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Bernard Shaw, Richard Rorty, and the Utopian Vision They Shared: Hope, Pragmatism, and the Quest for Something Approaching a Jesusian Kingdom of Heaven on Earth

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Abstract

This essay argues that Bernard Shaw and Richard Rorty, two of the most accomplished figures of the modernist age in their respective vocations—one an Anglo-Irish dramatist and polemicist; the other, an American philosopher and university professor—were similar in ways that merit our close attention. The focus here is on their mutual quest for a global civilization that would come as close as humanly possible to achieving a Jesusian kingdom of heaven on earth. Neither believed in the otherworldly supernaturalism of orthodox Christianity and the absolutist church dogmas that went with it, but both contended that the Nazarene's social-gospel values were salvational. In addition to their hopeful Jesusianism, Shaw and Rorty held four associated attributes in common that are especially noteworthy: their antifoundationalism; their pragmatism; their utopianism; and their liberal, social democratic commitments. Collectively, these symmetries show that Shaw and Rorty shared substantive views about how humans ought to live, in order that they not just survive by the skin of their teeth, but that they perhaps one day flourish and do so for all the generations that would follow.

Keywords: Bernard Shaw; Richard Rorty; Jesusianism; utopia; pragmatism; democracy

1. Introduction

This essay argues that two of the most intriguing prodigies of the modernist age—Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) and Richard Rorty (1931–2007)—were kindred pragmatist spirits who devoted their professional careers as engaged public intellectuals to pursuing something approaching a Jesusian kingdom of heaven on earth. Neither was a traditional Christian in the orthodox sense of the term, but they both embraced the Nazarene's utopian notion that we are obliged to live abundantly, compassionately, and justly on a healthy planet at peace with itself. While each rejected the otherworldly, supernatural aspects of Christianity, including the OmniGod, original sin, vicarious atonement, the Resurrection, and the Second Coming, they nevertheless believed that the social-gospel values Jesus lived and taught were indeed salvational because, should they become normative, the species that practiced them would not just survive, but would one day flourish. Moreover, Shaw and Rorty acknowledged that mortals were finite and flawed creatures living in a world of constantly changing contingencies, which meant that no aspirational ideal could ever be fully realized. But for them, this did not mean that efforts to build a better future for everyone were doomed to failure from the start. Just the opposite, they contended. In their view, humans in fact had the capacity to improve people's quality of life over time if they summoned the will to treat others empathetically.¹



Received: 28 April 2026

Revised: 23 June 2026

Accepted: 6 July 2026

Published: 11 July 2026

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To foreground the affinities between Shaw and Rorty, the essay highlights four characteristics they had in common: their antifoundationalism; their pragmatism; their hopeful Jesusian utopianism; and their liberal, social democratic beliefs. Collectively, these symmetries demonstrate that Shaw and Rorty shared substantive views about how humans ought to live in order to promote global wellness. Rorty equated “moral obligation with the need to adjust one’s behavior to the needs of other human beings.” He believed that “it is best to think of moral progress as a matter of increasing *sensitivity*, increasing responsiveness to the needs of a larger and larger variety of people and things.”²

In the Rortyan universe, acting morally is not a matter of aligning conduct with spurious transcendental notions like “the True or the Good or the Right” but of expressing, in words and deeds, “wider and wider sympathy” for the unfortunate among us (Ibid., pp. 87, 82). In his view, the most favorable locations for these empathetic outreach efforts were progressive liberal democracies which, imbued with socialist³ dimensions grounded in social-gospel values, gradually evolved toward just societies along pragmatist lines. The world Rorty sought is fundamentally Jesusian, one in which “all men and women are brothers and sisters”—humankind as one big family—a world in which we care for each other’s welfare naturally, a world in which we do what we should because we intrinsically want to, not because some externally imposed code, issuing either from the almighty gods or from earthly authoritarian surrogates, compels us to do so.⁴ For Rorty, humans autonomously develop the standards they live by, *consensually*.

On this view, a view Shaw shares, we should give up the search for immutable and unconditional moral truths and focus instead on practical questions of how to make the future better than today for the peoples of the world in terms of maximizing holistic wellness with the least degree of social dislocation. Shaw makes the same point in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* where he agrees with Ibsen that “conduct must justify itself by its effect upon life and not by its conformity to any rule or ideal.” (Shaw [1913] 1964). By life, Shaw intends Rorty’s notion of holistic wellness coupled with compassionate public policies. Our purpose on earth, Shaw consistently argued, is not just to live, not just to get by, by the skin of our teeth, but to live in flourishing Jesusian communities that endure over time. This means not only that what we want for ourselves, we should want for others; but also that we must work pragmatically toward democratically achieving a utopia which is based on social gospel values.

But in questing for an approximate Jesusian utopia pragmatically, Shaw agreed with Rorty that we must proceed experimentally *and* solicitously. Pragmatism, the former wrote, “is not any use when you come to governing a great state. There it is no use saying that the thing that works is right, because things that you know to be abominably wrong, and that you cannot pretend to be made right by any sort of working, can nevertheless be made to work politically if only you will put sufficient brute force into making them work.” (Shaw 1963a; at 64). For this reason, Shaw insisted that “even perfectly rational solutions of our problems must be humane as well if they are to be accepted by the good.” (Shaw [1924] 1969). Echoing Shaw, Rorty conceptualized pragmatism as a form of “humanism. “It offers,” Rorty said, “a philosophical apologia for a thoroughly secularized culture, a culture in which what Nietzsche called ‘all the surrogates for God’ [but not necessarily religion, properly understood] have disappeared and human beings are on their own.” (Marchett 2003). Pragmatism, as Rorty envisioned the school of thought, focuses on the Shavian commitment to improving the human condition gradually, by abandoning dogmatism in favor of deliberation, consensus-building, and creative problem solving. For each of them, the primary goal of Jesusian pragmatism is not the epistemological pursuit of the way things are in themselves, but the concrete reduction in as much pain, humiliation, and suffering as is humanly possible.

However, before we can turn to the argument in chief, two preliminary matters need consideration. Each implicates the antifoundationalism the pair hold in common, and Rorty explicitly raised them both: What is the goal of inquiry? And how do we defend the values we privilege? The answers to these queries form the axes upon which the primary assertions rotate, and we will spend a little time exploring each.

