

out of the public realm of ideas, policies, common goals, and challenges and into the interior lives of others. Here again she finds a parallel with developments in Athenian history; specifically, invective becomes common in fourth-century-B.C.E. oratory. Her main aim is to expose the underside of a politics that revolves around invoking good intentions and raising suspicions regarding the motives of the participants, and to question a leading tradition of critical thinking about democratic deliberations—Habermasian discourse ethics. A Habermasian quest for communicative purity can bolster the disturbing trend in contemporary politics toward examining “the presumed interior [lives and moral qualities] of fellow citizens” (p. 182), rather than their public persons and views.

The main argument of this book is that “focus[ing] on the personal sincerity of a speaker perversely hinders our deliberative potentials” (p. 73). Markovits further argues that we can find in Plato’s use of irony and mythmaking in the *Gorgias* and *Republic* a critique of Athenian practices of *parrhesia* that illuminates just why this is so, and that we need to look to the Arendtian idea of an “ethic of trustworthiness,” not discourse ethics, for help imagining an alternative to the deleterious sincerity ethic and the development of practices that exercise judgment.

There is a lot to admire in Markovits’s book. She advances a bold thesis. Her critique of the ideal of Habermasian sincerity is strong. Her account of how “irony can be a vital component of a democratic civic education and deliberations” rings true in this era of influence for *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and Tina Fey’s appearances on *Saturday Night Live* (p. 84). And, although the discussions of *parrhesia* unfortunately display little familiarity with ancient sources beyond Plato and make far too little use of Arlene Saxonhouse’s splendid *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens* (2006), the author’s command of a wide range of scholarly studies rooted in various disciplinary traditions is apparent.

Nevertheless, one aspect of the work diminishes its power. Markovits often loses sight of how *unlike* are the contemporary sincerity ethic and *parrhesia* and thus also misses some of the critical purchase we can draw from this ancient ideal. She is right that they both inspire “anti-rhetorical” rhetorical posturing that may sometimes license personal abuse and excessive attention to motives. But practicing *parrhesia* cannot be reduced to a speaking strategy or effort to expose the morals of competing speakers. *Parrhesia* was a civic ideal that called upon democratic citizens not just to speak in a certain way (frankly) and with good will (meaning not only honestly but without seditious or treasonous intent) but, when necessary, to courageously utter a certain kind of *content*. As a civic ideal, *parrhesia* sanctioned dissenting and disquieting speech, speech that aimed to unsettle personal convictions and disrupt an orderly, fixed, established consensus. For example, if Thucydides represents Cleon in his speech

about Mytilene as posing as a *parrhesiastes*, as Markovits suggests (p. 74–75), it is likely because he presents Cleon daring the Athenians to shake off the delusion that their empire is anything but a “tyranny” and not simply because he has Cleon deploy, perversely, a “rhetoric of anti-rhetoric” and indulge in invective. The ideal of *parrhesia* required citizens not just to “engage in speech devoid of rhetorical ornament” (p. 74), but to speak out against persistent illusions and complacency after having first interrogated their own beliefs and assumptions. This is the meaning Socrates engages. It is also what Cornel West finds so compelling about *parrhesia* in *Democracy Matters* (2004). And it is this meaning that Markovits neglects when she contends that Plato’s demonstration of the enormous deliberative value of irony and mythmaking delivers not only a critique of some perversions of *parrhesia*, but a “subversion of *parrhesia*” (p. 91). Had she more carefully attended to *parrhesia*’s difference from the sincerity ethic, she might have recognized that Plato’s interest in irony and myth may be part of an engagement with *parrhesia*, that is, with the following question: What forms of discourse in what settings can deliver on the promise of *parrhesia*? Had Markovits considered Edward R. Murrow’s journalism, a whistleblower’s news conference, or Richard Pryor’s comedy contemporary analogs of *parrhesia*, rather than the televised rants of Bill O’Reilly and Keith Oberman, she might have considered enlisting *parrhesia* in the project of improving public deliberation instead of suggesting that its valorization gives aid and comfort to its slayer.

**Frederick Douglass: Race and the Rebirth of American Liberalism.** By Peter C. Myers. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008. 272p. \$34.95.  
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— Bill E. Lawson, *University of Memphis*

How could the United States Constitution be interpreted as an antislavery document? What made American chattel slavery inhumane? What should be done with the “Negro” after emancipation? Frederick Douglass thought about these questions, and his answers have been the subject of a great deal of scholarly debate. Some scholars have argued that while Douglass may have been perceptive in his understanding of the evils of slavery, he was nonetheless naive in his theory of constitutional interpretation and underestimated the depth of both white supremacist thought and racism in the United States. In this well-written, researched, and argued book, Peter C. Myers adeptly shows that there was a deep and profound understanding of legal theory, history, human nature, and philosophy underpinning Douglass’s reading of the Constitution, and that Douglass had a much better understanding of the future of race relations in the United States than many of his contemporaries and some current political pundits.

