

INTRODUCTION

THE SOLIDARITY of an aggrieved people can be a dangerous thing. No lesson from recent history could be more evident. Any nation united mainly by memories of injustices done to it is likely to behave unjustly in its own defense and to elicit similar responses from its neighbors and enemies. A cycle of self-righteous violence will then ensue. Fear and resentment will escalate all around, placing innocents at home and abroad in further jeopardy. America's newfound solidarity in the age of terrorism therefore warrants suspicion. Many around the world nervously await our next massive use of military power, understandably afraid that we have ceased to be guided by democratic ideals and moral constraints. Solidarity we will surely need in the struggles ahead. But on what basis shall we secure it? We had better have something in common besides resentful fear of our enemies. Yet we have, until recently, been preoccupied with our ethnic, racial, and religious differences. We are not used to discussing what, if anything, links us together.

It is perhaps no accident, under such circumstances, that religious conceptions of national identity immediately come to the fore. Politicians assemble to sing "God Bless America" on the steps of the Capitol or to assure that children acknowledge membership in "one nation under God" at the start of every school day. A prominent Jewish senator declares America an essentially religious nation. Judging from his past pronouncements, he means a Judeo-Christian nation. Others intend something quite a bit narrower or a little broader when they utter the same words. Many Jews and Christians find the civil religion of our day incoherent and alienating—a travesty of true faith. As a student of these traditions, I am inclined to agree. But there is also something self-deceptive, and implicitly threatening, in the appeals to religion as a source of civic unity. Vague references to God from the crepe-lined podium cannot finally disguise the vast array of theistic and nontheistic religions Americans embrace. Need I add that dissenters, free thinkers, atheists, and agnostics are citizens, too?

Some critics charge that the moral and spiritual core of our society is empty. They frequently add that the ethical substance of the predecessor culture has been drained off by liberal secularism. To view the picture in high contrast, consider the Amish, a group that nobody would characterize as either fragmented or secular. It is easy to see both what marks this group as a community and what tradition its members can take for granted when discussing their ethical differences with one another. Any such group is bound together closely by sacred stories, dogmas, and rituals transmitted

across generations. Members of such a tradition are united in their beliefs about the world and their codes of conduct, their tables of virtues and vices, their pieties and their aspirations.

In contrast, modern democratic societies appear to lack any such unifying framework. In the eyes of many observers they seem to be inherently at odds with the substantive, comprehensive visions of the religious traditions. The perception of modern democratic societies as morally and spiritually empty is hardly confined to the Amish and similarly isolated sects. It is the common link among the various types of antimodern traditionalism that have appeared in countless times and places throughout the modern era. Edmund Burke, Pope Pius IX, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, René Guénon, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and many others have voiced the same complaint. Since 1980, that complaint has made new gains among religious intellectuals in America, primarily under the influence of Stanley Hauerwas, a Methodist theologian, Alasdair MacIntyre, a Roman Catholic philosopher, and John Milbank, an Anglican theologian. I will call the movement they represent the “new traditionalism.” The challenge this movement poses to democratic society is a central topic in what follows.

Liberal philosophers have often reinforced the traditionalist critique of modern democracy in two ways. First, they have endorsed a theory of the modern nation-state as ideally neutral with respect to comprehensive conceptions of the good. Second, they have proposed to establish political deliberation on a common basis of free public reason, independent of reliance on tradition. Not all liberal philosophers have committed themselves to these doctrines, but traditionalists have been quick to take them as definitive of modern democracy—and then to denounce modern democratic societies as embodiments of doctrinal error and secularism. There is no need for me to mount a detailed argument against these liberal ideas here, for other writers have already done the job admirably.¹ My own purpose is more positive. I want to make an affirmative case for seeing modern democracy differently. In the process of making it, I will not, however, be drawing mainly on liberal political philosophy from John Locke to John Rawls. My topic, stated in Rawlsian terms, is the role of free public reason in a political culture that includes conflicting religious conceptions of the good. But I am not trying to construct a theory of the social contract, so I cannot mean by “public reason” what Rawls does. And the object of the “overlapping consensus” I will identify in democratic culture is not what Rawls calls a “free-standing” political conception of justice.² We are committed to the legitimacy of constitutional democracy under circumstances like ours and to reasoning with one another about political questions in a way that perfects and honors our democratic norms. You can tell we have these commitments because of how we behave. If we were not committed to the legitimacy of constitutional democracy, we would invest much more energy than