2. Preliminaries

For Rorty, the goal of inquiry is *justification*, not truth. Rorty rejects representationalism, the notion that truth is correspondence to the way things are in themselves. In his view, there are many depictions of the world, some more useful than others for helping us navigate the exigencies of life, but no one of which brings us any closer to the intrinsic nature of reality as it is in itself—because, he consistently claims, there is *no* way the world is antecedent to and apart from our wants, needs, and descriptions. Accordingly, Rorty believes that our energy and resources are much better spent trying to improve the human condition than trying to attain truth as it is traditionally understood. The latter is a fool's errand in Rorty's judgment, since the unconditional truth philosophers and scientists alike historically sought is chimerical, illusory. Instead, we should endeavor to *justify*, to convince others through rhetorical argument, not physical force, that our beliefs show every indication of succeeding, humanely and efficiently, in reaching the ends we seek. In other words, for the pragmatist, the evaluative term "true" adds nothing substantial to the concept of "justified belief." Rather, it is commendatory and, more importantly, it is cautionary, in the sense that it reminds us that new findings or new audiences may at any time compel a revision of views. Hence, Rorty says, the provisional status of justified judgments ought to impart a healthy degree of humility in the minds of engaged public intellectuals and political leaders at every level. Their search for ever widening circles of consensus, should they incline toward pragmatism (and Rorty thinks *everyone* should so incline), must not blind them to the possibility that the best laid plans can and do go astray, and that the experimental nature of pragmatist enterprises necessarily carries with it risks that may entail unexpected social costs.⁵

But this is no cause for despair, Rorty maintains, because this is precisely what it means to be human—having to choose under inescapable conditions of uncertainty. Given our ineluctable finitude, we can do no more than use reflective judgment, fortified by as much intersubjective agreement as attainable, to deal constructively with the existential challenges that confront us, knowing full well that we may have to recalibrate and try again if things take turns for the worse. As Rorty put it in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, "We pragmatists cannot make sense of the idea that we should pursue truth for its own sake. We cannot regard truth as a goal of inquiry. The purpose of inquiry is to achieve agreement among human beings about what to do, to bring consensus on the end to be achieved and the means to be used to achieve those ends."⁶ Moreover, the same Rortyan antifoundationalist stance manifests itself in the realm of ethics, where moralists traditionally attempt to distinguish *is* from *ought*, the former signifying *facts*, things that render statements true or false; the latter signifying *values*, shared societal beliefs (a) that distinguish good from bad, and (b) that prescribe the permissible and impermissible in conduct. Here, too, Rorty argues that moral judgments are not legitimate subjects of appraisals in terms of truth or falsity, for there is nothing fixed and eternal out there to which prescriptions must correspond if they are to be valid. Stated differently, in the Rortyan pluralistic universe that lacks a universally accepted source of authority, normative assertions are *justified* rather than proven true or false. That is, we try to convince more and more people to accept our viewpoint through rational persuasion, preferably in nonviolent, liberal democratic settings.

In this connection, Rorty's strategy for dealing with the vexing fact-value distinction is two-pronged. First, he agrees with Kant (and Hume) that we cannot derive an "ought" from an "is" no matter how hard we try. Which is to say that no set of facts can generate binding moral injunctions. The nub of the conundrum resides in the problematic notion that there is no convincing way to transit from descriptive statements to prescriptive statements—no compelling argument that genuinely permits us to move from this is the way things *are* to this is the way things *ought* to be. On this view, facts simpliciter cannot properly legislate moral conclusions. Rorty put it this way: "the choice between alternative moral imperatives remains open no matter what facts are produced or what metaphysical theories are adopted. In the face of any conclusion that any philosopher will ever reach about the nature of reality or the nature and powers of the human mind, the question of what we should do will remain open."⁷

Values, then, are the principles we choose to live by; they are the overarching premises that motivate our behavior. Yet these non-negotiables, Rorty says, "cannot be supported or justified by any fact or any theory about facts scientific, metaphysical, or religious, or by anything except another moral imperative." (Ibid., pp. 16–17). If so, how can we ever convince ourselves and others to prefer one set of values over a different set? Are we, then, confronted with an infinite regress that repeatedly undermines the justification we offer for choosing one or between competing moral imperatives? Is personal preference or physical force the only means of upholding the ethical choices our values impel us to make? Is there no way out of this dilemma? Rorty believes there is.

For Rorty, there is indeed another way to warrant our moral imperatives: "point[ing] to the fruits of accepting them." (Ibid., p. 22). The mode of reasoning here—moving from ought to is and back again to ought—is admittedly circular, though not viciously so in the philosopher's ethical universe. This justificatory route, Rorty maintains, is the only proper pathway for circumventing the impossibility of gleaning a *must* from the way things *are*. Below is an oversimplified example of the type of *discursive* demonstration Rorty has in mind.

1. Major premise (Rorty's moral imperative—*ought*): We *must* always act in ways that increase happiness (holistic wellness) and decrease suffering.
2. Minor Premise (the *is*'s): There are people suffering in the U.S. whom we ought to help because, as history and the social sciences have shown, relieving such suffering increases the happiness—holistic health—of not only the individuals affected but also American society as a whole.
3. Conclusion, by inference (back to the governing *ought*): Therefore, we *must* enact policies and programs that decrease this suffering and thereby increase happiness (holistic wellness), individually and collectively.

The argument above is clearly circular—the conclusion is inherent in the major premise—but the syllogism is not intended as a logical proof that provides conclusiveness. Rather, it is meant to be nonviolently persuasive to as many people as possible, in a determined effort to reach the widest possible consensus about what we ought to do in a given situation. For as Rorty contends, this "is the only way we have got" to justify our moral imperatives (Ibid., p. 22).

When it comes to literary artists, Rorty posits an analogous *aesthetic* *modus operandi* for the method they employ to justify their moral imperatives: imaginative storytelling—in particular, creating stories, broadly construed, that viscerally move us to thoughts and actions consonant with the values the craftsperson privileges. In this context, Rorty invokes Milton's attempt "to justify the ways of God to man" in *Paradise Lost*. Rorty's response to the epic poem in blank verse is twofold: as a defense of the Christian OmniGod's "benevolence," Rorty deems it "a flop," yet he also declares that it is the best defense of the

worldview the poet projects. Why is the latter the case for Rorty? Because, he tells us, the narrative is “a story which we ought to believe if we accept Milton’s values[;] it is the best justification of those values which we can get.” (Ibid., p. 21).

We can put the matter this way. Writers use the values they endorse as the regulatory principles that govern the contours of the plots they build. These are the moral imperatives that frame the unfolding action—one must live life righteously by freely following the will of God, in Milton’s case. But the facts of the case, as Milton sees them in the real world, display the horrors that ensue when people practice disobedience rather than fidelity. Milton then inserts the negative consequences of this infidelity into his poem by depicting the evil, pain, and death that come into existence because of the rebellious actions Lucifer, Eve, and Adam voluntarily take. But this is not the end of the story, for the saga concludes with intimations of redemption, with signs that point to a “Fortunate Fall.” Should humans mend their ways and return to the fold, salvation is attainable even amid the hardships that persist. Despite the tragic consequences of waywardness, hope abides in the realization that the future can be better than today, the poet professes. This is the same hope that animates Rorty and Shaw in the non-Christian Jesusian universe they inhabit.