According to Meyers, “Douglass’s great theme was rational hopefulness for the ultimate triumph of justice in U.S. race relations” (p. 14). One might wonder how Douglass could have been hopeful about race relations when at the time of his death, race relations were beginning to reach their lowest point since the abolition of slavery. Myers argues that Douglass’s belief in natural law and the natural rights of humans to be free, coupled with his basic understanding that the United States was founded on these beliefs, buoyed his hopefulness. That hopefulness was also rooted in his understanding of slavery, which he saw as harmful to both the slave and the slaveholder. It rendered slaves less than fully human, and denied them any control over even the most intimate aspects of their lives. It also corrupted the moral fiber of the slave owners by granting them excessive power over the lives and bodies of others. Douglass regarded slavery as an evil and despotic system contrary to nature, to American political ideals, and to the U.S. Constitution itself. Slavery had expanded, he believed, against the aims and expectations of the Framers. He well understood the compromises over slavery that attended the original ratification in 1787, and yet he believed that because the Constitution was established to follow the dictates of natural law and to ensure the natural rights of individuals, in a deep sense it was at odds with slavery.

Douglass’s view of the Constitution, properly understood, as inconsistent with slavery was the subject of much discussion and debate, and his own views were shaped by this debate. Douglass started out himself as a follower of William Lloyd Garrison, who wrote in the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* that the Constitution was “the most bloody and heaven-daring arrangement ever made by men for the continuance and protection of a system of the most atrocious villianity ever exhibited on earth.” And yet over time, he came to shift his position, not on the evil of slavery but on the value of the Constitution and the sense in which it could be regarded by abolitionists as a source of intellectual support and inspiration. Drawing on letters and speeches, Myers shows that Douglass revised his thinking with care, addressing head-on the challenges to his revised position on the Constitution’s liberatory potential. Arguing that the Framers had regarded slavery as a short-lived institution destined soon to disappear, he regarded the hard-line position adopted by the South and its proslavery advocates as a violation of the spirit of the Constitution and to the basic national compact that it established. He insisted that this gave antislavery states the right to abolish slavery across the nation. Myers carefully explores the evolution of Douglass’s thinking on these issues, which culminated in his view that it would take a civil war to dissolve the institution of slavery in the United States.

After the Civil War, Douglass’s job was not done. He worked tirelessly to keep black Americans socially, politically, and morally included and invested in the United States. As the minimal gains from Reconstruction were being slowly

eroded, he retained his faith in the ability of Americans both black and white to weather the racial storms. Some scholars have read Douglass’s proclamation after the Civil War that blacks should be left alone to rise or fall by their own merit to mean that after the war, blacks were to be left at the whims and capriciousness of their former oppressors. Myers correctly argues that this view misreads Douglass’s understanding of the role of the state in the lives of blacks after emancipation. Post emancipation Douglass was for the enactment of civil rights legislation and governmental policies that would ease the move from slavery to equality. He was aware of the challenges facing blacks as they emerged from the darkness of slavery into the light of freedom, and he was clear that this emancipation could not be accomplished without the help of the state.

In the last years of his life, Douglass had to deal with the growing alienation that many blacks were beginning to feel toward the United States. He argued against emigration proposals, and worked to engender feelings of attachment to the country based on a more inclusive conception of citizenship which, he argued, was in fact the latent promise of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. He thought that through hard work and political participation, African Americans and white Americans could realize the goal of true racial harmony.

Myers has done Douglass scholarship a great service. In a fair and even-handed manner, he has taken on the history of that scholarship to show that Douglass was much more astute about philosophy, legal studies, and human nature than many of his biographers have appreciated. Indeed, Douglass seems to have had a deeper understanding of the meaning of liberal democratic thought and its impact on the psyche of Americans than most of his contemporaries. In this regard, as Myers rightly argues, Douglass’s writings are of continuing relevance for our understanding of race relations today.

As I write this review, an African American, Barack Obama, has just been elected the first nonwhite president of the United States. A huge threshold has been crossed, and race relations in America will never be the same. Myers argues that Douglass saw these changes coming. Perhaps they vindicate his civic faith in the United States. In any case, Myers’s book makes clear that Douglass was not simply an abolitionist hero but an astute theorist of the rebirth of American liberalism.

**The Nature of Rights at the American Founding and Beyond.** Edited by Barry Alan Shain. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008. 352p. \$45.00.  
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— Michael P. Zuckert, *University of Notre Dame*

Rights—we can’t seem to live with them and we can’t seem to live without them. This recent collection of essays on America’s “rights tradition” bears witness to the deep