The Abuse of Evil

The Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11

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Contents

Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass ~~attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditio~~ that make men abstain from evil-doing or even "condition" them against it?

<div style="text-align: right;">

Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mi*

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Preface

On August 31, 2001, I completed the manuscript of my book, *Radical Evil*. Eleven days later, the mo[st] dramatic terrorist attack in history took place. No one now doubts that the world changed on th[at] infamous day. Overnight (literally), we were bombarded with images and talk of evil. My boo[k] *Radical Evil* was an attempt to comprehend the horrendous evils experienced in the twentieth centur[y]. I wanted to see what we might learn about the meaning of evil from the modern philosophic[al] tradition. I subtitled the book "A Philosophical Interrogation," and I interrogated Kant, Hege[l], Schelling, Freud, Nietzsche, Levinas, Jonas, and Arendt in order to learn what they teach us about th[e] nature of evil. I concluded the work with a series of theses. Here is my first thesis: "*Interrogating ev[il] is an ongoing, open-ended process.* Throughout I have indicated my skepticism about the very idea [of] a theory of evil, if this is understood as a complete account of what evil is. I do not think that such [a] theory is possible, because we cannot anticipate what new forms of evil or vicissitudes of evil w[ill] appear." I did not realize, at the time, just how prophetic my claim would be.

After 9/11, I considered whether I wanted to revise my book, but I decided to let it stand as I ha[d] written it. Since 9/11, evil has become a popular, "hot" topic. Politicians, conservatives, preacher[s], and the media are all speaking about evil. Frankly, I have been extremely distressed by the post-9/1[1] "evil talk." I argue that the new discourse of good and evil, which divides the world according to th[is] stark and simplistic dichotomy, is an *abuse of evil*. Traditionally, the discourse of evil in our religiou[s], philosophical, and literary traditions has been intended to provoke *thinking*, questioning, and inquir[y]. But today, the appeal to evil is being used as a political tool to obscure complex issues, to bloc[k] genuine thinking, and to stifle public discussion and debate. I argue that what we are now confronti[ng] is a *clash of mentalities*, not a clash of civilizations. A mentality that is drawn to absolutes, allege[d] moral certainties, and simplistic dichotomies stands in contrast to a mentality that questions t[he] appeal to absolutes in politics, that argues that we must not confuse subjective moral *certitude* wi[th] objective moral *certainty*, and that is skeptical of an uncritical rigid dichotomy between the forces [of] evil and the forces of good. I call this mentality "pragmatic fallibilism." I also challenge wha[t I] consider to be the unjustified and outrageous claim that without an appeal to absolutes and fixe[d] moral certainties we lack the grounds to act decisively in fighting our real enemies. There is [no] incompatibility between fallibilism and a passionate commitment to oppose injustice and immoralit[y]. I also argue that the post-9/11 abuse of evil *corrupts* both democratic politics and religion. There is [no] place for absolutes in democratic politics. And we violate what is most vital in the world religion[s] when we uncritically assume that religious faith is a *sufficient* basis for knowing what is good an[d] evil. There are religious and nonreligious fundamentalists and fanatics. And there are religiou[s] believers and nonreligious secularists whose beliefs, deeds, and emotions are informed by a robu[st] fallibilism. The clash of mentalities cuts across the religious/secular divide. The stakes are high in th[is] clash of mentalities in shaping how we think and act in the world today – and in the future.

Introduction

Today our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature.

> George W. Bush, Address to the Nation,
> September 11, 2001

America has shown its evil intentions and the proud Iraqi people cannot accept it.

> Moktada al-Sadr, April 7, 2004

What do we mean when we call an event, an intention, a deed, or a human person evil? What are we referring to when we use evil as a *noun,* when we say "Today our nation saw *evil.*" There is something chilling and powerfully emotional when we speak of evil. We feel that we know precisely what we intend. There is no ambiguity or confusion about what really is evil – even if we are at a loss to define what we mean. And we also feel that there can be no compromise with evil. We must fight to eliminate it. When challenged to clarify what we mean by evil, we may appeal to other expressions such as unjust, immoral, wrong, sinful, horrible, wicked, malevolent, sadistic, vicious, etc. But none of these is as strong, terse, or compact as evil. To add emphasis – to the name the worst – we speak of *absolute, pure,* or *radical evil.* Although we sometimes compare evils and use expressions such as "the lesser of two evils," more often we think of evil in absolute terms. Evil is evil; there are no gradations here.

The concern with evil is as old as civilization itself. It is fundamental for all the major religions. Our greatest philosophers, theologians, poets, and novelists have struggled with the meaning and consequences of evil. It is a central theme in Plato, St Augustine, Shakespeare, Milton, and Dostoevsky. Theologians and philosophers speak of "the problem of evil," or the problem of "theodicy" – a word invented by the eighteenth-century philosopher Leibniz. If one believes that there is a God who is omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent, then the question arises as to how we can reconcile the *appearance* of evil with the existence of such a God. The reason I stress *appearance* is because some thinkers have denied the *reality* of evil. Evil is a lack or privation of what is good; it lacks real existence. Others affirm the reality of evil, but claim that human beings, by misusing their free will, are responsible for the evil that exists in the world: free will, a gift from God, involves the *choice* of good or evil. Still others have challenged the idea that God is really omnipotent. If we survey the historical literature dealing with the "problem of evil," we find that almost every possibility has been explored which would reconcile the idea of a benevolent Creator with the existence of evil in this world. There are even some religious doctrines (considered to be heretical by Christianity) that deny the benevolence of the Deity. Actually, the traditional "problem of evil" is not concerned primarily with defining or characterizing the *meaning* of evil. Rather – whatever we take to be evil – the question is how we can reconcile the existence of evil with a belief in a loving God. The task is to "explain" or "justify" evil in a way that does not make God responsible for it. Sometimes the problem of evil is used to challenge the existence of such a God. Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov argues passionately that the gratuitous murder of innocent children cannot be reconciled with a belief in a benevolent God.

Evil has been closely associated with suffering – especially suffering for which there does not seem

to be any meaning or justification. This is why the Book of Job is frequently cited as one of th[e] earliest discussions of how the apparent evil of Job's suffering can be reconciled with faith in a ju[st] God. It would be a serious mistake to think that the "problem of evil" is exclusively a religiou[s] problem. Secular thinkers have raised similar questions. They too want to know how to make sense [of] a world in which evil seems to be so intractable. Nietzsche declared that human beings do n[ot] repudiate suffering as such: it is *meaningless* suffering that is so intolerable. And the Frenc[h] philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has argued that *any* attempt (religious or secular) to *justify* [or] rationalize the horror of evil is a form of theodicy; we must resist the *temptation* of theodicy.

At the beginning of the modern age, many thinkers classified evils as either natural or mora[l.] Natural evils are those that occur without *direct* human intervention. Perhaps the most famou[s] example was the devastating Lisbon earthquake that struck the city on the morning of November [1,] 1755, and buried thousands of persons in the rubble. The question – debated throughout Europe – w[as] whether such a terrible event was compatible with a faith in the Christian God. What kind of G[od] would allow the death of so many innocent people? The best minds in Europe, including Voltair[e,] Rousseau, and Kant, struggled with the question. And it caught the popular imagination in pamphle[ts] and sermons of the time. Today, most of us do not think of such terrible natural events as earthquake[s,] tsunamis, tornadoes, and hurricanes as manifestations of evil. The entire category of natural evils h[as] been called into question, in part because of what Max Weber calls the "disenchantment of nature[."] Susan Neiman claims that the Lisbon earthquake marked the birth of modernity because "it demande[d] recognition that nature and morality are split" (Neiman 2004: 267).