Common to the two approaches Rorty takes to justifying moral choices—discursive and esthetic—is the notion of using ethical imperatives as necessary premises in formulating the starting points of the defenses we construct. Next, to fully build these proposed justifications, we supply additional factually grounded moral imperatives so that, once all of the postulates are conjoined, the products yield obligatory actions that conform to the defender’s ethical stance. These Rortyan ought-is-ought movements do not provide proof in a logical sense. No such proofs are possible, according to Rorty. But when well executed, Rorty thinks that they do provide the most persuasive arguments we can make on behalf of our ultimate values and the actions they inspire.

As we will soon see, Shaw anticipates Rorty’s thinking in crucial respects. Specifically, he uses the same two techniques, along with the inferential steppingstones which accompany them, that Rorty specifies for fashioning tenable defenses of the ultimate values we cherish. Furthermore, Shaw and Rorty share the same ultimate values that shape their mutually held view of how humans ought to live their lives: promoting flourishing life along Jesusian lines. Finally, under the aegis of the conceptual framework they hold in common, the two pragmatists take the following precept as their architectonic moral imperative—we cannot harm another unjustifiably or allow others to suffer unnecessarily without diminishing our own internal quotient of goodness. Put another way, Shaw and Rorty admonish us to always behave in ways that nurture the species’ growth and development by practicing the social-gospel way of life the Nazarene lived and taught.

3. The Argument

In the popular mind, utopia carries a pejorative connotation because, allegedly, it is untethered from the attainable, offering uncritical yearners empty dreaming rather than realizable possibilities for human betterment. From this angle, utopian ideas are merely escapist. They are the illusory means we use to evade the traumas of everyday life by projecting comforting fantasies of perfect societies that remedy injustice and sooth existential angst. Utopia, however, also has a positive dimension: the dimension that Shaw and Rorty explored. Two facets of this type of utopian thinking merit emphasis.

First, it may offer a sustained critique of existing societal conditions deemed deficient, with an eye toward remedying the unsatisfactory status quo through remediation. For example, consider the American Civil Rights movement of the mid twentieth century. Persistent nonviolent protests, led by Martin Luther King Jr., eventually resulted in historic legislation that finally guaranteed African Americans, a long-suffering ethnic minority

which had experienced unjust discrimination, equal treatment in education, voting, and housing. Second, visionary critiques can also shatter an existing social order and provide a foundational ideological template for an entirely new organizational structure. The American Declaration of Independence and Constitution are apt cases in point. These documents provided the New World colonists with a set of ideals that stipulated, among other things, that we are all, self-evidently, created equal and endowed with inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; and that governments are instituted among people to secure these inalienable claims—all of which delineate the national character of a burgeoning nation which had separated itself from the crimping clutches of a colonial British Empire. That we have not lived up to these glorious affirmations in the United States or anywhere else is no fault of the avowals. The fault lies with the conduct of the messengers, not the message.

But note: has anyone creditably argued that pursuing these goals is a waste of time and effort?—that it is impossible over time to form a better and better United States of America, to the extent that we ultimately achieve something approaching a utopia? Besides, has anyone convincingly proposed to Western sensibilities a more worthwhile way to live life? The answer to these questions, for Shaw and Rorty, is a resounding “no.” And herein lies the unsurpassable virtue of grounded, as opposed to fanciful, utopian thinking. It offers genuine *hope* that we humans can in fact continually improve everyone’s quality of life nonviolently by working cooperatively to enhance the common good. Without hope, life withers on the vine. With it, the determined can move mountains, *peacefully*.

Emily Dickinson, the great nineteenth-century American poet, likened hope to a feathered bird in one of her most celebrated poems.⁸ The lyric depicts hope as a perpetually singing, ecumenical, and winged creature that eternally dwells in human souls. The sweet melodies tweeted, superlatively sweet amid the harshest circumstances and gravest uncertainties, the speaker tells us, provide consoling warmth that never fails to keep its hosts buoyed and never requests, let alone demands—in contrast to the transactional nature of daily living in a materialistic age—a quid pro quo in return, not even a morsel. On this view, hope is the enduring tensile anticipation of future favorable events that are expected to come. Hope, moreover, empowers us, in the best pragmatist tradition, to keep on keeping on. It is the impetus that drives ongoing reformist efforts, even in the face of frustrations, personal disappointments, and the horrors history records.

Hope is also the profound emotion that binds Shaw and Rorty together in their lifelong quest for a Jesusian utopia on earth. Rorty believes that, while liberal, social democratic ideals “may be local and culture-bound,” that is, ethnocentric, they are not therefore “any the less worth fighting for.” Just the opposite, he claims. For despite their provincialism, they nonetheless remain “the best hope for the species.”⁹ By social hope, Rorty intends the wish “for a global, cosmopolitan, democratic, egalitarian, classless, casteless society,” one that realizes the pragmatists’ desire to “[devise] ways of diminishing human suffering and increasing human equality, increasing the ability of all human children to start life with an equal chance of happiness.”¹⁰ According to Rorty, the pragmatists’ “highest hopes are for a better human future, to be attained by more fraternal cooperation between human beings.” As the philosopher sees it, there is no compelling reason to “think subjection to an authority-figure is necessary to lead a properly human life.” For him, as well as for Shaw (and John Dewey), the essential ingredient for living ethically is *freedom*, not blind obedience to a supposed god or to hubristic poseurs aspiring to godhead.¹¹

Like Rorty, Shaw recognized the significance of hope for human wellness, in terms of both the individual and the collective. “Our will to live,” he wrote, “depends on hope, for we die of despair, or as I have called it in the Methuselah cycle, discouragement.”¹² The “we” Shaw invokes is inclusive: it encompasses anyone and everyone. No one is excluded.

For him, “Defeatism is the wretchedness of policies,” as it “drains vitality and erodes willpower, emptying life of any goals worth pursuing.” (Shaw 1949). Shaw dramatized this abiding sentiment in the first of the five plays that comprise the mammoth “Metabiological Pentateuch,” *Back to Methuselah* (1921): *In the Beginning: B.C. 4004*. In the prelapsarian Garden of Eden, for example: the sage Serpent offers “Hope. Hope. Hope.” as the remedy for Adam’s newly felt fear of the future’s uncertainty—with hope being the awareness that “As long as you do not know the future[,] you do not know that it will not be happier than the past. That is hope.” Later, post the Eden expulsion, Eve similarly responds to the question a disgruntled Adam poses—why do you continue living if all you do is complain?—with this revealing reply: “Because there is still hope . . . Of the coming true of your dreams and mine. Of newly created things. Of better things.” (Shaw [1921] 1971a).