INTRODUCTION

3

we currently do in attempts to alter our basic arrangements. If we were not committed to continuing a discussion that perfects and honors our democratic norms, we would happily accept more restrictive and exclusionary ways of conducting political deliberation.

Yet while our norms have substantive content, we often argue over how to articulate them and what they imply. They clearly commit us to ideals of equal voice and equal consideration for all citizens, to take two examples of normative commitments that distinguish us from our unapologetically hierarchical ancestors. But how to state and apply these ideals has been in dispute since the founding of the republic. It is unlikely that we are going to reach a stable consensus on their philosophical interpretation. The sort of overlapping consensus we are searching for in public discussion is focused on particular policy questions, not on abstract conceptions of justice. Such conceptions have a role to play within the overall discussion, but they tend to be much too controversial and speculative to become the object of our consensus.

Democracy, I shall argue, *is* a tradition. It inculcates certain habits of reasoning, certain attitudes toward deference and authority in political discussion, and love for certain goods and virtues, as well as a disposition to respond to certain types of actions, events, or persons with admiration, pity, or horror. This tradition is anything but empty. Its ethical substance, however, is more a matter of enduring attitudes, concerns, dispositions, and patterns of conduct than it is a matter of agreement on a conception of justice in Rawls's sense. The notion of state neutrality and the reason-tradition dichotomy should not be seen as its defining marks. Rawlsian liberalism should not be seen as its official mouthpiece.

We claim in our official documents to be committed to substantive values. The Preamble of the United States Constitution clearly designates a list of goods that its institutional provisions are meant to serve. It takes the democratic union it formally constitutes to be something the people wish, for good reason, to make "more perfect." The people thereby express their aspiration to "establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity." Some skeptics say that the Preamble's reference to "the people" is a fiction, designed to disguise the embarrassing fact that the governed have never actually given their consent. But who among us does not hope to receive from government roughly what the Preamble promises? Agreement on the value of such goods and on the value of attempting to secure them in something like the Constitution's way would seem to be a more promising source of solidarity than resentment and fear. A constitutional democracy is in place. We consent to being governed by it insofar as we refrain as a people from pressing for alternatives to it.

Of course, nearly every nation makes grand democratic pronouncements nowadays. Empty rhetoric is hardly an adequate basis for political community. Commitment to democratic values, to be worth anything, must reside in the life of the people, in the way citizens behave. We obviously fall far short of the democratic ideals we espouse, on any reasonable interpretation of their substance. The ideal of equal voice, in particular, is hardly consistent with the dominant role that big money now plays in politics. Yet we continue to demand reasons from one another when deciding on institutional arrangements and political policies. We still make some attempt to hold our leaders responsible to the rest of us. We at least complain that fat cats and bigwigs have the influence they do; and we are pursuing remedies that have some hope of surviving judicial review. It is not on ceremonial occasions alone that we invoke our norms. We use them to call one another to account and in deciding what to do.

In the ancient world, democracy meant rule by a particular class, the commons. For us, its strictly political referent is a form of government in which the adult members of the society being governed all have some share in electing rulers and are free to speak their minds in a wide-ranging discussion that rulers are bound to take seriously.³ The public deliberation that is essential to this form of government is conducted at various levels. The most prominent of these is that of the people's elected representatives in a congress or parliament. As Oliver O'Donovan has pointed out, it is crucial that the people's representatives play a role in modern democracy distinct from that played in an earlier era by a monarch's council. A council was expected to advise the ruler on how to achieve his or her goals; its term of office could be terminated at the ruler's whim; its representative function was minimal. A congress or parliament, in contrast, serves at the people's pleasure, and is expected to deliberate "not on its own behalf but in response to a wider context of deliberation, open to all, to which it must be attending carefully."⁴ This reference to a wider context of deliberation provides the link between democracy in its strictly political form and democracy as a broadly cultural phenomenon in the modern world. By highlighting the significance of public deliberation, democratic political arrangements bring to light their symbiotic relationship to a surrounding culture in which the shared discursive practices of the people are of primary importance.