The discourse about evil in the twentieth century has been extremely paradoxical. There are som[e] philosophers and theologians who have continued to struggle with the classic problem of evil. B[ut] these discussions have become specialized and esoteric; they are remote from the concerns [of] everyday life. Moral philosophers tend to focus on what is just and unjust, right and wrong, moral an[d] immoral. Kant, who many think of as the greatest of modern moral philosophers, argued that t[he] *justification* of moral claims ought to be independent of our religious beliefs. We may learn ou[r] morality – our sense of what is right and wrong, good and bad – from our religious upbringing, b[ut] this does not mean that the *justification* of our morality is based on religious beliefs. Even those mor[al] philosophers who disagree sharply with Kant's claims about the foundations of morality general[ly] accept the claim that morality should be clearly distinguished from religion.[1] Consequently, man[y] moral philosophers have avoided discussing evil, because evil is so intimately tied to religiou[s] discourse.

But at the same time, ever since we have become aware of the full horrors of the Nazi period an[d] the perverse cruelty of the Shoah, Auschwitz has come to symbolize the most extreme evil of our tim[e] – an evil unprecedented in history. Hannah Arendt is one of the very few thinkers who sought t[o] comprehend what is distinctive about the new form of evil that burst forth with twentieth-centur[y] totalitarianism. Appropriating Kant's expression *radical evil*, she tells us:

Evil has proved to be more radical than expected. In objective terms, modern crimes are n[ot] provided for in the Ten Commandments. Or: the Western Tradition is suffering from th[e] preconception that the most evil things human beings can do arise from the vice of selfishness. Y[et] we know that the greatest evils or radical evil has nothing to do any more with such human[,] understandable, sinful motives. (Arendt and Jaspers 1992: 166)

But what is radical evil? Radical evil is making human beings superfluous as human beings. Th[is] happens as soon as all unpredictability – which, in human beings, is equivalent to spontaneity – [is] eliminated. We can understand more fully what she means by turning to the description she gives [of]

total domination. She presents a three-stage model of the "logic" of total domination. It is in th[e] concentration and death camps that we find the "laboratories" of totalitarian regimes. And it is in th[e] camps that we find the most radical experiments for changing the character of human beings.

"The first essential step on the road to total domination is to kill the juridical person in ma[n]" (Arendt 1968: 447). This started long before the Nazis established the death camps. Arendt is referrin[g] to the legal restrictions that stripped Jews (and other groups such as homosexuals and gypsies) of the[ir] juridical rights. "The aim of an arbitrary system is to destroy the civil rights of the whole populatio[n], who ultimately become just as outlawed in their own country as the stateless and the homeless. T[he] destruction of man's rights, the killing of the juridical person in him, is a perquisite for dominatin[g] him entirely" (Arendt 1968: 451). Inmates in concentration camps have no rights.

"The next decisive step in the preparation of living corpses is the murder of the moral person [in] man. This is done by making martyrdom, for the first time in history, impossible" (Arendt 1968: 451[).] The SS, who supervised the camps, were perversely brilliant in corrupting all forms of huma[n] solidarity. They succeeded in making questions of conscience questionable and equivocal.

> When a man is faced with the alternative of betraying and thus murdering his friends or of sendin[g] his wife and children, for whom he is in every sense responsible, to their death; and when eve[n] suicide would mean the immediate murder of his own family, how is he to decide? The alternativ[e] is no longer between good and evil, but between murder and murder. Who could solve the mor[al] dilemma of the Greek mother, who was allowed by the Nazis to choose which of her three childr[en] should be killed? (Arendt 1968: 452)

But this is not yet the worst. There is a third step on the road to total domination – and it is here th[at] we come face to face with the core of radical evil.

> After the murder of the moral person and annihilation of the juridical person, the destruction [of] individuality is almost always successful . . . For to destroy individuality is to destroy spontaneit[y,] man's power to begin something new out of his own resources, something that cannot be explaine[d] on the basis of reactions to environment and events. (Arendt 1968: 455)

The camps served the ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled condition[s,] spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior and of transforming the human personality in[to] a mere thing. There was a systematic attempt to transform human beings into "living corpses," [to] fabricate human beings who were not quite human – who were at once human and inhuman. This [is] what Arendt takes to be the quintessence of radical evil; this is what she means by making huma[n] beings as human beings superfluous. Arendt is referring to those living corpses who were calle[d] *Muselmann* – so graphically described by Primo Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz.

> Their life is short, but their number is endless; they the *Muselmänner,* the drowned, they form t[he] backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-me[n] who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead in them, already too empty to really suffe[r.] One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which th[ey] have no fear, as they are too tired to understand.
> *They crowd my memory with their faceless presence, and if I could enclose all the evil of our tim[e]* *in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with he[ad]* *dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be see[n.]* (Levi 1986: 90, emphasis *added)*[2]

When Arendt described radical evil in *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* she focused on describing t̶h̶ phenomenon – the systematic transformation of human beings into something less than fully huma She didn't explicitly explore the motivations of the Nazi perpetrators, although she did speak of t̶ absolutely cold and systematic destruction of human bodies. This was the clear intention of those w̶ administered the camps. But the question of motives and intentions became much more problemat̶ for her when she reported on the trial of Adolph Eichmann. Arendt called into question one of o̶u̶ most central and entrenched moral and legal convictions: namely, that people who do evil deeds mu̶ have evil motives and intentions. They are vicious, sadistic, or wicked. She claimed that Eichma̶n̶ was not a sadistic monster. He was "terrifyingly normal"; he was "a new type of criminal wh̶ commits his crimes in circumstances that make it wellnigh impossible to know or feel that he is doi̶ wrong" (Arendt 1965: 276). His *deeds* were monstrous, and he deserved to hang, but his motives a̶ intentions were banal. One of the clearest statements of what Arendt means by the "banality of evil" in her 1971 lecture "Thinking and Moral Considerations."

> Some years ago, reporting the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem, I spoke of the "banality of evil" a̶ meant with this no theory or doctrine but something quite factual, the phenomenon of evil dee̶ committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickednes̶ pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was perha̶ extraordinary shallowness. However monstrous the deeds were, the doer was neither monstrous n̶ demonic, and the only specific characteristic one could detect in his past as well as in his behavi̶ during the trial and the preceding police examination was something entirely negative: it was n̶ stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think. (Arendt 1971: 417)

Susan Neiman sums up why *Eichmann in Jerusalem* makes such an important contribution understanding evil in our time – and why it is still so controversial.