The hope thematic comes full circle in the long peroration Lilith gives in the Epilogue to the last play in the series, *As Far as Thought Can Reach: A.D. 31920*. Her extended remarks characterize the potential destinies of the human species in binary terms: life or death, progress or extinction, and they also include the implicit ultimatum that the race either work on behalf of the former—which they have capacity to do—or eventually experience the finality of the latter. Lilith hopes they will choose growth rather than stagnation. For as she notes, “Of life only there is no end.” Should the race stultify progressive social change, should it impede the upward trajectory of evolution, “I say, let them dread, of all things, stagnation; for from the moment I, Lilith, lose hope and faith in them, they are doomed.” Here “hope and faith” are conjoined, the latter looking backward soberly to as yet unfulfilled possibilities of universal wellness, and the former looking forward expectantly to fructifying those longed-for possibilities that were millennia earlier vouchsafed in trust.

In our context, hope is the operative phenomenon because it brackets past lapses, which Lilith catalogues for us in accents reminiscent of the Devil’s “force of death” speech from *Man and Superman*—which stresses humankind’s penchant for unmitigated violence—and focuses on what tomorrow might bring in the way of human betterment if the members of the species could only put aside their differences and cooperate with one another compassionately as Jesusian utopian pragmatists would have them do. Hence, from both the cosmic and mundane perspectives, hope is the preeminent redemptive quality. Hope can move mountains provided there is the will to operationalize it through deliberative action. As Shaw and Rorty see things, the future belongs to the hopefuls, not to the naysayers, nihilists, or defeatists. However, she cannot foresee the future, so the outcome hangs in suspension. But who exactly is Lilith, in Shaw’s mind?

Lilith is the personification of the limited creative agency Shaw endowed with—as a working conceptual framework—the power to suffuse the universe, bring life into existence, and initiate the process of evolution, which is willfully oriented toward developing greater levels of organization, cooperation, and adaptability in and among living things. Shaw called this hypothesized energy-field the “Life Force,” but he insisted that it was not an OmniGod, Christian or otherwise. Rather, the potency of this catalyst, as Shaw conceived it, was circumscribed, in the sense that generative instrumentality could not act in the world *directly*: it depended on its creations to advance the upward evolutionary movement solely on their own, via the will. Two important points are implicated here. First, Shaw’s notion of evolution was Lamarckian, not Darwinian. He believed that creatures changed because they actively wanted to, not because they were simply the passive recipients of chance mutations that might or might not confer on them survival advantages.

Second, as noted earlier, Shaw’s perspective entailed a clear admonition to humans, even if the Life Force did not issue explicit edicts governing conduct. Should humankind fail to promote life ascendant responsibly, Shaw believed evolution would one day supplant

it with a more amenable species. Hence, Shaw argued that it behooved his race to practice in earnest the social gospel values the Nazarene lived and taught—and Rorty agreed with this advisement. Moreover, Rorty would never criticize Shaw for his imaginative Life-Force conception, a viewpoint he likely would have eschewed. Why not? Precisely because this was Shaw's *esthetic* defense of both the principles he most cherished and the behavior that ought to flow from them, which just so happened to be the very same principles and behavior that Rorty himself endorsed.

The Lilith-Life Force identity also formed the nucleus of a Jesusian religious orientation to existence which Shaw thought was absolutely necessary for a modernist age that could no longer believe either in Christianity's otherworldly OmniGod and the expiatory apparatus that went with it or in anything analogous that invoked supernatural authorities who brooked no gainsaying. For Shaw, some sort of religion was critical for sane living, and he offered worshipping life ascendant rather than vulgar Mammonism as the proper object of reverence. For Shaw, "civilization needs a religion as a matter of life or death" (Shaw [1921] 1971b); religion, he maintained, "binds [people] together in a common ideal of what is right and true." (Shaw 1963a, p. 71). Without a public religion that weaved people together in a cohesive web of norms, without an informed consensus on what is good and bad, right and wrong, in terms of personal conduct and collaborative policy making, Shaw thought societies would fracture and governments would flounder. In his eyes, the Jesusianism he advocated could be embraced by people of goodwill everywhere. This hope-filled faith, as Shaw conceived it, was churchless, ecumenical, and noncombatant—in the proselytizing sense. It also denied original sin, a determined future, a preexisting tablet of do's and don'ts, and an all-powerful deity that oversaw terrestrial events.

On the other hand, Jesusianism affirmed that humans had the intrinsic capacity to affect the unfolding of history in ways that helped or hindered the flowering of Creation. Put differently, the will was free to do good or evil,¹³ to act compassionately or selfishly. Moreover, Jesusianism insisted that mortals were completely on their own to rise or fall, that no transcendent divinity or messiah would ever come to their aid, and that they were solely responsible for one another's welfare in a world shorn of godhead. If the species was to survive and someday flourish, humans were obliged to practice Jesusianism conscientiously—not just individually but also governmentally. "I am ready to admit," Shaw wrote, "that after contemplating the world and human nature for nearly sixty years, I see no way out of the world's misery but the way which would have been found by Christ's will if he had undertaken the work of a modern practical statesman."¹⁴

At the granular level, the justificatory *esthetic* narrative Shaw creates in his dramatic works implicating Lilith, the Life Force, and its operating method, Creative Evolution, yields a train of reasoning that we can express *discursively*, as follows. We *ought* (chief moral imperative) to practice the values of the Jesusian social gospel because, theoretically speaking, a creative evolutionary process is (main *is*) at work—under the auspicious of the circumscribed Life Force—that implies a half-dozen consequences for the human species, one of which is potentially lethal (prevailing derivative *is's*): (1) the goal of the Life Force is to engender ever more flourishing life on the planet; (2) the Life Force cannot act directly in the world to accomplish its aim: it relies on its fallible creations, the products of Creative Evolution, to achieve what it cannot achieve on its own; (3) with respect to Homo sapiens, this means that we mortals all are members of one another biologically and must act as each other's keeper in order to nourish planetary wellness; and (4) why so?—because, should humans fail to sufficiently cultivate the race, evolution will eventually replace them with a more promising species; and (5) presumably, the human species does not have a collective death wish; and (6) therefore, via inference, we humans *ought* (back to the chief moral imperative) to practice Jesusian social gospel values because they are the ones that

most likely will promote global wellness, and thereby avert obliteration, should humans succeed in their efforts to nurture life ascendant.

Yes, as Rorty has shown us, this type of argument is circular. But as Shaw foresaw in those of his prose works that made the case for the moral imperative he championed, which is the same ultimate *shalt* that Rorty later argued for implicitly in his “Philosophy as Ethics,” the circularity was not fatal. Why not? Because, as with Rorty, Shaw believed that the ought-is-ought argumentative form is the *only* legitimate way we have to justify the values we venerate. What this means for us is that both Shaw and Rorty believed that humans *ought* to behave *as if* there were an imperative that universally obliged them to serve life ascendant, *as if* there were an indefeasible *must* that—barring an incapacitating mental or physical constraint—required them to increase wellness and reduce suffering, since the fate of the species, in their view, hinged on meeting this existential exigency.

