Engaged Fallibilistic Pluralism

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[To the Columbia Pragmatism group: I wrote this paper for a conference given in my honor by former PH.Ds from the New School for Social Research. It was addressed to them on a topic that has one of my central concerns. Although it is informal I touch on a number of topics that draw on the pragmatic tradition and can serve as a basis for our discussion]

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In December 1988 I gave the presidential address to the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association entitled “Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds.” I want to cite a passage from that address because it will serve as a basis for today’s talk.

[P]luralism itself is open to many interpretations and we need to make some important distinctions. For there is a danger of a fragmenting pluralism where the centrifugal forces become so strong that we are only able to communicate with a small group that already shares our own biases, and no longer even experience the need to talk with others outside of this circle. There is a flabby pluralism where our borrowings from different orientations are little more than glib superficial poaching. There is polemical pluralism where the appeal to pluralism doesn’t signify a genuine willingness to listen and learn from others, but becomes rather an ideological weapon to advance one’s own orientation. There is a defensive pluralism, a form of tokenism, where we pay lip service to others “doing their own thing” but are already convinced that there is nothing important to be learned from them.
The type of pluralism that represents what is best in our pragmatic tradition is engaged fallibilistic pluralism. Such a pluralistic ethos places new responsibilities upon each of us. For it means taking our fallibility seriously—resolving that however much we are committed to our own styles of thinking, we are willing to listen to others without denying or suppressing the otherness of the other. It means being vigilant against the dual temptations of simply dismissing what others are saying by falling back on one of those standard defensive ploys where we condemn it as obscure, wooly, or trivial, or thinking we can always easily translate what is alien into our own entrenched vocabularies. (Bernstein 1991: 335-36)

I am sure that one can discriminate many other types of pluralism. Today we are confronted with a pluralism of pluralisms. I want to elaborate what I mean by “engaged fallibilistic pluralism.” Let me recall the context in which I gave the presidential address. I was speaking to fellow philosophers. And indeed the Eastern Division was the bastion of hard core analytic philosophy. Although I had a serious interest in the analytic style of philosophizing from the time I took a seminar with Carl Hempel during my first year of graduate school at Yale and sat in the seminars of Wilfrid Sellars when he joined the Yale faculty, my philosophic interests had been much broader. I wrote a dissertation, “John Dewey’s Metaphysics of Experience” at a time when Dewey, pragmatism, and even metaphysics were considered passé by many professional philosophers in “prestigious” analytically oriented graduate philosophy departments. I have always made a sharp distinction between “analytic ideology” and the serious contributions of analytic and linguistic philosophy. The analytic ideology is offensive and oppressive. The question was frequently asked, “Do you do philosophy or are you interested in the history philosophy?” Doing philosophy meant engaging is something respectable like ordinary language
analysis, philosophy of logic, or the philosophy of science? Presumably the only game in town was dealing with the latest hot issues in the philosophy of language, mind or action. And the rest was simply no longer “serious” philosophy. By the standards of the profession, most of what we did—and still do—at the New School for Social Research just didn’t count as philosophy. What today goes by the name of continental philosophy was not only ignored, it was mocked and ridiculed. (In many places it still is). And for many members of the A.P.A. the epitome of the “worst” kind of philosophic pretense was epitomized by Derrida. No “respectable” graduate department—with very few exceptions—would teach graduate courses in contemporary European philosophy. If you wanted to study “stuff” like phenomenology, hermeneutics or deconstruction—you were told to go comparative literature departments. I always detested the analytic ideology—and I still do. It is petty, provincial, and even boring. It has nothing to do with real philosophizing although, as so many of you painfully know, it still has a lot to do with hiring faculty and with academic infighting. Today we speak of the split between Anglo-American philosophy and continental philosophy, but truth is that this split was an invention that was instituted in the mid-twentieth century. In the 1960s and 1970s this analytic ideology dominated the profession. There were signs of some small changes during the 1970s and 1980s. A group who called themselves the “Pluralists” rebelled against the analytic ideology and demanded greater representation of different philosophic orientations at A.P.A. meetings. The “Pluralists” even managed to elect a president that was more sympathetic to their concerns—against the vociferous protests of more analytically inclined colleagues.