> Auschwitz embodied evil that confuted two centuries of modern assumptions about intention.
>   Those assumptions identify evil and evil intention so thoroughly that denying the latter normally viewed as a way of denying the former. Where evil intention is absent, we may ho̶ agents liable for the wrongs they inflict, but we view them as matters of criminal negligenc̶ Alternatively, anyone who denies that criminal intention is present in a particular action is thoug̶ to exonerate the criminal. This is the source of the furor that still surrounds Arendt's *Eichmann Jerusalem,* the twentieth century's most important philosophical contribution to the problem evil. The conviction that guilt requires malice and forethought led most readers to conclude th̶ Arendt denied guilt because she denied malice and forethought – though she often repeated th̶ Eichmann was guilty, and was convinced that he ought to hang. Her main point is that Eichmann̶ harmless intentions did *not* mitigate his responsibility. (Neiman 2004: 271–2)

Historians have raised many questions about the factual accuracy of Arendt's portrait of Eichman̶ but this does not diminish the significance of her main point – that normal people with banal motiv̶ and intentions can commit horrendous crimes and do evil deeds.[3] But despite the lack of ev̶ intentions, they are fully responsible for their acts. Furthermore, Arendt's warning is as relevant for today as it was when she wrote it: "The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people wh̶ never made up their minds to be or to do either evil or good" (Arendt 1977b: 180).
    Auschwitz has come to epitomize the evil of the Nazi regime. But, unfortunately, it is only one the *many* genocides that have occurred in the twentieth century – and continue to take place in t̶ twenty-first century. Despite such slogans as "Never Again," genocides continue to break out

different parts of the world. Each one is distinctive in its circumstances, methods, and character, b
each brings forth new manifestations of evil. There is a protean quality about evil. It changes its sha
and takes on ever new forms. This is why it is so difficult to define or characterize. What is
frightening is that once some new evil is introduced, it sets a precedent for what may happen again.

When we survey historical attempts to comprehend evil, there is one characteristic that stands ou
The confrontation with evil provokes *thinking.* St Augustine draws on all his imaginative, emotiona
and intellectual powers to reconcile the appearance of evil with his firm belief in a loving Go
Leibniz thought we needed a new discipline – theodicy – to explain *rationally* why everything happe
for the best. Shakespeare explores the intricacies of the moral psychology of evil in such characters
Iago, Lady Macbeth, and Richard III. No one poses the questions about evil more brilliantly than t
characters in Dostoevsky's novels. And Hannah Arendt returned over and over again to confront ane
the evils of the twentieth century.

But something different happened on 9/11. Overnight (literally) our politicians and the media we
broadcasting about evil. We were flooded with headlines about evil and images displaying evil – fro
the repetitive TV images of the crumbling of the towers of the World Trade Center to the smirki
faces of Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. Suddenly the world was divided in a simple (a
simplistic) duality – the evil ones seeking to destroy us and those committed to the war against ev
There have been other times in recent history when politicians – especially in the United States – ha
used the rhetoric of good and evil to gain support from their constituencies. Ronald Reagan called t
Soviet Union "The Evil Empire." But, despite this rhetoric, Reagan was flexible and pragmatic in h
diplomatic negotiations when Gorbachev became the leader of the Kremlin. What is so disturbi
about the post-9/11 evil talk is its rigidity and popular appeal. Few stop to ask what we really mean
evil. What are we saying when we label our enemies "evil"? And who precisely are our enemies? It
presumably self-evident. In a world where there is fear and anxiety about unpredictable threats
terrorism that can strike at any place and any time, it is psychologically reassuring to label the ene
"evil."

I want to examine this new fashionable popularity of the discourse of good and evil. I will argu
that it represents an *abuse* of evil – a dangerous abuse. It is an abuse because, instead of inviting us
question and to *think,* this talk of evil is being used to stifle *thinking.* This is extremely dangerous in
complex and precarious world. The new discourse of good and evil lacks nuance, subtlety, an
judicious discrimination. In the so-called "War on Terror," nuance and subtlety are (mis) taken
signs of wavering, weakness, and indecision. But if we think that politics requires judgment, artf
diplomacy, and judicious discrimination, then this talk about absolute evil is profoundly *anti-politic*
As Hannah Arendt noted, "The absolute . . . spells doom to everyone when it is introduced into t
political realm" (Arendt 1963: 79). Our proclamations about evil and the "axis of evil" are matched
fanatical talk of a jihad committed to eliminating evil infidels. Consider the statement that I cited
my second epigraph to this introduction. If we substitute the phrase "Moktada al-Sadr and his milita
cohorts" for "America," and "the proud American people" for "the proud Iraqi people," then we hav
the type of statement that we hear so frequently from Washington. "Moktada al-Sadr and his milita
cohorts have shown their *evil* intentions and the proud American people cannot accept it."

Before 9/11 many fundamentalists and conservative Christian evangelicals exhibited restraint
condemning Islam. But since 9/11 this has changed. Franklin Graham, Billy Graham's son and heir
his ministry, declared that Islam is a "wicked and evil religion." This is the type of inflammator
rhetoric that is matched by the diatribes of Islamic fundamentalists against Christianity and Judais
as evil religions.

Samantha Power succinctly and eloquently describes the contrast between more thoughtf
responses to evil and the new stark opposition of black (evil) and white (good) in her recent comme

about Hannah Arendt.

> Arendt used the phrase "radical evil" to describe totalitarianism, and this idea has been broug
> back in circulation. Yet while Arendt did not allow such branding to deter her from exploring th
> sources of that evil, the less subtle minds who invoke the concept today do so to mute criticisms
> their responses. (Who, after all, can be against combating evil?)
>   But sheltering behind black-and-white characterizations is not only questionable for moral
> epistemological reasons. It poses a practical problem because it blinds us from understanding an
> thus undermines our long-term ability to prevent and surmount what we don't know and most fea
> "Evil," whether radical or banal, is met most often with unimaginativeness. Terrorism is a thre
> that demands a complex and elaborate effort to distinguish the sympathizers from the militants an
> to keep its converts to a minimum. Terrorism also requires understanding how our past policie
> helped give rise to such venomous grievances. (Power 2004: 37)

We need to probe the mentality that neatly divides the world into the forces of evil and the forces o
good, to understand its sources and its appeal. For this is an outlook that is currently widespread
American culture, from Hollywood to Washington, although it has a much longer history, reachin
back to ancient forms of Gnosticism and Manichaeism. It stands in sharp opposition to anoth
mentality that is more open and fallible, and has a robust sense of the unpredictability
contingencies – an outlook that demands questioning and inquiry along with firm resistance
concrete evils. I want to expose and challenge the claim frequently made by those who find simp
stark contrasts and oppositions so appealing. The champions of the new "evil" discourse claim that th
only alternative to such a firm and clear understanding of good and evil is a wishy-washy (secula
relativism that lacks the serious commitment to oppose and eliminate evil. This is the way in whic
many neo-conservatives characterize their political opponents. They are weak and vacillating; the
lack the moral conviction, realism, firmness, and fervor to do what is required to fight and elimina
evil. We are told that if we give up on "moral certainties," we will lack the backbone to fight ou
enemies. Nietzsche spoke about the desire for "metaphysical comfort." He meant the smugness an
selfrighteousness – the false sense of security – that arises when we *delude* ourselves into thinkin
that we have firm and absolutely *certain* foundations for our moral convictions. But we can (and mus
learn to live without "metaphysical comfort," to live with a realistic sense of unpredictab
contingencies – and at the same time to have a passionate commitment to understand, resist, and fig
concrete evils and oppose injustices. Questioning the new superficial discourse of good and ev
requires digging into the foundations of what is rarely critically examined – the dualistic outlook th
underlies this mentality. It also requires questioning one of the most pernicious assumptions made b
the champions of the new discourse. This is the assumption that firm moral convictions and action
rest upon moral certainties and absolutes.