In fact, they attributed the deplorable state of the world—which looked to them to be rife with poverty, oppression, exploitation, violence, injustice, and war—precisely to the failure of mortals to act compassionately toward one another in a manner that aligned with Jesusian teachings. Apart from their awareness of the horrors history had already documented, Shaw and Rorty saw with their own eyes the foul results of indifference, selfishness, aggression, and bellicosity. Two world wars in their lifetimes, wrapped in battlefield atrocities, death camps, atom bombs, and astronomical losses of life, limbs, materiel, and dollars would be more than sufficient to fill any sane person with a palpable Swiftian loathing for *Homo sapiens*. Shaw and Rorty certainly felt that revulsion, yet they retained a reservoir of hope that things could be different. They declined to raise their hands in defeat. They refused to surrender to despondency. If ever evidence were needed to support Alexander Pope’s celebrated claim that “Hope springs eternal in the human breast,” Shaw and Rorty would surely testify in the affirmative. For them, as it was for Dickinson and Pope, hope is inscribed in the race’s DNA.¹⁵

Nonetheless, the Shaw-hope nexus needs elaboration, lest we risk misapprehending Shaw’s layered character. The most fruitful way of approaching Shaw is to think of him, in the language of Alfred Turco Jr., as a “tragic optimist.” (Turco 1976). Shaw was optimistic in the sense that he believed life would continue on its upward evolutionary trajectory toward greater and greater structural complexity indefinitely—barring a cataclysmic extinction event of biblical proportions, which destroyed every living thing on the planet. But he was pessimistic in the sense that he had grave doubts about whether his species would be around to participate in the procession. The tragic sensibility he harbored made him acutely aware of the self-defeating tendencies inherent in the conflicted human psyche. If the race excels in anything, *Man and Superman’s* urbane Devil reminds us, it is in inventing ever more destructive weapons of mass destruction; of the arts of peace, it knows nothing. In his darkest moments, Shaw feared that sooner or later—most likely the former if the downward spiral he observed in the world around him continued unabated—featherless bipeds would go the way of the dodo and passenger pigeon.

Shaw reiterated this deep-seated concern in plays that came after *Superman*. *Heartbreak House*, arguably his finest achievement for the stage, and *Saint Joan* are good examples. The first dramatizes enervated Londoners sleepwalking into WWI because they lacked the political capacity—the will to navigate rather than drift, in Captain Shotover’s memorable metaphor—to campaign actively for sane government. As the bombs fall, and the final curtain descends, the playwright intimates that nothing much will change for the better until either humans come to their senses or they are replaced by a more capable species. Which outcome will ultimately eventuate is left in suspension. *Saint Joan*, however, which clinched the 1925 Nobel Prize for Shaw, in honor of his lifetime achievement to date in Literature, appears to tilt the scales in the direction of the second eventuality. There, the

dramatist implies (in the play's *Epilogue*) that mortals may never be able to recognize, let alone follow, the saints in their midst—those gifted individuals who periodically illuminate the path toward global wellness. Why is this the case, for Shaw? Because we invariably burn our Joans, poison our Socrateses, assassinate our Lincolns, and crucify our Nazarenes. In Shaw's eyes, we are our own worst enemy.

Yet, despite the intense strain of pessimism that coursed through his corpus, Shaw remained hopeful that the species could in fact redeem itself, provided it found the will to do so. For him, as for Rorty, the future remained open, undetermined, metaphysically—which meant that no remedial effort was necessarily doomed to failure from the start. Were they sufficiently motivated to act in constructive ways, Shaw never surrendered the belief that humans had the ability to surmount the exigencies of existence, ethically and efficiently. Where there was resolve, an appropriate way would be found, according to Shaw.

At the center of Shaw's worldview is a democratic socialism that aims to achieve equality—equality of rights, equality of opportunity, and equality of income—so that individuals may go as far as their ability and determination may take them without interference from others or governmental agents, provided they behave responsibly and extend the same dispensation to everyone else. Of these equalities, it is safe to say that Shaw meant strict equality per person for the first two but not for the third. For the latter, it is closer to the truth to think that Shaw intended the notion in terms of proportional rather than numerical equality. This form of distribution strives for fairness and is employed to justify unequal outcomes that are nonetheless considered fair. Its counterpart is different. This distributive principle does not permit deviations from the established standard. In other words, the exact same allotment must be provided to each relevant party.

Two things here merit comment. First, the three enumerated equalities are societal ideals. That is, they represent aspirational goals that serve as metrics to gauge how far or how close the status quo is to the desired target. Shaw understood that humans were flawed beings who could not achieve perfection in their terrestrial endeavors. Yet, to his way of thinking, they nevertheless had the capacity to make tomorrow better than today and gradually fashion something approaching a just society. Second, proportional equality of income occupied a privileged place in the political economy of the socialism Shaw advocated. Shaw abhorred poverty and the odious class system it spawned. He wished to abolish them both through democratic means. The governing Shavian idea was that in a civilized socialist society the government would distribute the national wealth in a way that ensured a living wage, which also included a surplus to enable individuals to enjoy the fruits of culture. In return, citizens would contribute to the commonweal at least as much as they received—more, if they could.

In a perfect Shavian universe, absolute equality of income would be the norm (except for idlers who tried to game the system). However, Shaw recognized that it was impossible for socialism to deliver such a distribution in the world he inhabited. National incomes would never be sufficient to cover all the societal costs entailed in providing eligible persons with strictly equal shares. Some sort of wage stratification would be necessary, he acknowledged. Shaw understood the realities that prevailed in his species' environment of scarcity: while everyone has the same basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter, individual strengths and weaknesses vary; some skilled occupations demand specialized expertise as well as higher financial investments in education, training, and field experience than do others; so, inevitably, those in the workforce will be compensated at greater or lesser levels; hence, to meet the necessities of communal living, wage differentials among the professions will be simultaneously inescapable and arguably justifiable—but not at the expense of fairness, Shaw insisted.

On the view Shaw advocated, socially responsible people will get a decent wage that promoted holistic wellness—a guaranteed economic floor that not only kept the citizenry vibrant, but also enabled them to marry freely across what heretofore had been artificially constructed income barriers (thus nullifying the pernicious effects of a rigid class system). Additionally, Shaw added the corollary that socialist societies are concomitantly obliged to work diligently toward leveling-up lower shares toward higher ones as time unfolds. In this way, shares will inevitably be unequal, yet always life-affirming, fair, and, if conditions remained propitious, on the rise. As Shaw saw things, no group had a monopoly on intelligence or ignorance; genius or stupidity could spring from any quarter of society, he believed. If so, allow people to marry whom they choose and let nature take its course rather than resorting to selective breeding along eugenic lines in an effort to enhance the attributes of the race, Shaw averred. Doing things the old-fashioned way, he believed, stood the best chance of procreating healthy offspring as well as the periodic Ibsen, Mozart, or Einstein.