I would like to share one anecdote with you that illustrate the ambience of the 1980s. The president of the A.P.A is primarily an honorary office. The president gives an address at the annual meeting in December and chairs some boring meetings. But he can also suggest speakers
to be invited by the program committee. At the time Jacques Derrida was the most vilified philosopher in the world—and much of the vilification came from American analytic philosophers. When Derrida was invited to Yale he taught in the comparative literature department. The chair of the philosophy department discouraged philosophy students from taking Derrida’s courses—and they could not receive official credit if they did. I had met Derrida a year before I became president of the A.P.A. I asked him if he would give a talk at the annual meeting if officially invited. Well he did come. There were about a thousand people in the audience when he gave a paper based on the book he was writing, *The Politics of Friendship.* Some of my analytic colleagues in the “profession” thought it was a terrible scandal to invite Derrida to give a major address to the A.P.A. But his participation had symbolic value because the theme of my presidential address was time had come to get over the ideological antagonisms that divided philosophers.

I have tried to give you some sense of the context of my presidential address and what our “profession” was like at the time. But the idea of “engaged fallibilistic pluralism” had much great significance for me. It is essential for cultivating a genuine democratic ethos. Before turning to the more overt political and cultural significance of this type of pluralism, I want to comment on the three key terms, “engaged,” fallibilistic,” and “pluralism.”

To be engaged demands *actively* seeking to understand what initially strikes us as strange and different. And whether we are talking about different philosophic orientations, traditions, cultures or ethnic groups, this takes hard work. It requires learning how to listen—to *really* listen and hear what the other is saying. Listening isn’t enough; it requires imagination and hermeneutical sensitivity to try to understand different and alien points of view in their strongest possible light. One of the reasons why I have been attracted to Gadamer’s work is because he
epitomizes this dialogical play, this to-and fro movement thus is involved in understanding. We really only come to understand ourselves in and through our encounters with what is other and different from us. It is critical understanding that is essential for engagement—and critical understanding involves judgment and *phronesis*.

There are two major styles of philosophical engagement today: the agonistic and the dialogical. The agonistic style is one that focuses on the vulnerability, weaknesses and deficiencies of the text or the position that one is encountering. An agonistic adversarial style has become all too dominant in many of our professional encounters. It may be a bit of a caricature (but one that I suspect all of us have witnessed) when a commentator on a paper presented at the A.P.A. seeks to show that his “opponent” is confused, wrong, and illogical (and preferably all three at once). In contrast, the dialogical style is one where we actually think that we might learn something from our interlocutor. One tries to see the strength of the thinker’s position and what is insightful about it. We all can recognize these different styles of encounter. For example, we may read the Platonic dialogues focusing on the arguments presented in order to evaluate them and to expose what we take to be invalid and/or confused. And we judge these arguments by our currently accepted “rigorous” standards of justification. Or we might also approach the Platonic dialogues in a more holistic manner where we take account the setting, characters, and the dramatic development in order we discern what we might learn from these dialogues. (I am, of course, simplifying the difference between these two styles of encounter for the sake of bringing out the contrast). Now the main point that I want to stress is that critical engagement involves balancing *both* styles of encounter. And both styles have extremes that should be avoided. The agonistic style can degenerate into the presumptuous conviction that if something doesn’t meet what “we” (or I) consider the most rigorous criteria for argumentation, it
is to be rejected out of hand. And the dialogical style can degenerate into such a thorough sympathetic embrace that one never takes any critical distance from what one is trying to understand. When I was an undergraduate at the University of Chicago there was a tendency to go to this extreme. We became so proficient at “understanding” that there never seemed any need or space for critique. I remember a party at Yale when I was a graduate student where one of my professors, Paul Weiss, turned to a group of us who had studied at Chicago and said, “You guys from Chicago always want to swing the bat, but you never want to hit the ball.” That causal joke changed my life. For what Paul Weiss meant is that it isn’t good enough to engage in endless understanding; to seek to know Plato, Aristotle, Kant, or Hegel better than anyone else. To be a philosopher one must learn how to take a critical stand and to defend it. There isn’t any rule or algorithm for balancing dialogical and agonistic approaches. But I am convinced that both are required in philosophy. When we are confronted with an orientation or position that may strike us as alien and even absurd, our first task is understand it in its strongest possible light. Only then that we can engage in serious critical evaluation—not just scoring debating points.