Let me clarify what I will criticize. We frequently appeal to "certainty" in perfectly legitima
ways. If I am asked whether I saw John yesterday, I may reply that "I am absolutely certain that I sa
him." But if I discover that John was actually in another city yesterday, I do not hesitate to admit th
I was mistaken. "Certainty" is used to express our *certitude*, our subjective personal conviction th
something is so-and-so. But all too frequently there is a slide from this subjective sense of *certitude*
an objective sense of certainty – where we act as if the *strength* of our personal conviction is sufficie
to justify the objective *truth* of what we are claiming. *Subjective certitude or personal conviction i
itself is never sufficient to justify objective truth.* The mentality that I will be criticizing is one th
thinks that affirming one's certitude and the depth of one's sincere conviction is sufficient to justi
the claim of objective certainty.

There are also appeals to absolutes that may be perfectly legitimate. Many religious believers w[ill] appeal to God as their absolute. But it is always appropriate to ask what the person of faith mea[ns] thereby. What is her *understanding* of what she calls the absolute? Once we realize that any appeal [to] an absolute requires *understanding* and *interpretation,* then there is an opening for critical reflecti[on] on the truth and adequacy of one's claims. We enter what Wilfrid Sellars has called the "logical spac[e] of reasons," of asking for and giving reasons – and this may include *religious* reasons. But there a[re] those who refuse to enter this space. They do not think that any further justification, discussion, [or] understanding is necessary. To put the point in a slightly more technical way, I am denying that the[re] are any *self-authenticating epistemological* episodes – episodes where the mere *having* of su[ch] episodes yields genuine knowledge. This is what Sellars calls "the myth of the given" (Sellars 196[3,] 140).

Finally, when I challenge a rigid dualistic mentality – one that divides the world into the "forces [of] good" and the dark "forces of evil" – I am not calling into question the importance of making sha[rp] distinctions. We cannot think or act in the world without doing so. At times, we do need to make [a] clear distinction between friends and enemies. But there is a danger that distinctions become reifi[ed] and rigid in ways that obscure complex issues. This is what has happened with the popular post-9/1[1] dichotomy of good and evil. I agree with *The 9/11 Commission Report* when it asserts: "But the ene[my] is not just 'terrorism,' some generic evil. This vagueness blurs the strategy. The catastrophic threat [at] this moment in history is more specific. It is the threat of Islamist terrorism – especially the Al-Qae[da] network, its affiliates, and its ideology" (p. 362). In short, I intend to criticize the *uncritical* [and] *unreflective* appeal to objective certainty, absolutes, and rigid dualisms.

We also need to explore the relation of this new discourse of good and evil to politics and religion. [I] have already suggested that it is anti-political. The appeal to absolutes is disastrous for politics. B[ut] there are also questions about religion and morality. The popular discourse about good and evil [–] especially in the United States – is permeated with an aura of religious piety. It is commonly believe[d] that the justification for dividing the world into good and evil is supported by fundamental (Christia[n]) religious beliefs. Almighty God is invoked as the source and justification for firm moral conviction[s.] There is also a disparity and a dissonance between the philosophical understandings of morality a[nd] the widespread popular view. Philosophers may tell us that when it comes to matters of justificatio[n,] our morality – our sense of what is right and wrong, or good and bad – is autonomous. We do not nee[d] to appeal to religion to justify or warrant moral beliefs. They may tell us that the great achievement [of] (Western) modernity has been to distinguish morality from religion. But this is not the prevailin[g] view of many religious believers. They believe that it is their religion that is the source an[d] justification for their morality. The Bible tells us that God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses [on] Mount Sinai. In the West, religion generally means the Judaic-Christian tradition. But, of cours[e,] Muslims believe that Allah is the source of all morality. When they speak of a holy war, or jihad, it [is] a religious war against evil infidels justified by God.

Does it make sense to speak of *the* Christian, Judaic, or Muslim conception of good and evil? Ma[ny] believers who invoke God or Allah do *not* think that there is any ambiguity and uncertainty about thi[s.] I will argue that there is no *single religious* conception of good and evil. And furthermore, that there [is] n o *univocal* Christian, Judaic, or Muslim conception of good and evil. Stated positively, livin[g] religious traditions are rich, complex, and always undergoing historical transformation. They conta[in] different, competing, conflicting, and even contradictory historical conceptions of good and ev[il.] Thus, for example, Christians today condemn the Spanish Inquisition's "religious" justification [of] torture. We now condemn this as a perversion of "authentic" Christianity – as being thoroughl[y] *unchristian.* Indeed, Pope John Paul II explicitly condemned torture as an *intrinsic evil.* We disto[rt] and do violence to religious traditions when we fail to appreciate their changing historical characte[r.]

Consequently, we must be wary and extremely skeptical about any form of religious reification ~~essentialism. When we examine the world religions, we find that there are competing conceptions~~ good and evil that are *internal* to these traditions. We should be critical of those who appeal to the religious beliefs as if they provided unambiguous and univocal justification for their moral certaintie This does not mean that the world religions lack moral content. But it does mean that interpretatio and questioning of religious doctrines is always required. In a living religious tradition, there always a conflict of interpretations. I want to show that when we unmask the current popular discour of good and evil, which is saturated in religious language, it turns out to be *anti-religious*. It violat what is best and most vital in the living world religions.

The battle that I see taking place is not between religious believers with firm moral commitmen and secular relativists who lack conviction. It is a battle that cuts across the so-called religious/secul divide. It is a battle between those who find rigid moral absolutes appealing, those who think th nuance and subtlety mask indecisiveness, those who embellish their ideological prejudices with t language of religious piety, and those who approach life with a more open, fallibilistic mentality – on that eschews the quest for absolute certainty. Such a mentality is not only compatible with a religiou orientation; it is essential to keeping a religious tradition alive and relevant to new situations ar contingencies. What we are confronting today is *not* a clash of civilizations, but a *clash of mentalitie* And the outcome of this clash has significant *practical* consequences for how we live our everyda lives – for our morality, politics, and religion.

The Clash of Mentalities

The Craving for Absolutes versus Pragmatic Fallibilism

In the Introduction I spoke about the clash of mentalities. In this chapter I want to explain what I mean, and why I think this clash is so consequential. By a mentality, I mean a general orientation – a cast of mind or way of thinking – that conditions the way in which we approach, understand, and act in the world. It shapes and is shaped by our intellectual, practical, and emotional lives. Mentalities can take a variety of concrete historical forms. We never encounter a mentality in the abstract, but only in a particular historical manifestation. To fully understand a specific historical manifestation of a mentality, we need to locate its context, its distinctive character, and its sources. We need to pay careful attention to its historical particularity – although we can recognize its similarities (and differences) with other historical examples of the same or similar mentalities. Mentalities also arise at different stages in history – and their concrete manifestations can pass away. So we also need to inquire about why they arise at a certain time and why they fade away. I want to begin with a specific historical example, one that has had a great influence on the character of the United States in the late nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth century. After examining this important example of what I call pragmatic fallibilism, I will then, in the next chapter, reflect on its more general significance – and its relevance to our current situation.