Thus, for Shaw the utopian, the optimum route to achieving something approaching a Jesusian kingdom of heaven on earth lay in alleviating poverty and negating social rankings, coupled with securing equal rights and equal opportunity for a polity which lived under the aegis of a government that was progressive, democratic, and socialist. Shaw made the case for this *Weltanschauung* both discursively and aesthetically in a manner that Rorty would instantly recognize and reaffirm were he familiar with the Shavian corpus.

In the discursive mode, Shaw begins the effort to persuade with his axiomatic moral imperative: we must always act in ways that enhance rather than diminish the flowering of life. This major Ur-premise is semantically the same as Rorty's argumentative starting point—we ought always to act in ways that increase happiness (holistic wellness) and decrease suffering. From this conceptual center, Shaw develops his thinking just as Rorty does, by identifying problematic *is's* that generate inferences to the operative ethical principle that initiates the ensuing chain of reasoning. Consider, for example, the brief opposing poverty Shaw presents and his assertion that democratic socialism along Jesusian lines is its remedy.

Shaw considered poverty, rampant in his England, a grave crime against civilization. For him, it took an intolerable toll on human welfare, both at the individual and societal levels. In addition, Shaw viewed capitalism as the main cause of pauperism, as, in his eyes, it invariably enriched the few and impoverished the many. It also, he noted, brought out the worst of human tendencies: greed, exploitation, colonialism, political corruption, and war, to name the most salient. These were the troublesome *is's* that at once preoccupied Shaw and, in his mind, demanded remediation. Given these circumstances, Shaw drew the only inference that made sense to him. If promoting life ascendent ought to be the aim of our actions, which Shaw maintained was indeed the case, then we must find a way to eradicate poverty; and to accomplish this end, Shaw concluded, it was incumbent on us to replace capitalism with democratic socialism in accordance with the contours he delineated—contours that included equality of rights, equality of opportunity, proportional equality of income, and the peaceful transition to a progressive, Jesusian system of government. This was Shaw's abiding perspective, and he devoted a lengthy career as an engaged public intellectual to defending it not only discursively in his voluminous prose works, but also esthetically in several of his dramatic works. *Major Barbara* and *The Apple Cart* are instructive examples of the latter.

In *Major Barbara*, Andrew Undershaft, the munitions magnate who sells armaments to anyone willing to pay the price, uttered this memorable sentiment: "the spirit cannot soar until the millstones are lifted." (Shaw [1907] 1979). The referenced millstones that onerously weigh down the human spirit comprise the basic necessities of life, such as food,

clothing, shelter, fuel for fires, and taxes, as well as the costs incurred in raising children and maintaining respectability—none of which can be adequately covered if one is mired in poverty. Without a sustainable income that meets the minimal requirements of existence with a leftover balance that allows for cultural enrichment, the life prospects of individuals will be severely diminished in laissez-faire England and elsewhere. Here Undershaft speaks for Shaw, and the industrialist's factory and surrounding township are the instruments intended to "save" his workers, and his daughter Barbara by extension, from "the crime of poverty" capitalist society inflicts on its members. But how is this anticipated deliverance to be effected? Undershaft himself will "lift," metaphorically, the seven "deadly" millstones he enumerated by providing his employees and their families with the requisite financial and associated resources they need to live, in principle, meaningful lives free from stifling pecuniary constraints.

So impressed was Cusins, a professor of Greek and Barbara Undershaft's future husband, with what Andrew Undershaft had achieved that he exclaimed: "Everything perfect! wonderful! real! It only needs a cathedral to be a heavenly city instead of a hellish one." (Ibid., p. 129). Cusins' morally ambiguous statement reflects the morally ambiguous nature of Andrew Undershaft and his business enterprise: purveying arms to enthusiastic buyers with no questions asked, provided the price-tag is met. At first glance, selling destructive weapons simpliciter, without any concern for motive and potential deployment, strikes the viewing or reading audience as ethically dubious, at a minimum. So, how then would the addition of a Christian church transform Undershaft's so-called hellish city into a heavenly one? Similarly, how can Shaw in his preface refer to the armaments dealer as "St. Andrew Undershaft," (Ibid., pp. 15–23) a figure who is referred to as a devilish Mephistophelean Prince of Darkness, whose pagan-like religion is "money and gunpowder"? Is there anything salutary in a commercial ethic that stipulates, my job is to sell you lethal munitions; how you use them is up to you? Yes, there is, in the context of the play, and Barbara tells us why, when she affirms that "the way of life lies through the factory of death." (Ibid., pp. 93, 152).

For Shaw, there is a feasible means of raising hell to heaven, and Undershaft Senior shows the way. To start, we lift the millstones from everyone's neck by ridding the world of pestilent poverty, as the model factory and surrounding town Undershaft has built illustrates in miniature. For Shaw, money per se is not evil; it only tends in that direction when people lack sufficient funds to live decently. Undershaft solves that problem. He uses his—some would say, mistakenly, in Shaw's view, "ill-gotten"—profits to ensure that those in his orbit have enough dollars to sustain themselves, not just by the skin of their teeth, but abundantly, in the manner the Nazarene lived and taught. We are obliged, Shaw held, not to be poor. It is the first order of business, so to speak, and in this regard, Undershaft succeeds brilliantly.

Next, we use the weaponry Undershaft purveys to defend civilization against those who seek to destroy it. That is, we only employ bullets and bombs defensively; in other words, we resort to second-order violence to combat first-order, aggressive, violence. Just as individuals have a non-negotiable right to self-defense, so long as they use proportional physical force, nations have the same inalienable right and the same correlative responsibility. In the Shavian universe, living is not a suicide pact; no one is obliged to offer the neck to an advancing blade. In this way, we make war on war, so people can go about their daily activities with peace of mind, knowing that deadly munitions, like lightning strikes, are extremely unlikely to rain down on their heads.

Undershaft also hints at a second avenue for making war on war, one that similarly implicates lifting the millstones. Shaw believed that capitalist dynamics incentivized wars of aggression. If so, he reasoned that supplanting capitalism with socialism would

accomplish two things at once: It would alleviate poverty and annul the main driver of battlefield belligerence. If everyone had enough resources to live comfortably, there would be no reason other than sheer deviancy to commit crimes against one's neighbor or for one country to attack another militarily, unprovoked. Were this utopian vision to be realized, *Major Barbara* suggests that Undershaft would be delighted to fold his tent and go home—once he determined that England and other democratic countries had adequate stockpiles of weaponry to pose a strong deterrent to any hostile actions bad actors or rogue states might contemplate (the same holds for any of his successors). In retirement, should Undershaft be so fortunate to reach that status, he might even add a cathedral to his heavenly municipality. For the ever-hopeful Shaw, ending poverty and nullifying the impetus behind armed conflict would be giant steps toward reaching the utopian just society he envisioned. And, in his view, there was no better way to free the world from these scourges than to supplant a voracious capitalism with a democratically orchestrated and nonviolent transition to a compassionate Jesusian socialism.