By engaging in these practices we participate in a common life, a life that both needs to be made "more perfect" and needs to be defended against those who attack it for being morally vacuous or evil. This book concerns a tradition of democratic reasoning, dispositions, and attitudes that the people have in common. My primary aim is to make plain what this adhesive element in our sociality involves. My conception of the civic nation is pragmatic in the sense that it focuses on *activities* held in common as constitutive

INTRODUCTION

5

of the political community. But the activities in question are not to be understood in merely procedural terms. They are activities in which normative commitments are embedded as well as discussed. The commitments are substantive. They guide the discussion, but they are also constantly in dispute, subject to revision, and not fully determinate. They are initially implicit in our reasoning, rather than fully explicit in the form of philosophically articulated propositions. So we must be careful not to reduce them to a determinate system of rules or principles. Because they evolve, we need the historical category of “tradition” to bring them into focus.

In commending this pragmatic conception of democratic sociality, this book addresses readers in their capacity as citizens. It seeks a public, as opposed to a narrowly professional, audience. This is not so much a matter of the size of the audience I expect to reach, a topic on which it is pointless to speculate, as it is a matter of the point of view I am inviting my readers to adopt while reading. The point of view of a citizen is that of someone who accepts some measure of responsibility for the condition of society and, in particular, for the political arrangements it makes for itself. To adopt this point of view is to participate in the living moral tradition of one’s people, understood as a civic nation. It is the task of public philosophy, as I understand it, to articulate the ethical inheritance *of* the people *for* the people while subjecting it to critical scrutiny. In inviting readers to adopt the point of view of a citizen, I am also inviting citizens to reflect philosophically on their common life. This is a demanding activity, as is all true philosophizing. It has almost nothing in common with “popular philosophy,” a genre that tries to make philosophy accessible by leaving out the arguments—that is, the philosophy.

The people I am addressing, the people whose ethical inheritance I hope to comprehend and assess, are my fellow Americans. Much of what I have to say would apply equally well, however, to other societies animated to some significant extent by democratic attitudes and appeal to democratic norms. When I speak of democratic societies, I do not mean groups that fully live up to such norms, for in that sense there are no democratic societies. But I do mean groups whose members invoke such norms habitually when holding one another responsible for what they say and do and are.

What norms in particular? For example, those expressed in the Bill of Rights, like the freedom to speak one’s mind in public, the guarantee of due process, and the prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment. But also norms agreed on only more recently, such as those implicit in the Emancipation Proclamation and the Nineteenth Amendment, in Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address and Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” And also norms still in the process of being hammered out by people who sense that democracy has unrealized implications for families, churches, corporations, and other forms of association.

The continuing social process of holding one another responsible is chiefly what I have in mind when I refer to the ethical life or inheritance of a people. Central to democratic thought as I understand it is the idea of a body of citizens who reason with one another about the ethical issues that divide them, especially when deliberating on the justice or decency of political arrangements. It follows that one thing a democratic people had better have in common is a form of ethical discourse, a way of exchanging reasons about ethical and political topics. The democratic practice of giving and asking for ethical reasons, I argue, is where the life of democracy principally resides. Democracy isn't all talk. Now and then there is also a lot of marching involved, for example. But there is no form of ethical life that generates more talk on the part of more people than does modern democracy. It is in democratic discourse that the claims and reasons of marching protestors get expressed. Protestors rarely just march. They also carry signs that say something. They chant slogans that mean something. They sing songs that convey a message. And they march to or from a place where speeches are given.