Several years ago, Louis Menand published a fascinating book, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America.* It explores the intellectual history of American pragmatism and seeks to situate this movement in the context of American history. (The Metaphysical Club was an informal discussion group of intellectuals who met in Cambridge, Massachusetts, during the 1870s to discuss philosophical issues.) Pragmatism as a philosophical movement arose in the United States just after the Civil War. This was a time when the idea of a research university – modeled on the German university – began to take hold throughout the United States. Before the Civil War, most private institutions of higher learning were colleges founded by different religious groups. The primary purpose of these colleges was to educate citizens and clergy rather than to engage in research. But during the latter part of the nineteenth century, there was a flourishing of independent scholarship in the natural sciences, social disciplines, and humanities. It was during this period that American thinkers sought do develop a distinctive philosophical orientation.

William James first popularized the expression "pragmatism" in a famous address that he delivered at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1898. In his address, "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results," James generously acknowledged his debt to Charles S. Peirce, "one of the most original contemporary thinkers," and James refers to "the principle of practicalism – or pragmatism as he called it when I first heard him enunciate it at Cambridge in the early '70s" (James 1977: 348). James first heard Peirce discuss his pragmatic principle at meetings of the Metaphysical Club. James introduces "Peirce's principle" with a metaphorical description: "the soul and meaning of thought, he says, can never be made to direct itself towards anything but the production of belief, belief being the demicadence which closes a musical phrase in the symphony of our intellectual life." James tells us that "beliefs, in short are really rules of action; and the whole function of thinking is but one step

the production of habits of action" (James 1977: 348). In 1898, Peirce was barely known as
philosopher (except to a small group of admirers such as James). Peirce, the son of a famous Harva
mathematician, was a scientist and a logician, but his intellectual curiosity spanned the entire range
human disciplines. As James's popular version of pragmatism spread, Peirce was so appalled an
outraged that he renamed his own doctrine of meaning " 'pragmaticism' which is ugly enough to b
safe from kidnappers" (Peirce 1931–5: 5. 414). There is a famous quip that pragmatism is th
movement that was founded on James's misunderstanding of Peirce. Peirce and James were lifelor
friends – although at times their friendship was a stormy one. Another young member of th
Cambridge circle who joined the discussions of the Metaphysical Club was Oliver Wendell Holme
Jr., who later became one of the most famous justices of the United States Supreme Court. Joh
Dewey, born in 1859 (the year of publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species),* was 20 years young
than James. He came from a background that was very different from that of Cambridge intellectual
He was born in Burlington, Vermont, the son of a shopkeeper, and was educated at the University
Vermont. Dewey was among the first American philosophers to get a Ph.D. degree at the newl
founded graduate school, Johns Hopkins University. Peirce briefly taught at Johns Hopkins whe
Dewey was a graduate student. When Dewey joined the faculty of the University of Chicago in 189
he was already a great admirer of James. Dewey claimed that James's magnum opus, *The Principl
of Psychology,* had an enormous influence on his own intellectual development. And James himse
was enthusiastic about the philosophical orientation being developed by the "Chicago Schoo
centered on Dewey. In one of Dewey's most important books, *Experience and Nature,* Dewey prais
Holmes as "one of our greatest philosophers," and quoted a long passage from Holmes's essay
"Natural Law." Holmes admired *Experience and Nature* – a book that shared his own conception
experience and existence. With his typical charming wit, Holmes wrote: "Although Dewey's book
incredibly ill written, it seemed to me . . . to have a feeling of intimacy with the universe that I four
unequaled. So methought God would have spoken had He been inarticulate but keenly desirous to te
you how it was" (quoted in Menand 2001: 437).

One of Menand's major contributions was to show how the origins of the pragmatic moveme
could be understood as a *critical response* to the horrors and excesses of the Civil War – the war th
split the nation. Menand focused attention on four persons, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., Willian
James, Charles S. Peirce, and John Dewey, although he also discussed many of their contemporarie
Menand made a bold claim about the influence of these four men. He declared:

> Their ideas changed the way Americans thought – and continue to think – about educatio
> democracy, liberty, justice, and tolerance. And as a consequence they changed the way American
> live – the way they learn, the way they express their views, the way in which they understar
> themselves, and the way in which they treat people who are different from them. We are still livin
> to a great extent, in a country these thinkers helped to make. (Menand 2001: p. xi)

What is the bond that unites these very diverse thinkers? Menand affirms that they shared a commo
attitude toward ideas.

> What was that attitude? If we strain out the differences, personal and philosophical, they had wi
> one another, we can say that what these four thinkers had in common was not a group of ideas, bu
> single idea – an idea about ideas. They all believed that ideas are not "out there" waiting to l
> discovered, but are tools . . . that people devise to cope with the world in which they fir
> themselves. They believed that ideas are produced not by individuals, but by groups of individuals
> that ideas are social. They believed that ideas do not develop according to some inner logic of the

own, but are entirely dependent, like germs, on their human careers and environment. And the
~~believed that since ideas are provisional responses to particular situations, their survival depend~~
not on their immutability but on their adaptability. (Menand 2001: p. xi)

This "single idea" did not develop in an intellectual vacuum. It emerged in response to the viole
extremism of the American Civil War. These thinkers were reacting against the entrenche
opposition, the absolute certainty by the opposing forces of the righteousness of their cause, the she
intolerance toward those who held opposing convictions – an intolerance that frequently set membe
of the same family against each other. This rigid mentality led to bloody violence. It was a mentali
in which there were stark oppositions, a black-and-white world in which there was no possibility
compromise or negotiation. Holmes fought in the Civil War and was seriously wounded several time
James had a brother who nearly died in the war. Dewey was a young child during the war, but h
father fought in the war. (Peirce, however, dreaded the draft. Through his father's influence, h
secured a position in the US Coastal Survey and managed to avoid conscription.) But th
consciousness of the Civil War shaped an entire generation. Menand's thesis is that the pragmati
thinkers undertook to develop a more flexible, open, experimental, and fallible way of thinking th
would avoid all forms of absolutism, stark binary oppositions, and violent extremism. And in the
individual and collective way of doing this, they helped to reshape the ways in which American
thought and acted.

I believe that Menand is essentially correct in the way in which he approaches the historic
situatedness of the pragmatic movement. We tend to think that philosophers are somehow complete
divorced from history – as if they were simply engaged in a timeless conversation with each oth
across the centuries. There have been philosophers who have characterized philosophy in this manne
but the pragmatic thinkers rejected this ahistorical conception of philosophy. Dewey, for exampl
always maintained that philosophy is (and ought to be) responsive to the deepest conflicts of its ow
time. Menand has written the type of intellectual history that reflects Dewey's own understanding
the cultural rootedness of philosophical speculation, and he presents a far more dramatic and viv
understanding of role played by this movement in reshaping the mentality of American life. There
another virtue in Menand's approach. He helps us to see that when the pragmatists critically attacke
absolutism, when they sought to expose the quest for certainty, when they argued for an open univers
in which chance and contingency are irreducible, they were not concerned exclusively with abstra
metaphysical and epistemological issues. They were addressing profound ethical, political, an
practical questions that ordinary people confront in their everyday lives. They were haunted by th
memory of the way in which the conflict of absolutes led to so much bloody violence. They wanted
develop a new way of thinking – a new mentality – that would be an alternative to, and wou
overcome, all forms of entrenched ideological extremism.