Such was the thrust of *Major Barbara*, and Shaw reprised his animus toward capitalism in *The Apple Cart*. Here, plutocracy—represented by the conglomerate Breakages Limited—is synonymous with capitalism and its excesses. Breakages specializes in manufacturing products with built-in obsolescence and exercises a pernicious influence on the media and politics. Opposed to the giant corporation, whose predatory actions harm the commonweal, is King Magnus, a wise, crafty, and responsible monarch, who believes in democracy. Magnus embodies “the eternal against the expedient” rather than “the day's gluttony.” (Shaw [1930] 1988). The everlasting values the king endorses are those of the Jesusian social gospel, which emphasizes caring and sharing, while the prevailing cupidity stands for the avariciousness the captains of industry demonstrate in their monomaniacal pursuit of profit, no matter how many lives they impoverish in the process.

In the end, the exceedingly popular Magnus outmaneuvered Prime Minister Proteus and his squabbling do-nothing cabinet by employing a clever stratagem. Proteus and his allies sought to reduce Magnus via ultimatum to a powerless cypher, but the king threatened to abdicate his throne and run for a Parliamentary seat as a commoner, which would—should he emerge victorious, as was the likely result of any future election—make him a much more potent political force than he was in his kingship. Through this ploy, Magnus retained the veto power that would enable him to continue his campaign against the corrosive corruption of Breakages. However, the play's implication was clear: Magnus' victory might prove temporary if the constitutional monarchy did not find a way to replace the unacceptable status quo with economic and governmental systems that were both efficient and humane. Shaw had an answer to this quandary. It was the same one he consistently offered. We must transition away from an immoral capitalism to an uplifting Jesusian socialism through peaceful democratic means.

Proteus is not the only antagonist who seeks to reduce Magnus to an impotent figurehead. Mr. Vanhatten, the effusively exuberant American Ambassador to the United Kingdom, arrives to inform the king and queen that the United States plans to cancel the Declaration of Independence and rejoin the British Commonwealth via a corporate merger of sorts—a proposal that in reality is a thinly veiled ruse, which Magnus readily sees through, to effect a neocolonial, hostile, capitalist takeover and subsequently transfer sovereignty from the United Kingdom to Washington, D.C. However, the always artful Magnus does not swallow the bait. Instead, he politely declines to accept the announcement with a warm embrace and declares that a formal response will be forthcoming at a later date. Magnus has no interest at all in succumbing to an Irish-inspired plot that would rob his country of its autonomy.¹⁶ He prefers to remain an adept monarch in his democratic nation rather than become a vassal “emperor” subservient to a plundering foreign force.

He chooses to be an implacable foe of malignant capitalism rather than the abject servant of a plutocratic power bent on domination.

As the interactions among Magnus, Proteus, and Vanhattan illustrate, the fundamental conflict in *The Apple Cart* is between democracy and plutocracy, between representative government and ruinous capitalism. We know where Shaw stands on the issue: with the former, not the latter—democracy must stay, and capitalism must go, he professed. But how does Shaw plan to reach this goal? His answer: using democratic processes to supplant capitalism with socialism, gradually and peacefully. The desired end-state is democratic socialism, a governmental system dedicated, among other things, to eradicating the poverty laissez-faire economics inflicts on the polity by providing hard-working, civic-minded people with a flourishing quality of life.

Lifting the millstones Undershaft enumerated in *Major Barbara*, however, requires competent political leaders with integrity, who are free from the clutches of capitalist special interests, at a minimum. Statespeople like these were rare in England and everywhere else, as Shaw saw things. In his view, democracy was dysfunctional, in need of radical reform if it were going to meet the needs of those in its care. Never short of innovative ideas, Shaw had proposals for rectifying this troubling situation. He wanted, for example, to test prospective candidates for political office in a variety of subjects, across the academic disciplines and arts spectrum, in order to ensure, as much as humanly possible, that only the best, the brightest, the most compassionate, and the most capable individuals became upper-tier public servants. He also advocated for paired men and women tickets in the electoral process, as well as for specialized panels to deal with complex matters of concern. In this way, Shaw did everything he could to help his country move steadily toward achieving something approaching a Jesusian kingdom of heaven on earth. Like-minded individuals, he thought, would have to pick up the mantle and participate in the restoration effort. Otherwise, visionary utopians were destined for disappointment, Shaw believed.

Similarly, Rorty was dissatisfied with the politics of the United States. He thought that America had a long way to go to live up to her Jeffersonian ideals. The USA, in his view, was still racist, capitalist, materialistic, corrupt, and neglectful of the poor to an intolerable degree. The ever-widening wealth gap was especially repugnant to him, as was the palpable animus directed toward the culturally liberal and the non-straight. Like his fellow utopian pragmatist and Jesusian—Shaw—Rorty the philosopher was preoccupied with how humans ought to live their lives. Their primary responsibility, he maintained, was acting in ways that increased wellbeing and decreased suffering, which included being good citizens, caring for one another compassionately, and living on a healthy planet at peace with itself. Were Rorty alive today, he would be shocked but not surprised by his country's precipitous slide into autocracy. In a 2003 interview, Rorty was prescient when he said:

I think that we are slipping under the control of the right in America. The Republicans are likely to dominate Congress. What we call the religious right, the Christian fundamentalists, are likely to have an increasing amount of control over the Republican Party. So I think that there will be a persistent attempt by the Republicans to repeal the New Deal, to get rid of the welfare state, to take more and more money for the rich. I'm very pessimistic about American politics.¹⁷

The nightmare scenario Rorty prophesied for the United States has been realized, in spades. The nation's political landscape and its deformed ethos would be unacceptable to him. What would not have changed, were Rorty still with us, was his unwavering Shavian-like commitment to freeing the world from cruelty along the utopian lines the Nazarene taught millennia ago. Pervasive hope; a constantly expanding circle of solidarity; broad-based compassion; enduring anti-authoritarianism; a colorblind society; a live-and-

let-live attitude within the bounds of decency; a socialist inspired structure of societal safety nets to protect the variously challenged; an optimally functioning democracy that secures liberty and equality; a responsible government that conscientiously serves the people's needs; a pragmatist approach to resolving pressing problems besetting the commonweal; a literate, informed, and engaged citizenry; and a peace loving people—these were the values Rorty affirmed; and Shaw advocated for them as well, and did so tirelessly, as did his American analogue. In these critical respects, there is no conceptual distance between Shaw and Rorty.

