, the death penalty, or nuclear testing. Our opponents are either deluded or people of bad intentions, yet they are as adamant as we are. A feeling of certainty cannot be the measure of truth.

James never denied the existence of truth and falsehood; the problem is that you can never be sure that you know the truth so you take a risk
when you act according to your convictions. Like Hegel's owl of Minerva, which flies only at dusk, we are not sure until long afterward whether we did the right thing. Coming close to Socrates' notion of a "knowledge of ignorance" in "The Apology," James implied that we have some inkling of the truth, so that even if we lack certainty, we are not completely in the dark.

In addition, James stipulated that only "harmless" pleasures, a difficult term to define, should be tolerated. When genuine harm is done, intervention may be necessary. Mutual respect does imply the end of judgments about other cultures. When we perceive injury occurring in other countries, for example, in Haiti or Bosnia, any action we may need to take should be rooted in knowledge of that culture, including the existing diversity of positions. We also need to remain aware, however, of our tendency to blindness.

James's theory of blindness and respect can also be criticized for being politically naive. He concentrated so much on the psychology of intolerance that he neglected institutions, power, ideology, and interests as causes of hostility. For example, Marxists have contended that racism is not innate but has been fomented to divide working and poor people and to justify imperialism. Class interest, not psychology, is at the heart of social conflict, and James neglected the intuition of Rousseau in *The Social Contract* that a society cannot find commonality unless there is at least an approximate equality of wealth. Without equality, conflicting groups will not see themselves as members of one society, and self-interest will then fuel hatred and make respect impossible.

Psychology is not more fundamental than power and interest in causing social conflict, but James illuminated the psychological dimension of conflict. To the assertion that the crucial problem to be addressed is not intolerance but injustice, James might have replied that he did not profess that pragmatism would create justice or end social strife but he did anticipate that a widespread adoption of the pragmatic outlook would reduce hatred so that conflicts could be resolved more peacefully. It may be that social harmony is impossible without the creation of just institutions and practices; such a hypothesis requires that a standard of justice be agreed upon and that a society would willingly be shaped according to it. How can that standard be determined? Whose interpretation of justice would be given institutional form? James clarified why such questions are difficult
to resolve from the psychological standpoint and delineated the spirit needed to achieve their resolution. He may have added little to the analysis of the institutional dimension of the problem, but he contributed to the comprehension of the psychology of conflict and mutual respect.

The materialist critique of James cannot be easily dismissed and raises the broader issue of the practical effects of normative political theory. Theorists can argue for respect, direct democracy, or ideal speech communication, but who is listening? Theorists may suspect that in putting forth their alternative visions they are only giving solace to themselves and a few sympathetic readers. The people who need to hear the argument for respect will not listen to it—if the Bosnian Serbs had read either James or a critique of nationalism such as Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, would they have stopped the killing?

Can the rhetoric of toleration, coming from academic, political, or religious sources, appeal to a large audience? It can sound clichéd or utopian and perhaps will reach only the people who subscribe to it already. The language of hatred, on the other hand—the language of Louis Farrakhan or Ariel Sharon—always sounds tough-minded; it may be appalling, but it wins new followers. Is the discourse of equality and respect—from Jesus to Tolstoy, Locke to Mill, Gandhi to King—all superstructure, or has it had an influence in restraining violence and hatred? Evidence could be mustered that nonviolent, democratic visions have had an effect as they have helped lead the way to the civil rights and feminist movements.

A second dimension of the question concerning the power of political visions is more specific to academic political theory. Although every theorist dreams of advising fellow citizens and even readers abroad, the reality is that comparatively few people read scholarly books and any one teacher reaches only a handful of citizens in college classrooms. On the other hand, a lot of people go to school, and from universities to grammar schools, American education has been altered by challenges to the Western canon, new attention to anthropology, non-Western history, women’s history, gay and lesbian studies, radical democratic thought, feminist and postmodern philosophies. These educational innovations can be seen as a democratic “correction” of the sort that James attributed to Christ, Rousseau, and Tolstoy.

Recent movements for civil rights, feminism, radical democracy, and equal rights for gays and for the handicapped might be seen as democratic
efforts to overcome an "ancestral blindness" that prevent us from recognizing the contributions of previously disrespected groups. Yet I recognize that we seem to be entering a period of a sweeping reaction against equality, and James’s faith that "little by little, there comes some stable gain; for the world does get more humane, and the religion of democracy tends toward permanent increase" appears to be more solace than an accurate prediction of the near future. The anti-equality movements also have their theorists opposing affirmative action and equal rights for gays and lesbians, and some of those theorists are fundamentalists who reject democratic debate as moral weakness. One hopes that both sides adopt a tincture of Jamesian mutual respect so that the struggle can proceed nonviolently.