In all the pragmatic thinkers there is a sustained multifaceted attack on what Dewey called "th
quest for certainty." It is not just ideologists and fanatics who claim to live by absolute certaint
Dewey thought that this quest had been one of the most basic goals of the Western philosophic
tradition. Dewey related this quest for certainty to a quest for *security,* an attempt to flee from th
contingency, uncertainty, and ambivalence of everyday life. Many traditional philosophers had tende
to valorize what is eternal, fixed, unchanging, and necessary, and to denigrate what is changin
becoming, contingent, and perilous. But there is no "escape from peril," from the vicissitudes
existence. Furthermore, we are neither playthings of forces that are always operating behind o
backs; nor can we ever completely control our destinies. Dewey, like the other pragmatic thinker
sought to expose the arrogance of those who think that they can anticipate, manipulate, and control a
unexpected contingencies. All the pragmatists rejected doctrines of mechanical determinism th

allow no place for genuine human agency and freedom. But they were just as relentless in the critiques of gratuitous voluntarism – the belief that we can initiate significant changes in the wor simply by willing them. The important pragmatic task is to develop those ideas – and even mo important – those flexible critical habits and practices that will enable us to cope with what unexpected and unpredictable in a reflective intelligent manner.

Dewey coined the phrase "the spectator theory of knowledge." He argued that many traditional a modern philosophers were dominated by ocular metaphors, and that they tended to approach knowi as a form of passive seeing, or contemplation. Integral to the change in mentality that he and the oth pragmatists sought to develop was the intellectual experiment of situating human beings as *agents*, n as passive spectators – agents who are always already undergoing and shaping their experience transactions with their world. Dewey, like the other pragmatists, was skeptical of radical utopia "solutions," and he was suspicious of the idea of *total* revolution. But he was committed to ongoir radical social reform. Throughout his long life, his central concern was the character and fate democracy. He felt that the greatest threats to American democracy were internal ones – threats which the public was being manipulated by powerful special interest groups. He was concerned abo "the eclipse of the public" – the eclipse of an informed public where there is open communicatio debate, and deliberation. Dewey warned about the threat to democracy that resulted from the grow and spread of the "corporate mentality" – a mentality that has taken on global dimensions in our time

> The business mind, having its own conversation and language, its own interests, its own intima groupings in which men of this mind, in their collective capacity, determine the tone of society large as well as the government of industrial society. . . . We now have, although without formal legal status, a mental and moral corporateness for which history affords no parallel. (Dewey 193 41)

Democracy, according to Dewey, does not consist exclusively of a set of institutions, formal votir procedures, or even legal guarantee of rights. These are important, but they require a culture everyday democratic cooperative *practices* to give them life and meaning. Otherwise institutions ar procedures are in danger of becoming hollow and meaningless. Democracy is "a way of life," ethical ideal that demands *active* and *constant* attention. And if we fail to work at creating and r creating democracy, there is no guarantee that it will survive. Democracy involves a reflective faith the capacity of all human beings for intelligent judgment, deliberation, and action if the proper soci educational, and economic conditions are furnished. When Dewey was celebrating his eightie birthday he presented a talk entitled "Creative Democracy – The Task Before Us," in which outlined his vision of a true democratic society:

> Democracy as compared with other ways of life is the sole way of living which believ wholeheartedly in the process of experience as end and as means . . . and which releases emotion needs, and desires so as to call into being the things that have not existed in the past. For every wa of life that fails in its democracy limits the contacts, the exchanges, the communications, t interactions by which experience is steadied while it is enlarged and enriched. The task of th release and enrichment is one that has to be carried on day by day. Since it is one that can have end till experience itself comes to an end, the task of democracy is forever that of creation of a fre and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute. (Dewey 1988: 229–30

Dewey understood that at times of deep uncertainty, anxiety, and fear, there is a craving for mor certainty and absolutes. At such times there can be a desperate search for metaphysical and religiou

comfort. But this is precisely what we must *resist.* For such comfort is based on illusion. Furthermore, as ~~Peirce had already emphasized, such an appeal to absolutes blocks the road~~ to open inquiry and genuine thinking. The pragmatists exposed and sharply attacked the seductive b misleading appeal to absolutes, certainty, specious foundations, and simplistic oppositions. But the main positive achievement was to develop a viable critical and fallible alternative.

Hilary Putnam, a leading contemporary philosopher who strongly identifies with the pragmat tradition, claims that pragmatism is a "way of thinking" that involves "a certain group of these theses which can and indeed were argued very differently by different philosophers with differe concerns." He summarizes these key theses as

(1) antiskepticism; pragmatists hold that doubt requires justification just as much as belief . . .; (fallibilism; pragmatists hold that there is never a metaphysical guarantee to be had that such an such a belief will never need revision (that one can be fallibilistic and antiskeptical is perhaps th unique insight of American pragmatism); (3) the thesis that there is no fundamental dichotom between "facts" and "values"; and the thesis that, in a certain sense, practice is primary philosophy. (Putnam 1994: 152)

Peirce consistently challenged the idea of epistemological and metaphysical foundationalism th he took to be so basic for many philosophers – the dream or nightmare of discovering once and for a an incorrigible foundation that could serve as a basis for building the edifice of knowledge. There a deep philosophical, religious, social, and psychological reasons for this search for solid foundation and incorrigible truths. Descartes, more than any other thinker, vividly portrayed what he took to b the grand Either/Or that we confront: *Either* solid foundations and indubitable knowledge *Or* a swam of unfounded and ungrounded opinion. I once called this "the Cartesian Anxiety" (Bernstein 1983: 16 24). Descartes' search for an Archimedean point is much more than a device to solve metaphysic and epistemological problems. It is the quest for some fixed ground, some stable rock upon which w can secure our lives against the vicissitudes that constantly threaten us. The specter that hovers in t background of the journey of the soul that Descartes undertakes in his *Meditations* is the dread chaos and madness where nothing is fixed and determinate, where – to use his own chilling metaph – we are in a sea where we can neither touch bottom nor support ourselves on the surface. This anxie has haunted intellectual and popular thinking right up to the present. It can take many different form And indeed, I believe that those today who claim religious or moral certainty for dividing the wor into the forces of good and the forces of evil are shaped by this Cartesian Anxiety. For they ar *claiming* the type of certainty for their moral and political convictions that Descartes claimed for h indubitable foundation. They also make use of the grand Either/Or when they attack their opponent For they claim that the only alternative to solid foundations and moral certainties is to be lost in quagmire of relativistic opinions.