The political vision expressed in this book can be summed up in two thoughts from the writings of John Dewey. The first is his twist on a familiar slogan:

The old saying that the cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy is not apt if it means that the evils may be remedied by introducing more machinery of the same kind as that which already exists, or by refining and perfecting that machinery. But the phrase may also indicate the need of returning to the idea itself, of clarifying and deepening our apprehension of it, and of employing our sense of its meaning to criticize and remake its political manifestations.

Dewey continues by saying that the “prime difficulty . . . is that of discovering the means by which a scattered, mobile and manifold public may so recognize itself as to define and express its interests. This discovery is necessarily precedent to any fundamental change in the machinery.”⁵ The other thought is that democracy is a “social idea” as well as a system of government. “The idea remains barren save as it is incarnated in human relationships.”⁶ As feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp has put the point, “democracy is never just a set of laws about equal and fair treatment. Rather it is an ongoing interpretation of itself, an ongoing production of new practices and narratives, of new values and forms of social and personal life that constitute a democracy.”⁷ By combining these thoughts Dewey hoped to encourage both active identification with democratic practices and an ambitious but realistic program for their improvement. “Only when we start from a community as a fact, grasp the fact in thought so as to clarify and enhance its constituent elements, can we reach an idea of democracy which is not utopian.”⁸

INTRODUCTION

7

Our fellow citizens are going to go on disagreeing with one another about how to rank highly important values no matter what we do. And none of us knows how to bring racial antagonism, poverty, misogyny, and mistrust to an end. We had better work hard, nonetheless, to keep the democratic exchange of reasons going, for that is the best way we have of holding one another responsible. While we should try in various specific ways to raise the quality of our common discourse, we would be foolish to expect it to produce convergence on common conclusions at each point where we now disagree. We should also recognize, however, how disastrous it would be—in an era of global capitalism, corporate corruption, identity politics, religious resentment against secular society, and theocratic terrorism—if most citizens stopped identifying with the people as a whole and gave up on our democratic practices of accountability altogether.

The ethical inheritance of American democracy consists, first of all, in a way of thinking and talking about ethical topics that is implicit in the behavior of ordinary people. Secondly, it also consists in the activity of intellectuals who attempt to make sense of that way of thinking and talking from a reflective, critical point of view. Either of these things, when considered in the dimension of history, may plausibly be termed a “tradition.” I believe there is enough continuity between the projects of Dewey and those of various other public intellectuals I admire to warrant speaking of a tradition of democratic thought, but I have to admit that this continuity has sometimes been hard to discern. One set of reasons for this has to do with dubious assumptions about what traditions are, assumptions I will address directly in this work. But another set of reasons has to do with the rhetorical habits of democratic thinkers themselves. Any tradition born in suspicion of deference, and which honors as a cardinal virtue in a thinker what William Hazlitt called mastery of one’s own mind and Emerson called self-reliance, may be fated to have a shaky grasp on its own history.

Think of the Zen master who, at the very moment when his pupil is virtually overwhelmed by feelings of piety toward him, insists on being slapped in the face. Acknowledging one’s dependence on an exemplar-guide whose help has been a necessary condition of spiritual growth, while also being able to achieve the independence of mind that the exemplary thinker exemplifies, is a high and rare spiritual achievement. Most traditions settle for a more subservient, and therefore more obvious, form of piety in order to have piety at all. This heightens one’s sense of belonging to a tradition, but at the expense of a spirit of independence. Many of the great practitioners of democratic criticism have valued independence over the more deferential forms of piety. Their consciousness of their own tradition tends in consequence to be undeveloped. They are too busy slapping one another in the face to dwell for long on what they owe to whom. I am nonetheless persuaded that there are real paths of influence, commentary,

and allusion linking later writers to earlier ones within the tradition I have in mind. In any event, my aim at the moment is not to offer a scholarly exposition of a tradition's origins and development, but rather to acknowledge an affiliation, or a bias, that informs my work.