Let me turn to the second expression, “fallibilistic”—or rather the noun “fallibilism.” Fallibilism was first explicitly made a principle of philosophy by Peirce. Peirce attacked all forms of epistemological foundationalism that claimed that there are certain truths that are not only indubitable but incorrigible—and that we can know them with absolute certainty. He criticized all claims to intuitive immediate knowledge—including what has been called “knowledge by direct acquaintance.” Peirce anticipated the critique of what Wilfrid Sellars calls “the myth of the given.” Peirce would agree with Sellars when he begins his famous lecture series “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” by declaring: “Many things have been said to be ‘given’: sense contents, material objects, universals, propositions, real connections, first
principles, even givenness itself. And there is, indeed a certain way of construing the situations which philosophers analyze in these terms which can be said to be the framework of givenness” (Sellars 1997: 14). And Peirce would endorse Sellars’ famous remark “For empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension science, is rational, not because it has a foundation, but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put any claim in jeopardy, though not all at once (Sellars 1997: 79). For Peirce all inquiry is essentially self-corrective. Peirce sharply distinguishes what is indubitable from what is incorrigible. There are many beliefs and propositions that are indubitable. But it doesn’t follow that they cannot be called into question. Peirce, in his Critical Common Sensism, affirms that there are indeed beliefs that are indeed absolutely indubitable, but the fallibilist affirms that after a belief is pronounced to be indubitable “he fully acknowledges that even then it may be that some of his indubitable beliefs may be proved false.” (Peirce 1998: 353). I agree with Hilary Putnam when he says that pragmatism involves a “way of thinking” that involves “a group of theses that can and indeed were argued very differently philosophers with different concerns. In enumerating these theses he lists “(1) antiskepticism; pragmatists hold that doubt requires justification just as much as belief. . . : (2) fallibilism; pragmatism holds that there is never a metaphysical guarantee to be had that such and such a belief will never need revision. . . .” And he then makes an extremely perceptive remark: “that one can be fallibilistic and antiskeptical is perhaps the unique insight of American Pragmatism” (Putnam 1994: 152). But fallibilism is much more. I once described it as follows:

Fallibilism, in its robust sense, is not a rarified epistemological doctrine. It consists of a set of virtues—a set of practices—that need to be carefully nurtured in critical communities. A fallibilistic orientation requires a genuine willingness to test one’s ideas
in public, and to listen carefully to those who criticize them. It requires the imagination to formulate new hypotheses and conjectures and to subject them to rigorous public testing and critique by the community of inquirers. Fallibilism requires a high tolerance for uncertainty, and the courage to revise, modify, and abandon our most cherished beliefs when they have been refuted. Robust fallibilism requires what Karl Popper (who was influenced by Peirce) called the “open society.” Consequently fallibilism involves more than a minimal tolerance of those who differ from us and challenge our ideas. We must confront and seek to answer their criticisms and objections—and this requires mutual respect. (Bernstein 2005: 29-30)

There is another aspect of fallibilism that needs to be emphasized. Fallibilism is the alternative to the “Cartesian Anxiety.” I defined the Cartesian Anxiety as follows: “With a chilling clarity Descartes leads us with an apparent and ineluctable necessity to a grand and seductive Either/Or. Either there is some support for our being a fixed foundation for our knowledge or we cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelop us with madness with intellectual and moral chaos” (Bernstein 1983: 18. (I want to make it clear that I believe that Descartes is a very subtle and complex philosopher. “The Cartesian Anxiety” is a construct based on a popular and entrenched interpretation of Descartes.) Although many philosophers now reject the varieties of foundationalism, there is a popular form of this anxiety that is still very prevalent. There is a belief that unless one can absolutely secure one’s ultimate convictions then there can be no basis for one’s moral and political convictions. There is craving for absolutes. But this craving has dangerous consequences. Why is the appeal to absolute certainty so seductive –especially in times of perceived crisis—when it comes to issues of choice, decision, and action? Because unless we possess moral certainty we will not have any basis for justifying our choices,
decisions, and actions. The alternative to objective certainty is taken to be sheer or “bad” relativism. But this involves a fallacious inference that must be exposed and rejected. When we are acting intelligently we appeal to reasons to justify our actions—or we should be prepared to do so if challenged. When we appeal to reasons we are operating in a space where there can be better and worse fallible reasons. If we give reasons to justify our actions then we must admit that however plausible and convincing we find these arguments they are always open to further critique. There is no escape from our fallibility. But does acknowledging the fallibility of our reasons and justifications mean that we lack conviction and the passionate commitment to choose and act decisively? The answer is clearly No! We should act on what we take to be our best reasons and strongest convictions. We may even be prepared to die for what we ultimately cherish. None of this requires any compromise or weakening of fallibilism—the belief that no matter how firmly we hold certain beliefs, they are in principle open to criticism and correction. In a famous essay of Isaiah Berlin he quoted a wise saying by Joseph Schumpeter, who wrote: “To realize the relative validity of one’s convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian.” And Berlin comments: “To demand more than this is perhaps a deep incurable metaphysical need, but to allow it to determine one’s practice is a symptom of an equally deep, and more dangerous, moral and political immaturity” (Berlin 1969: 172).