4. Conclusions

Bernard Shaw was arguably the second greatest dramatist in the English language after Shakespeare. He was also a skilled polemicist. Richard Rorty was arguably one of the most impactful philosophers of the twentieth century. Philosophy was never the same after him. Both thinkers were Jesusian pragmatists who rejected traditional Christianity. They embraced the Nazarene's social-gospel values, but jettisoned the supernatural aspects of orthodoxy, including the OmniGod, the Christ of theology, the Resurrection, original sin, and vicarious atonement. The two believed that, barring an extinction event, humankind would rise or fall by its own efforts alone. In their view, no messiah waited patiently in the wings to make a grand, saving entrance at the ordained moment, trailing clouds of glory; nor did they think that passively relying on the good fortune of chance was a winning strategy. The postulated non-deterministic structure of the universe also meant, for them, that no outcome was set from time immemorial. In other words, the future remained open, and perhaps even accommodating, to those intrepid souls who left the sidelines and tried to help build just societies through carefully planned experimental efforts—revisable, as necessary, depending on the results returned—that took projected social costs into account, locally as well as globally.

Shaw and Rorty were intrepid souls in the intended sense. They devoted their lives to working toward achieving something approximating a Jesusian kingdom of heaven on earth. They understood that no human ideal could ever be fully realized because mortals were finite, flawed, and, for all their good intentions, error-prone creatures compelled by contingencies to do the best they could under circumstances that were always uncertain and changing. To confront the unruly flux of existence, Shaw and Rorty proposed a pragmatist strategy, grounded in a realistic conception of utopia, which offered humankind what they took to be an ethically efficacious means of making the future better than the present in terms of quality of life. The pair were steadfast visionaries, yet they avoided counterproductive pie-in-the-sky thinking in their shared perspectives on the exigencies of existence and what was needed to confront them sanely and compassionately.

For Shaw and Rorty, we are responsible to no sovereign power but ourselves, our fellow beings, future generations, and, to a lesser extent, nonhuman living things, for the actions we take. In the universe they contemplated, no transcendental agencies or terrestrial totalitarians legitimately dictated the morality that governed the rightness or wrongness of our behavior. The onus is on us, individually and collectively, to do good in the world. Should empathetic Jesusian conduct along pragmatist lines become normative, as Shaw and Rorty advocated, the species might one day come as close as humanly possible to achieving planetary wellness within the utopian social gospel framework the Nazarene proclaimed. This was their hope, and it ought to be ours as well.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Interested readers might wish to consult two essays of mine that explore the similarities between Shaw and Rorty, neither one of which explicitly treats the notion of utopia they share: “Bernard Shaw + Richard Rorty = Two Dialectical Peas in a Jesusian Pragmatist Pod,” *SHAW: The Journal of Bernard Shaw Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Einsohn 2023): 164–92; and “Bernard Shaw, Paul Ricoeur, and Richard Rorty: Three Like-Minded Advocates for a Vibrant Literary Culture Grounded in Empathy,” forthcoming, *SHAW: The Journal of Bernard Shaw Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Einsohn 2026).
- ² Rorty (1999a); at 72, 81 (original emphasis).
- ³ Rorty was raised in a family with entrenched socialist beliefs and noted that “I grew up knowing that all decent people were, if not Trotskyites, at least socialists” (Rorty 1999b; at 6). His grandfather, Walter Rauschenbusch, was a leading figure in the Social Gospel movement, which dedicated itself to applying New Testament values to social problems. These socialist roots were reflected in Rorty’s abiding attempts to blend American pragmatism with Jesusian social democratic principles in ways that promoted freedom, equality, and justice for everyone, without invoking traditional religious or Marxist frameworks. The same could be said of Shaw, who was equally committed to democratic socialism and all that it entailed in terms of the caring and sharing orientation the Nazarene embodied; and he, too, rejected supernatural religion as well as key elements of Marx’s ideology, such as the labor theory of value, the necessity of class warfare, and the inevitability of a violent revolution led by the proletariat.
- ⁴ Richard Rorty, “Ethics Without Principles,” 79–80.
- ⁵ Rorty (1995), especially the opening pages of the essay.
- ⁶ Richard Rorty, “Relativism: Finding and Making,” in his *Philosophy and Social Hope*, xvi–xxxii; at xxv.
- ⁷ Rorty (2020); at 19. Kindle.
- ⁸ Emily Dickinson’s poem, “Hope Is the Thing with Feathers,” is widely available on the internet.
- ⁹ Rorty ([1991] 2011); at 208. Kindle.
- ¹⁰ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Social Hope*, vii, xxix.
- ¹¹ Rorty (2021): at 23; see also, 15–16. Kindle.
- ¹² Shaw (1963b), Vol 2, c; a few pages later, Shaw wrote that “Discouragement does in fact mean death” (ibid., cvi).
- ¹³ It is important to note that Shaw considered both the evolutionary process and human beings to be imperfect. In his conceptual framework, they each proceed experimentally, by trial-and-error, in their respective domains, and each is susceptible to making mistakes, which, to Shaw’s way of thinking, accounts for the evil in the world—be the aberration deliberate, unintentional, coerced, or caused by nature. This means, among other things, that since we are neither indefectible nor omniscient, all of us ought to journey through life as Jesusian pragmatists in good standing, in the manner Shaw and Rorty would endorse.
- ¹⁴ Shaw ([1913] 1946). Kindle. In addressing the supposed conflict between science and religion, Rorty noted that “these two areas of culture seem to fulfill two different sets of desires. Science enables us to predict and control, whereas religion offers us a larger hope, and thereby something to live for” (Rorty, *Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism*, 22). And the religion Rorty had in mind was Shavian Jesusianism, even if he never used the phrase. Why so? Because Rorty’s conception of religion—just like Shaw’s—was a blend of Nazarene social gospel values and pragmatist practices that discarded the supernatural elements of orthodox Christianity and was intended to govern both individual and political conduct. In short, the religious views of Shaw and Ricoeur are identical in substance. (For a detailed discussion of this issue, see my “Bernard Shaw + Richard Rorty.”)
- ¹⁵ But this does not mean that hope is inextinguishable. Mental health professionals have taught us that loneliness, fear, and extremely stressful situations can lead to hopelessness.
- ¹⁶ When King Magnus asks Vanhattan, the American Ambassador to the United Kingdom, who was the source of the annexation plot? the latter answers: “the President of the Irish Free State,” who “is known to his friends as Mick O’Rafferty” (Act II). Thus, in my view, the ultimate source of the scheme is Irish-initiated, and here I believe Shaw is taking a satirical swipe at the Commonwealth for its imperialism toward Ireland.
- ¹⁷ Giancarlo Marchett, “Interview [with] Richard Rorty,” n.p.

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