

Ethics for Moral Fundamentalists¹

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As a philosophy professor whose specializations include ethics and politics, recent semesters have inevitably spotlighted current conditions of American moral and political discourse. I invite you to sit in on one of my Spring 2019 ethics classes. There's nothing exceptional about this class, but a visit may reveal one of many ways in which professors in the humanities are struggling right now to create a better context for constructive discourse and decision-making.

I sometimes ask my students to bring examples of people weighing in on a contemporary issue such as immigration or reproduction. How many of those people, I ask, would knowingly raise their hand and pledge the following?

There's a single basis of moral and political life, and this supreme basis determines the right way to proceed. I have access to this supreme basis. When others don't agree with me, it's because they have the wrong faith commitments or they aren't analyzing things properly. Agreement with me is a prerequisite to solving our problems. Consequently, I have nothing to learn about these matters from those who disagree with me. Their participation is, at best, an irrelevant distraction and, at worst, an evil to be defeated. My diagnosis of the issue has precisely captured all that is morally or politically relevant. It's exhaustive, hence beyond revision and reformulation.

After my students and I swap stories about those who might blithely take such a pledge, we invariably conclude that the pledgers are outnumbered by their counterparts: conservatives, liberals, and radicals who would, upon conscious reflection, reject this outright as cocksure arrogance. Moreover, it quickly becomes clear that this pledge—especially beginning with the third sentence—doesn't speak to the sort of people my students wish to become.

And yet, our class conversation continues, how many of us certified broader-minded souls act as though complex problems come prepackaged with our singular interpretation of them? Do we prejudge and offhandedly dismiss alternative diagnoses of shared moral issues? However open-minded we may seem to ourselves, do we react to others as though we are navigating with the one, universal moral compass? In sum, are our real moral habits implicated in this pledge most of us would disavow?

At this point, I introduce another classroom activity, from philosopher Anthony Weston's *A 21st Century Ethical Toolbox*.² Suppose we wanted to codify rules to make moral and political debates as fruitless as possible. The idea here, Weston explains, is to spell out rules that maximize the distance between "us" and "them" and that ensure that creative, constructive possibilities go forever unnoticed. For example, Weston suggests, you might consider things like "approach the debate as a zero-sum game," "emphasize disagreements," "widen the gulf that separates our concerns," "stereotype the other side," and "be angrier and talk louder than others."

I divide students into groups and ask them to develop 10 more rules. They come up with an excellent toolkit for sabotaging dialogue. "Be visibly offended by any questioning of your

¹ This piece was first published in *Inside Higher Education*, (April 9, 2019), <https://www.insidehighered.com/advise/2019/04/09/teaching-constructive-discourse-current-environment-opinion>.

² Anthony Weston, *A 21st Century Ethical Toolbox* (4th edition), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

conclusions,” “denounce moderate voices as morally complicit sellouts,” and “prepare your comeback instead of listening.” Gradually some of the fun fades, and the discussion shifts from a playful game to serious cultural criticism.

Is there any link between the “pledge” activity and your devious new toolkit, I ask? The sense of the class is that the toolkit clarifies the practical upshot of “the pledge” activity, identifying some of the behaviors legitimized and exercised by this outlook. We all end up recognizing

problems that our values must speak to. Our moral and political beliefs are nourished in this conflicted social matrix, resulting in moral jetlag.

Due in part to this moral jetlag, many of us have an uneasy relationship with our inherited “moral fundamentalism,” to give a name to the cluster of habits exhibited in “the pledge.” The term moral fundamentalism was coined by philosopher Mark Johnson as a synonym for moral absolutism. Its rejection, as a general outlook, by whatever name, has entered politics and policy

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ing some of these behaviors in ourselves, myself included. Shifting uncomfortably in our complicity, my students and I then pause to explore our cognitive dissonance. Perhaps we’re merely hypocrites, parading open-mindedness while betraying its opposite. But I think there’s also something more philosophically interesting at work.

To explain, let’s now step out into the hall. We’ll leave the class uninhibited by the professor’s diagnoses and prescriptions.

I’ll begin by introducing the terms “moral jetlag” and “moral fundamentalism.” The philosopher John Dewey proposed soon after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that citizens of techno-industrial nations suffer from “cultural lag.” I’ll call this “moral jetlag,” a condition in which most of the basic alternatives we have on hand to think and talk about moral and political life—from customary moralizing to sophisticated theorizing—were developed, canned, and pickled on a shelf so long ago that they now lag far behind the multifaceted

in part through extensive research on “wicked problems,” inspired by Horst W. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber and now ubiquitous in the field of environmental studies.³

To be more precise, a moral fundamentalist might be defined as someone who holds, at the very least, that there is: 1) a single right way to diagnose moral or political problems; and 2) a single approvable solution to any particular problem. This definition clarifies the sense in which moral fundamentalism is a vice. The chief problem, from a moral fundamentalist’s point of view, is always presumed to be that others don’t get the problem. Or the main problem is presumed to be the general failure of others to bow to our brilliant solutions. Never mind the unnoticed parts of the mess obfuscated by our way of casting the problem. Unlike *their* concerns, ours have overriding force—because they’re value-neutral and free of interest-driven rationalizations and inherited biases.

But, unfortunately, when we suppose our diagnosis of the problem is exhaustive, we

³ Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Sciences* 4, no. 2 (June 1973): 155-169.

autocratically predefine what's relevant and we prejudice alternative formulations without dialogue.

What happens, then, to opportunities for learning our way together across a spectrum of values, beliefs, and concerns? In public disputes, competing moral fundamentalist camps restrict the sympathies of in-groups to an exclusive channel. The result is either/or thinking, attended by tendencies to oversimplify and quests for purity. In this way, moral fundamentalism blocks the way to discovering shared toeholds to debate and achieve social goals like security, health, sustainability, and justice. It encourages antagonism toward excluded standpoints, closure to being surprised by the complexity of many problems, neglect of the context in which decisions are made, obtuseness about one's own truncated framework, and a related general indifference to public processes and adaptive policies. It may be progressive in one dimension of a problem, but typically at the cost of being regressive with respect to concerns that are off-the-radar of our idealizations.

Moral fundamentalism is a vice because it obstructs communication, constricts deliberation about what is possible, and underwrites bad decisions. It makes the worst of our native impulses toward social bonding and antagonism. Meanwhile, reactionary nihilism is merely moral fundamentalism's mirror image, setting up a false dilemma that is yet another symptom of our moral jetlag. We'd be better off if we'd experiment with how far we can go, as teachers, to create a learning context in which we steer *between* what philosopher Catherine Elgin aptly calls "the absolute and the arbitrary."⁴

Returning from the hall to find my students engaged in a spirited discussion, let's pause to ask what we, as teachers, want for them. Among diverse educational values, most of us want our

students to become humane, compassionate, active, and informed problem-solvers in a world that, at best, is too often indifferent to their welfare—and, at worst, sends many of them daily signals that their lives are of lesser worth than students from the other side of their hometown.

Teaching students to oppose others' moral fundamentalism with their (or our) own won't achieve what we want for them. Exercising and reinforcing moral fundamentalist habits perpetuates the root problems.

To improve conditions of American moral and political discourse, teachers need to aim for something more genuinely radical than moral fundamentalism: we need to develop class activities and curricula that support confidence and resistance without puritanical zealotry, courage in confronting problems without expectation of absolute certainty, democratic participation without fatalistic resignation or paralyzing guilt, frank speech without oversimplification, and moral clarity without incorrigibility.

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⁴ Catherine Z. Elgin, *Between the Absolute and the Arbitrary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).