Now what is distinctive about the pragmatic thinkers is that they rejected this grand Either/Or. Th exclusive disjunction: "absolute" certainty *or* "absolute" relativism is specious. We need to *exorci* the Cartesian Anxiety, or, to switch metaphors, engage in a form of philosophical therapy that wi release us from its constraining grip. Beginning with Peirce, the pragmatists sought to develop t idea of fallibilism as a genuine alternative to the Cartesian Either/Or. Fallibilism is the belief that an knowledge claim or, more generally, any validity claim – including moral and political claims – open to ongoing examination, modification, and critique. Peirce originally argued that fallibilism essential for understanding the distinctive character of modern experimental science. Scientif inquiry does not have any absolute epistemological starting-points or end-points. Inquiry is a *se corrective enterprise* that – in the words of Wilfrid Sellars – "can put any claim in jeopardy, thoug

not *all* at once" (Sellars 1997: 79). The phrase "though not *all* at once" is crucial, because we cou~~not even engage in any inquiry unless we~~ *take* ~~some claims and beliefs to be basic and unquestione~~But the key word here is "take" because further inquiry may teach us that what we have *taken* to basic may need to be questioned and revised. Consequently, there is an uncontroversial sense in whic we start from foundations and "takens." These are beliefs and "truths" that we take for granted order to conduct an inquiry. These are warranted claims that have been established by previo inquiries. In the course of the self-corrective process of inquiry, these may also be questioned, revise and even abandoned. And the self-corrective process of inquiry requires a *critical community inquirers*. Peirce extended this notion of self-corrective inquiry to philosophy itself. But it was Jame and especially Dewey, who sought to show the full significance of fallibilism for moral, social, an political inquiry in a democratic society. And Holmes's approach to the law is pervaded by fallibilistic ethos that eschews all forms of absolute principles. In the *Common Law*, Holmes declare "The life of the law has not been logic; it has been experience"(quoted in Menand 2001: 341).

Fallibilism, in its robust sense, is not a rarified epistemological doctrine. It consists of a set virtues – a set of practices – that need to be carefully nurtured in critical communities. A fallibilist orientation requires a genuine willingness to test one's ideas in public, and to listen carefully to tho who criticize them. It requires the imagination to formulate new hypotheses and conjectures, and subject them to rigorous public testing and critique by the community of inquirers. Fallibilis requires a high tolerance for uncertainty, and the courage to revise, modify, and abandon our mo cherished beliefs when they have been refuted. Robust fallibilism requires what Karl Popper (who w influenced by Peirce) called the "open society." Consequently, fallibilism involves more than minimal tolerance of those who differ from us and challenge our ideas. We must confront and seek answer their criticisms and objections – and this requires mutual respect.

This fallibilistic mentality helps us to appreciate what Putnam means when he ascribes to t pragmatists "the thesis that there is no fundamental dichotomy between 'facts' and 'values'; and t thesis that, in a certain sense, practice is primary in philosophy."[1] To reject the idea of a fundament *dichotomy* between "facts" and "values" is *not* to reject the idea that there are facts – and th objective facts are all important in any inquiry. Rather, Putnam seeks to emphasize the ways in whic our interests and values shape what we *take* to be the facts in a given context. Furthermore, fallibilistic mentality becomes meaningful and effective only when it becomes concrete in o everyday practices.

The pragmatists knew how difficult it is to cultivate and sustain a fallibilistic mentality. It does n come into being simply by talking about it or willing it. Fallibilism becomes a concrete reality only we succeed in developing the proper critical habits and practices in a democratic society. This is ongoing task that is never completed. Dewey's lifelong interest in education, especially in t education of the young, was motivated by his conviction about the importance of the role of t schools in nurturing a fallibilistic mentality.

We can now better understand what Putnam means when he underscores the pragmatic insight th one can be fallibilistic and anti-skeptical. When Putnam speaks of skepticism, he is referring to t philosophical doctrine that calls into question the very *possibility* of knowledge. But fallibilism is n skepticism in this sense. It does not raise skeptical doubts about the very possibility of knowledge. C the contrary, it is intended to bring out the essential characteristics of what constitutes legitima knowledge – including both common sense and scientific knowledge. But fallibilism does raise doub about the very possibility of *absolute incorrigible knowledge.* The pragmatists are not saying that t idea of such absolute knowledge is a desirable goal, but that we finite human beings can never achiev it. They are making a much more forceful and challenging claim: *the very idea of absolu incorrigible knowledge is incoherent.* Consequently, fallibilism does not lead to despair about th

possibility of gaining knowledge, but seeks to illuminate how we can secure warranted knowledg[e] claims and make progress in our inquiries.

In contrast to the philosophical doctrine of epistemological skepticism, there is a mo[re] commonsense concept of "skepticism," such that we can even speak of fallibilistic skepticis[m.] Menand succinctly describes the liberating quality of the fallibilistic skepticism advocated by t[he] pragmatic thinkers.

> The belief that ideas should never become ideologies – either justifying the status quo, or dictat[ing] some transcendent imperative for renouncing it – was the essence of what they taught.
>
> In many ways this was a liberating attitude, and it accounts for the popularity of Holmes, Jame[s] and Dewey (Peirce was a special case) enjoyed in their lifetimes, and for the effect they had on [a] whole generation of judges, teachers, journalists, philosophers, psychologists, social scientists, la[w] professors, and even poets. They taught a kind of skepticism that helped people cope with life in [a] heterogeneous, industrialized, mass-market society, a society in which older human bonds [of] custom and community seemed to have become attenuated, and to have been replaced by mo[re] impersonal networks of obligation and authority. . . . Holmes, James, Peirce and Dewey helped [to] free thought from the thralldom to official ideologies, of the church or the state or even th[e] academy. There is also, though, implicit in what they wrote, a recognition of the limits of wh[at] thought can do in the struggle to increase human happiness. (Menand 2001: p. xii)

There is another motif that is characteristic of a pragmatic fallibilistic mentality. William Jame[s] was the first philosopher to dignify the word "pluralism" when he entitled one of his last books [A] *Pluralistic Universe.* There is no single system, no single all-encompassing philosophy, that stands f[or] all time. The universe is pluralistic, and we as finite agents have multiple and limited perspectives [in] coping with this universe. He argued that philosophers frequently tend to substitute their rarified ne[at] abstractions for the thick tangled plurality of life itself. Few philosophers have equaled James in h[is] ability to describe, elicit, and celebrate the concrete plurality and varieties of human life.

The pragmatists also anticipated the importance of what has become the overwhelming fact [of] contemporary life: the plurality of cultural, ethnic, and religious differences. When James deliver[ed] his Oxford lectures in 1908, which were later published as *A Pluralistic Universe,* two you[ng] Americans were in the audience: Horace Kallen, a Jewish American, and Alain Locke, the fir[st] African American to be a Rhodes scholar. They had already formed a friendship during their stude[nt] days at Harvard. Both were deeply influenced by James's vision of pluralism, and sought to app[ly] James's ideas to articulating the notion of "cultural pluralism." Horace Kallen coined the expressi[on] "cultural pluralism." And Kallen's own defense of cultural pluralism led to a lively discussion amo[ng] many who had been shaped by the pragmatic mentality, including Alain Locke, W. E. B. Du Bo[is] (another student of James), and Randolph Bourne. Because anti-Semitism and racism were [so] prevalent in the United States at the time, there was a strong *practical* motivation in the pragmat[ic] effort to develop a viable conception of cultural pluralism. The pragmatic thinkers advanced "cultur[al] pluralism" as a norm and an ideal when there was an outbreak of xenophobia in the United States. [In] the 1920s Congress passed extremely restrictive immigration laws to keep out "undesirab[le] foreigners." These laws were "justified" by pseudo-scientific appeals to eugenics, in order to ke[ep] America "racially pure."[2] Once again, the pragmatists found themselves fighting a pernicious absolu[te] mentality – one that divided the world into "we Americans" and "undesirable foreigners."