Dewey inherited much from predecessors like Emerson and Whitman. All three stood self-consciously within modernity. They were not appealing to the authority of a premodern tradition, and then imagining themselves to be messengers from a betrayed past. Nor were they identifying themselves with a postmodern future, gesturing vaguely beyond the horizon to something wholly other than the culture in which they lived. They acknowledged that they belonged to the age they were thinking about even in the moments when they found it most despicable and worrisome. They were determined to identify, and identify with, forces within the age that could be bent toward its betterment or made to sustain democratic hope. This critical activity cultivated the ground on which they stood and with which they selectively identified. They did not promise to adhere to the given loyalties or allegiances of a people, but they did actively identify normative sources within their own society that were worthy of their endorsement. Whitman and Dewey belong to the tradition of independent essaying that writers like Hazlitt and Emerson helped create in English-speaking countries. Later writers, like Meridel Le Sueur, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Bill Holm eventually found a niche in the same tradition. Many of the most important democratic thinkers have found their footing there. Few of them are philosophers.

My predicament is enough like those of the democratic writers I admire to make their precedents instructive. That is as far as I will go; my admiration stops well short of hero-worship. Like Emerson, I call attention to the lapses and limitations in all my favorite authors to keep my pieties within bounds.⁹ I claim only that there is moral and intellectual sustenance to be gained from such thinkers, along with much of interest to argue with and reject. Every generation needs to survey the prospects of democracy with its own eyes (and without cant about the past). Whitman exemplifies the expressive vocation of democratic thought most fully when he teaches the necessity of straying from him.

Whitman and Dewey aimed to give expression to the intimations of democracy in their own culture. Their task as intellectuals was to articulate the substance of democratic commitments in a way that would allow such commitments to be held self-consciously and self-critically. The point of doing so was in part to counter the image of democracy as an essentially destructive force with no ethical life or cultural substance of its own. Whitman was writing as a democrat when he posed “the important question of character” to the American people. He called for what amounted to a democratic theory of the virtues—a theory designed “not for a single class

INTRODUCTION

9

alone,” a theory compatible with “the perfect equality of women.” As I argue in part 1, the question of character is no less important today. Whitman was right to insist that democracy should pose that question to itself, but in its own terms. And Baldwin and Ellison were right to pose it again, a century later, when they spoke of the need to achieve or discover our country.

Our democratic aspirations coexist, however uneasily, with our hatred, cruelty, sloth, envy, greed, and indifference to the suffering of others. The emergence of new elites has combined with various forms of vice, bigotry, arrogance, deference, and fear to deform democratic practices in all societies we loosely label democratic. Justice, as democracy conceives of it, has always and everywhere been a virtue in short supply. But if this judgment applies to us, and not merely to societies that lack free elections and constitutionally protected rights, why continue to trust our fellow citizens and the leaders who represent them? And if one has no good reason to do this, why remain committed to membership in a democratic society at all? These questions arise nowadays in debates over racial injustice, over the separation of church and state, over the moral limits to be observed when defending the people from terrorist attacks, and in many other contexts.

American discussions of character have focused largely on three virtues, all of which are commonly interpreted in religious terms.¹⁰ The first of these, piety, looks toward the past. It concerns proper acknowledgment of the sources of our existence and progress through life. The second, hope, looks toward the future. It concerns our capacity for ethical and political striving when success appears uncertain or unlikely. The third, love or generosity, can be directed to past, future, and distant objects, but it mainly binds us to those with whom we share our time and place. It concerns our capacity to respond appropriately to our fellows, as no less worthy of being cared for and cared about than we are ourselves. The primary aim of part 1 is to take note of what a few influential American thinkers have said about these topics, thus reminding ourselves of a conversation in which we can see our commonalities as well as our differences in play. I give more attention to piety than to hope and generosity because that has generated more controversy throughout our history.