What about the third term “pluralism”? To the best of my knowledge, the first philosopher to use the expression “pluralistic” in the title of a book was William James. In 1907 gave a series of lectures at Oxford that were published as A Pluralistic Universe. In his opening lecture, James tells us:
Prima Facie the world is a pluralism: as we find it, its unity seems to be that of any collection; and our higher thinking consists chiefly of an effort to redeem it from that first crude form. Postulating more unity than the first experiences yield, we also discover more. But absolute unity, in spite of brilliant dashes in its direction, still remains undiscovered, still remains a Grenzbegriff. . . To the very last, there are various “points of view” which the philosopher must distinguish in discussing the world; and what is inwardly clear from one point remains a bare externality and datum to the other. The negative, the alogical, is never wholly banished. Something—call it “fate, chance, freedom, spontaneity, the devil, what you will”—is still wrong and other and outside and unincluded, from your point of view, even though you be the greatest of philosophers (James 1977: 5-6)

There was a good reason why James adopted the expression “pluralism.” He was battling the various forms of monism and absolute idealism that were so fashionable at the time—a doctrine advocated by his Harvard colleague, Josiah Royce and the British Idealists. But James was no less an opponent of the type of epistemological atomism that was embedded in traditional British empiricism where all simple impressions were thought to be discrete and separable. James argued that these so-called simple impressions or sense data were actually abstractions from the concrete flow of experience. When we mistake an abstraction for the dynamic concrete flow of experience we are guilty of what Whitehead called “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.” James called it “vicious intellectualism.” Today we might say that James was opposing the “God’s eye view” of philosophy. There is no place outside the world where we can stand and see the world sub specie aeternitatis. We always speak from a finite and particular point of view. But this does not mean that we are trapped in our conceptual schemes. We can seek to enlarge
our horizon—or to use Gadamer’s expression—seek to achieve a fusion of horizons. Pluralism for James was not only a characteristic of our experience but also of the world. I want, however, to focus on the ethical-political significance of pluralism in James and Dewey. We discern the ethical-political consequences of James radical pluralism is such essays as “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” and “What Makes Life Significant.” The blindness that James speaks of is “the blindness with which we are all afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves.” We tend to be egocentric and insensitive to the feelings, opinions and convictions of those who are really different from us. “Hence the stupidity and injustice of our opinions, so far as they deal with the significance of alien lives. Hence the falsity of our judgments, so far as they presume to decide in an absolute way on the value of other persons’ conditions or ideals” (James 1977a: 629-30). James does not think of different points of views as self-enclosed monads that are somehow incommensurable with each other. We may all have certain blindesses to the lives of others, but the point of James’ pluralism is that with imagination, sympathy and openness we can come to appreciate and understand these different points of view. Since the mid-twentieth century there has been a great deal of fascination with incommensurability. In part this was provoked by Thomas Kuhn’s introduction of the idea incommensurability in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. But the idea of incommensurable languages, values, frameworks spread to all areas of cultural life. I have argued—like others such as Davidson and Gadamer—that there is something radically confused and indeed incoherent about this idea of incommensurable languages when this is taken in the strong sense. This is what Karl Popper labeled “the Myth of the Framework” a metaphor that suggests “we are prisoners caught in the framework of our theories; our expectations; our past experiences; our language” (Popper 1972: 56) and so locked into these frameworks that we cannot communicate with others
who are locked into other frameworks and languages. This is just the sort of doctrine that engaged fallibilistic pluralism opposes. We do speak from a given point of view or orientation, but we are not prisoners of it; we can enlarge our perspective and encounter different perspectives. “Incommensurability” does not designate a rigid metaphysical or epistemological barrier; rather it designates a practical challenge for critical understanding. Understanding different points of view is not to be confused with uncritical acceptance but rather demands that we take them seriously and open to mutual critical dialogue. John Dewey emphasized the social and political dimensions of pluralism; it is fundamental for his understanding of democracy as “a way of life.” The following perceptive description of democratic politics (or more accurately, what democratic politics should be) by Hannah Pitkin and Sara Shumer epitomizes Dewey’s understanding of democratic politics.