Because there are not only different shifting individual and group identities but also conflicting an[d] clashing ones, the problem of the tolerance of differences has become especially acute [in] contemporary life. We live at a time when there are powerful tendencies toward globalization. But th[e]

globalization increases our awareness of heterogeneity and differences. Throughout the world tension~~and hostilities flare up among different cultural, religious, and ethnic groups. During the past 50 yea~~ many thinkers have been acutely aware of the significance of difference, otherness, alterity, an~~ incommensurability. There is something extremely important in this new consciousness, but als~~ something that is excessive and disturbing. There is a legitimate reaction to what James cal~~ "intellectualism," and to what is sometimes called "abstract universalism," a type of universalism th~~ is insensitive to particularity and pluralism. Ethnic, cultural, and religious groups who feel that the~~ very identity is threatened in the name of some presumably universal ideal have strongly resist~~ assimilation. These so-called universal ideals turn out – so it is claimed – to mask the prejudices of~~ dominant and powerful group. In the name of "openness" and "tolerance," there is a disguise~~ intolerance. We expect others to be and to act just like us, and we expect them to adopt and accept ou~~ norms and values. Emmanuel Levinas is right when he claims that there has been a deep tendency ~~ Western thought to try to assimilate the "other" to the "same" – to obliterate the singularity of th~~ otherness of the other. He speaks of this tendency as "ontological imperialism," and when he does s~~ he is not using a dead metaphor. For the same logic is at work in political, economic, and cultur~~ imperialism.

But we must also be alert to the *excessive* celebration of difference, otherness, and alterity. Not a~~ forms of difference are desirable or to be welcomed. Some of these we must strongly oppose~~ especially those that seek to undermine or eliminate genuine plurality. Consequently, we need ~~ develop a *critical* fallibilistic attitude toward cultural differences, distinguishing those that are to ~~ welcomed and embraced in a pluralistic society from those that threaten the very existence of such~~ society. And here too, I believe that a pragmatic mentality is helpful in overcoming the speciou~~ dichotomy between abstract universalism and an uncritical celebration of singularity and differenc~~ Although the pragmatists emphasize plurality, difference, and otherness, they were never guilty ~~ what Karl Popper once called "the myth of the framework." This is the myth that we are prisone~~ caught in the framework of our own theories, cultures, values, and language – so much so that w~~ cannot communicate with those who are encased in "radically" different, incommensurab~~ frameworks. The "myth of the framework" leads straight to the type of relativism that undermines t~~ *critical* evaluation of plural cultural practices. The pragmatists consistently advocated an *engage~~ pluralism* – an orientation wherein we acknowledge what is different from us, but seek to understa~~ and critically engage it.[3]

In opposition to the myth of the framework, which treats different cultures and languages as if the~~ were completely closed and self-contained, the pragmatists argued that it is always possible to mov~~ beyond and enlarge our limited horizon. We do this through the dialogical encounter with what ~~ other and different. Failure to engage with what is strange and alien is a *practical* failure, a failure ~~ imagination, and a failure to make an effort to understand what is different from us. *Pluralism is n~~ relativism.* As a corollary to Putnam's claim that the pragmatists elaborated a fallibilism that is ant~~ skeptical, I would add that they also developed a pluralism that is anti-relativistic. Engaged pluralis~~ is the very opposite of relativism. It demands that we make a serious effort to really understand wh~~ is other and different from us. It requires that we engage in the *critique* of our own views as well ~~ those of the people we encounter.

To complete this portrait of the mentality of pragmatic fallibilism, I want to explore one fin~~ theme that is necessary for grasping its essential character. This is the centrality of the notions ~~ chance and contingency. Peirce introduced a positive conception of chance. During his lifetime~~ before the discovery of quantum physics – many philosophers and scientists accepted some version ~~ mechanistic determinism that left no room for chance. Presumably, the laws of nature are such th~~ everything that ever happens is completely fixed according to these laws. From this perspectiv~~

"chance" is just a name for our ignorance of these laws. If we had full knowledge of these laws, th~~
we~~ ~~would see that what appears to be a chance event is really fully determined. The French~~ scienti
Pierre–Simon Laplace, who declared that "we must . . . imagine the present state of the universe as t~~
effect of its prior state and the cause of the state that will follow it," put forth one of the most famo~~
statements of this philosophy of determinism.

> An intelligence which, for a given instant, could know all the forces by which nature is animate
> and the respective situation of the beings who compose it, if, moreover, it was sufficiently vast
> submit these data to analysis, if it could embrace in the same formula the movements of the great
> bodies in the universe as well as those of the lightest atom – nothing would be uncertain for it, a
> the future, like the past, would be present to its eyes. (Quoted in Menand 2001: 196)

Peirce argued that this notion of determinism was neither a presupposition nor a warranted conclusi~~
of actual scientific inquiry. It is an unwarranted a priori *prejudice* – one that is completely unjustifi~~
by the actual practice of experimental science. Indeed, Peirce argued that actual scientific laws are n~~
absolutely precise and determinate. As Menand tells us:

> If scientific laws are not absolutely precise, then scientific terminology has to be understood in
> new way. Words like "cause" and "effect," "certainty" and "chance," even "hard" and "soft" cann~~
> be understood as naming fixed and discrete entities or properties; they have to be understood
> naming points on a curve of possibilities, as guesses or predictions rather than conclusio~~
> Otherwise, scientists are in danger of reifying their concepts – of imputing an unvarying essence
> phenomena that are in a continual state of flux. Peirce was the first scientist to perceive all t~~
> implications of this problem, and his philosophy . . . is obsessed with it. The problem boils down
> this question: What does it mean to say that a statement "true" in a world is always susceptible to
> certain swerving"? (Menand 2001: 223)

This "swerving," this positive *reality* of chance is a basic element of the universe. Peirce called
"tychism" – based on the Greek word for chance. In one of his most speculative essays, "A Guess
the Riddle" (unpublished during his lifetime), he declares:

> We are brought, then, to this: conformity to law exists only within a limited range of events a~~
> even there is not perfect, for an element of pure spontaneity or lawless originality mingles, or
> least, must be supposed to mingle, with law everywhere. Moreover conformity with law is a fa~~
> requiring to be explained; and since Law in general cannot be explained by any law in particula~~
> the explanation must consist in showing how law is developed out of pure chance, irregularity, a~~
> indeterminacy. . . . According to this, three elements are active in the world: first chance; seco~~
> law; and third habit-taking.
>   Such is our guess of the secret of the sphinx. (Peirce 1992: 276–7)

Peirce consistently argued that we can't understand the laws of nature unless we appreciate t~~
positive role of chance – that it is a basic irreducible "element" active in a dynamic world. Typicall~~
Peirce – in his speculations about the role of chance in the universe – was primarily concerned wi~~
clarifying the character of experimental science and the role of statistical probability in scientif~~
explanation. James and Dewey sought to humanize Peirce's insight, and to bring out its rich ethic~~
and political implications. The world in which we live is an "open universe" in which there is re~~
chance, luck, and contingency. Contingency is a source of both joy and tragedy; it presents us with
opportunity and a challenge. Human agents can make a difference in shaping the world, although to

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