Part 2 takes up a conflict that has emerged over the last several decades between secularist and traditionalist interpretations of our political culture. Here, too, we must come to terms with the implications of deep religious differences among the people. It would be unrealistic to expect membership in religious groups to have no influence on democratic decision making and debate, for one function of religious traditions is to confer order on highly important values and concerns, some of which obviously have political relevance. Yet some prominent political theorists and philosophers are suspicious of individuals who use religious premises when arguing pub-

licly for a political proposal. They ground their suspicion in the notion that reasoning on important political questions must ultimately be based on principles that no reasonable citizen could reasonably reject. I find this notion extremely implausible as an account of what we could conceivably have in common, but here I am less concerned with proving it wrong than with developing an alternative understanding of public reasoning. All democratic citizens should feel free, in my view, to express whatever premises actually serve as reasons for their claims. The respect for others that civility requires is most fully displayed in the kind of exchange where each person's deepest commitments can be recognized for what they are and assessed accordingly. It is simply unrealistic to expect citizens to bracket such commitments when reasoning about fundamental political questions.

Religion is not essentially a conversation-stopper, as secular liberals often assume and Richard Rorty has argued explicitly. Neither, however, is religion the foundation without which democratic discourse is bound to collapse, as traditionalists suppose. The religious dimensions of our political culture are typically discussed at such a high level of abstraction that only two positions become visible: an authoritarian form of traditionalism and an antireligious form of liberalism. Each of these positions thrives mainly by inflating the other's importance. They use each other to lend plausibility to their fears and proposed remedies. Each of them needs a "force of darkness" to oppose if it is going to portray itself as the "force of light."

The result of such posturing is the Manichaean rhetoric of cultural warfare. The pundits would have us believe that we are all embroiled in an essentially two-sided conflict over the culture of democracy. Academics have done remarkably little to correct the resulting forms of paranoid fantasy. The debates, over issues like abortion and same-sex marriage, that do nowadays occasionally erupt into uncivil behavior are more accurately described as marginal skirmishes than as warfare, at least when viewed in historical or cross-cultural perspective. There is some danger, however, that a dualistic picture of our cultural situation, if accepted by enough people, will *become* true. To the extent that believers and nonbelievers accept the caricatures and exclusive choices now on offer, they become more likely to retreat into separate camps that are incapable of reasoning and living peaceably with one another.

It is true that the expression of religious premises sometimes leads to discursive impasse in political debate. But there are many important issues that cannot be resolved solely on the basis of arguments from commonly held principles. So if we are going to address those issues meaningfully, we had better find a way to work around the impasses when they arise. One name for the way I propose is conversation. By this I mean an exchange of views in which the respective parties express their premises in as much

INTRODUCTION

11

detail as they see fit and in whatever idiom they wish, try to make sense of each other's perspectives, and expose their own commitments to the possibility of criticism.

The bulk of part 2 aims to demonstrate the value of carrying on a public conversation of this kind with religious traditionalists. My conversation partners in these chapters are prominent Christians. I have selected them in part because they represent the religious tradition to which most American citizens are committed. It should be obvious that similar forms of traditionalism have proven attractive to some Jews and Muslims. The broader conversation I hope to instigate would include them—and others as well. But one cannot converse seriously with everyone at once, and in this book I have chosen to converse mainly with versions of traditionalism that the Christian majority in the United States has found tempting.

Traditionalists are right, I believe, to argue that ethical and political reasoning are creatures of tradition and crucially depend on the acquisition of such virtues as practical wisdom and justice. They are wrong, however, when they imagine modern democracy as the antithesis of tradition, as an inherently destructive, atomizing social force. I could have made the latter point in a different way by focusing on Christians who are openly fighting to make their tradition more democratic, such as Lisa Cahill, Rebecca Chopp, James Forbes, Peter Gomes, Mark Jordan, Susan Frank Parsons, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Andrew Sullivan, and Garry Wills. This would have had the advantage of diversifying the range of Christian voices under consideration. But a book on those figures would make no impression on readers who are attracted to the new traditionalism. So I have decided to focus my critical attention in chapters 4–7 on the most influential of the new traditionalists: Hauerwas, MacIntyre, and Milbank. My criticisms of them are in some large measure feminist in inspiration, and incorporate points made before by Gloria Albrecht and Susan Moller Okin. I also try to challenge the traditionalists in another way, however, by contrasting their positions with those of theologically conservative but politically progressive thinkers like Calvinist philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff and Barthian theologian George Hunsinger.