Democratic politics is an encounter among people with differing interests, perspectives, an opinions—an encounter in which they reconsider and mutually revise opinions and interests both individual and common. It happens always in a context of conflict, imperfect knowledge, and uncertainty, but where community action is necessary. The resolutions achieved are always more or less temporary, subject to reconsideration, and rarely unanimous. What matters is not unanimity but discourse. The substantive common interest is only discovered or created in democratic political struggle and it remains contested as much as shared. Far from being inimical to democracy, conflict handled in democratic ways, with openness and persuasion—is what makes democracy work, what makes for mutual revision of opinions and interests (Pitkin and Shumer 1982: 47-8)

This description of democratic politics is close to Hannah Arendt’s understanding of action, politics, and public freedom. Recall that for Arendt the basic condition for action—the highest
form of human activity—is plurality. Human plurality is based upon the unique distinctiveness of every individual. Plurality is the sine qua non condition of action and speech because they can take place only in between human beings in the public spaces that they create. And these public spaces are where human beings meet each other as citizens not as private individuals. Public freedom, for Arendt is a worldly tangible reality that is created by human beings to be enjoyed by human beings. It is the man-made public space or market-place which antiquity had known as the area where freedom appears and becomes visible to all.

When William James gave his lectures on pluralism at Oxford, two former Harvard students in the audience were Horace Kallen and Alain Locke. Horace Kallen came from an immigrant orthodox Jewish family and Alain Locke was the first African-American to receive the prestigious Rhodes Scholarship to study at Oxford. Kallen, who had been a student of James, became one of the first philosophers to teach at the New School for Social Research. And Alain Locke who became a professor at Howard University became one of the intellectual leaders of the Harlem Renaissance. Alain Locke, like W.E. Dubois, another philosophy student of William James, both occasionally taught course at the New School.

To appreciate the contributions of Kallen and Locke to the practical applications of engaged fallibilistic pluralism we need to appreciate the cultural context that they were addressing. In the first decades of the twentieth century there were powerful voices arguing for the “Americanization” of all immigrants. In the 1912 presidential election Theodore Roosevelt declared “we have no room for but one language here. . . .We intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans and not dwellers in a polyglot boardinghouse.” Roosevelt’s reference to a “crucible” calls to mind a play that had been extremely popular at the time—a play that Roosevelt had seen and enthusiastically approved. In “Melting Pot” by Israel Zangwill, the
protagonist declares “America is God’s Crucible the great Melting-pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming. . . . Germans and Frenchman Irishman and Englishman, Jews and Christians Jews and Russians—into the Crucible with all! God is making the American.” The metaphor of “The Melting Pot” was (and still is) a powerful metaphor in the United States. It was taken to mean that foreigners should leave their strange customs languages and cultures and melt into a homogeneous mass. More cynically, it meant that immigrants should assimilate to the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture in order to become “true” Americans. When Horace Kallen published his classic article “Democracy Versus the Melting Pot” (1915) in *The Nation*, he sharply criticized this idea of America as a society that obliterates cultural differences. In contrast to the idea of the “Melting Pot” Kallen writes:

At his core no human being, even in a ‘state of nature,’ is a mere mathematical unit of action like the “economic man.” Behind him and tremendously in him in quality are his ancestors; around him in space are his relatives and kin looking back with him to a remote common ancestry. In all these he lives and moves and has his being. (Kallen 1996: 78)

Kallen strongly objected to the idea of assimilating to a homogeneous culture. He hoped that different religious and ethnic groups would take pride in their cultural heritage. He envisioned a United States as a nation in which cultural differences would be acknowledged and respected. And he strongly believed that such cultural differences would enrich a vital democracy.