One of my central claims is that modern democracy is not essentially an expression of secularism, as some philosophers have claimed and many theologians have feared. Modern democratic reasoning is secularized, but not in a sense that rules out the expression of religious premises or the entitlement of individuals to accept religious assumptions. Those who lament our failure to agree as a nation on the sanctity of embryonic life and on issues relating to sexual conduct and family life are free to offer their reasons to the rest of us. Some hope ultimately to place a sacred canopy over what Father Richard John Neuhaus calls “the naked public square,” thereby rescuing ethical discourse from the perils of secular liberalism. In

practice this proposal turns out to be either unacceptable or unrealistic—unacceptable if it employs the coercive power of the state to reverse the secularization of public discourse, unrealistic if it does not. Equally important, it tends to misconceive what the secularization of public discourse involves.

Traditionalists claim that democracy undermines itself by destroying the traditional vehicles needed for transmitting the virtues from one generation to another. Because traditionalists see democracy as an essentially negative, leveling force—as the opposite of a culture—they tend to underestimate the capacity of democratic practices to sustain themselves over time. Because they suspect that moral discourse not grounded in true piety is actually a form of vice, they are tempted to withdraw from democratic discourse with the heathen. Some traditionalists actively foster alienation from the citizenry’s public discussion of divisive ethical questions while promoting identification instead with premodern traditions and religious communities. I argue that this move represents an unwarranted form of despair over the current condition of ethical discourse and that it tells a largely false story about the kind of society we live in.

Whether the citizenry can transform itself into a community that more fully warrants the trust essential to democratic practices remains an open question. We had better hope that the answer is yes, because the only alternative is grim. The rhetoric of the new traditionalists and Black Nationalists, to take two examples, implies that they have already given up on democracy. They declare the civic nation or modernity itself innately vicious, and then, having no place else to go, identify strictly with communities distinct from democratic society as a whole. But this message has largely made matters worse. There are practical reasons for resisting it, especially today.

Democratic norms are initially implicit in what we do when we demand reasons for some actions, commitments, and arrangements, while treating others as acceptable by default; or when we treat some reasons as sufficient and others as insufficient; or when we respond unreflectively to something by admiring or deplored it. But norms can also be made explicit in the form of principles and ideals, as they are in our founding documents and in the speeches of eloquent citizens. Our political culture traffics heavily in appeals to explicitly stated norms. This is the most obvious way in which we hold our leaders, as well as our fellow ordinary citizens, accountable to the people. From a pragmatic point of view, the function of moral principles with respect to the ethical life of a people is essentially expressive, a matter of making explicit in the form of a claim a kind of commitment that would otherwise remain implicit and obscure. Public philosophy as I conceive of it is an exercise in expressive rationality.¹¹ Part 3 attempts to clarify what this conception of public philosophy involves. It argues that a

INTRODUCTION

13

kind of pragmatism can transcend the current standoff between secular liberals and the new traditionalists—and do so by borrowing crucial insights from both sides.

For Whitman, articulating the ethical life of democracy was mainly a poetic task, and he took his understanding of the poet mainly from Emerson.¹² The young Dewey learned from Emerson's essays and from Hegel that the task belonged as much to philosophers as it did to poets. His mature pragmatism was largely an attempt to translate Hegel's philosophical expressivism into the ordinary language of Americans who had no use for the Hegelian logic of identity. One thing he learned from Hegel was that the project of rational self-criticism and the project of bringing the ethical life of a people to self-conscious expression were best understood as two phases or dimensions of a single project. This project is Socratic in its commitment to self-examination and in aiming for self-perfection, but it is carried out simultaneously on an individual and a social scale—as a public philosophy. Dewey's pragmatism sought to explain, in terms a plain-speaking citizen could find intelligible, how one could reasonably aim to make explicit, and then to criticize, the ethical life of one's culture without claiming (dishonestly, self-deceptively) to rise above the perspective of a situated, committed participant in that culture's practices.

Many early champions of modern democracy, influenced by Enlightenment philosophy, had portrayed themselves as the heralds of a complete break from the past; “tradition” was a name for what they opposed; “reason” and “modernity” were names for what they championed. Many of them were revolutionaries who sought to turn the world of pomp and privilege upside down. Their rhetoric implied that they owed nothing to the past. In retrospect, we can see the conceptual continuities that linked them with their predecessors and opponents. There is much to be gained by abandoning the image of democracy as essentially opposed to tradition, as a negative force that tends by its nature to undermine culture and the cultivation of virtue. Democracy is a culture, a tradition, in its own right. It has an ethical life of its own, which philosophers would do well to articulate. Pragmatism is best viewed as an attempt to bring the notions of democratic deliberation and tradition together in a single philosophical vision. To put the point aphoristically and paradoxically, *pragmatism is democratic traditionalism*. Less paradoxically, one could say that pragmatism is the philosophical space in which democratic rebellion against hierarchy combines with traditionalist love of virtue to form a new intellectual tradition that is indebted to both.

Part of the democratic program is to involve strangers and enemies, as well as fellow citizens, in the verbal process of holding one another responsible. This means taking norms that originated in one tradition and applying them across cultural boundaries, in the hope of drawing undemocratic indi-

viduals and groups into the exchange of reasons. Philosophers make the task look easier than it is when they claim that all human beings already share a common morality, *the* common morality, simply by virtue of being human. From my point of view, such a claim seems like wishful thinking. It ignores the essential role that traditions play in shaping human thought.

Among the central theses of part 3 are an expressivist conception of norms and the claim that being justified in believing something is a contextual affair. While these two ideas can surely be attributed to Dewey, there are so many points at which I depart from Dewey's specific formulations that it would be tedious for me to spend much time explaining the details. Instead, I draw directly on what I take to be the most important recent developments in pragmatic philosophy. My most obvious departure from Dewey is my claim that truth is not an essentially relative concept. This is a notion that many readers of my previous writings have found hard to square with what I say in praise of Dewey's doctrines on other topics. But I maintain that emphasizing the priority of social practices in the way pragmatism does need not prevent us from thinking of ethical discourse as an objective endeavor in which full-fledged truth-claims play an essential role. A central challenge for pragmatism as a public philosophy is to overcome the suspicion that it cannot adequately distinguish truth from concepts like warranted assertibility and justified belief. Otherwise pragmatism appears to undermine or eliminate essential features of the ethical and political discourse it purports to articulate and defend.

The difficulty this book poses to the nonphilosophical reader rises in chapters 3 and 8–12. These are the places where I spend more time discussing distinctions that have been drawn by philosophers who write mainly for other philosophers. A public philosophy is addressed to the public, and it takes public life as its subject matter, but it is still philosophy. So it ought to hold itself responsible to what philosophers say among themselves. I therefore need to move back and forth, as Dewey did, between explaining ideas honed in academic philosophy and addressing moral, political, and religious concerns that ordinary citizens discuss in public every day. Of course, the professionalization of philosophy since the days of classical pragmatism has widened the gap between the two languages that public philosophy attempts to link together, perhaps to an extent that casts doubt on the bridging I am undertaking here. But I have plunged ahead, in the hope that others have created an audience for the sort of mixed genre to which the present work contributes. In this way, I hope, the ethical heritage of modern democracy can be made more intelligible to at least some of those who have been shaped by it.

I would like to think that a reader who took the time to go through the entire discussion carefully could emerge with an improved understanding of what has been going on recently in the disputed territory where philo-

INTRODUCTION

15

sophical, political, and religious thought intersect. My argument is addressed to readers—above all young ones—who are struggling to make sense of the social criticism, philosophy, and theology currently in circulation. My objective is to awaken in them a sense of new ethical, political, and intellectual possibilities.

My focus throughout is on democracy in America. I would have written a different book if I had been living elsewhere, hoping to influence some other society. As an act of social criticism, this book is necessarily a somewhat parochial affair. But as a contribution to comparative ethics, it also takes part in a global conversation in which every society with democratic aspirations will need to be heard from on its own terms. If democracy is nowhere fully realized and everywhere in jeopardy, we all have much to learn from particular cases.