What do we will we make of the United States—a unison, singing the old Anglo-Saxon theme ‘the America,’ the America of the New England school, or a harmony, in which that theme shall be dominant perhaps, among others, but one among many—not the only one? (Kallen 1996: 89)
For Kallen “unison” was the symbol of leveling and homogeneity: it means the triumph of cultural monism. “Harmony” in contrast only exists if there are plural voices that have integrity and harmonize together. Much later Kallen described cultural pluralism as follows:

Cultures live and grow in and through the individual, and their vitality is a function of individual diversities of interests and associations. Pluralism is the *sine qua non* of their persistence and prosperous growth. But not the absolute pluralism which the concept of the unfaltering and inalienable Monad discloses. On the contrary the *sine qua non* is a fluid, relational pluralism which the living individual encounters in the transactions wherewith he constructs his personal history moving out of groups and into groups, engaging in open or hidden communion with societies of his fellows, every one different from the others, and all teamed together, and struggling to provide and maintain the common means which nourish, assure, enhance the different, and often completing values they differently cherish.(Kallen 1956: 55)

I should also mention Randolph Bourne who studied with Dewey at Columbia and was a great admirer of William James. Bourne developed Kallen’s ideas in an even more radical way in his essay “Transnational America” (1916). He also condemned the “melting-pot” metaphor and “Americanization.” “We act as if we want Americanization to take place on our own terms, and not by the consent of the governed.” “We are all foreign-born or descendants of foreign-born. . . “(Bourne 1996: 94). Like Kallen, Bourne was interested in what America might yet become – not with clinging to an imagined past. He advocated a new cosmopolitan ideal for the United States—a” transnational America.” This would fulfill the democratic ideal embodied in the spirit of Emerson, Whitman, James, and Dewey. “It is not what we are now that concerns us, but what
this plastic next generation may become in the light of a new cosmopolitan ideal.” What Bourne wrote a hundred years ago is just as relevant today—perhaps even more so.

[I]f freedom means democratic cooperation in determining the ideals and purposes and the industrial and social institutions of a country, then the immigrant has not been free, and the Anglo-Saxon element is guilty of just what every dominant race is guilty of in every European country: the imposition of its own culture upon minority peoples” (Bourne 1996: 97).

Alain Locke extended the idea of cultural pluralism to include African-Americans. Locke first publically addressed the issue of race in a remarkable set of lectures that he delivered at Howard University in 1915—about the same time that Kallen’s “Democracy Versus the Melting Pot” appeared. (See Locke 1992). At the time it was widely believed that race was rooted in biology and that Blacks were an inferior race. Drawing on the work of Franz Boas—who is considered one of the modern founders of anthropology and was a colleague of John Dewey at Columbia—Locke argues that there are no fixed factors—biological, sociological, anthropological—that determine race. Boas’ empirical investigations demonstrated the “plasticity of human types.” And Boas was one of the first to speak about the plurality of cultures that change over time. Locke argued that racism is a pernicious ideology that has no scientific credibility. Locke was deconstructing the concept of the fixity of races. He speaks of race as “an ethical fiction.” Today we might say that he was showing that racism is a vicious social construction. But this does not mean that this fiction does not have powerful real effects. He shared with W.E.B Dubois the conviction that African-Americans need a positive idea of race in order to achieve self-esteem, self-respect, and genuine dignity. They need to assertively counter what has been thrust upon them –that they are biologically and culturally infer to whites. And
they can do this by achieving artistic and literary excellence that is the basis for self-esteem and self-pride. Locke—especially in the role in played in the Harlem renaissance—sought to advance the ideal of cultural pluralism that would include African-American culture. Horace Kallen, Randolph Bourne, Alain Locke—all inspired by the pragmatic ethos helped to shape the discourse of a cosmopolitan pluralism.

Today not only in the United States but throughout the world the issues that were so pressing at the beginning of the twentieth century are once again in the foreground. Prejudice and antagonism to immigrants and refugees is a global phenomenon. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt noted that every major political event since World War I has created new masses of refugees and stateless people. And in the twenty-first century throughout the Middle East and Africa this continues at an alarming rate. Throughout the world we hear voices echoing the same types of sentiments that Kallen and other cultural pluralists were sharply criticizing at the beginning of the twentieth century.

I have focused on engaged fallibilistic pluralism in the context of philosophy and democracy in America. But recently I am becoming much more concerned with its global significance. I have been participating in the Istanbul Seminars organized the organization ReSet. These are discussions that take place every year in Istanbul where there are encounters between “Western” and “Non-Western” scholars and students. This past spring the topic was pluralism. I was impressed when I discovered how scholars from India and many different Islamic countries are rediscovering the elements of pluralism in their own traditions. I was also impressed how students and younger scholars all over the world yearn to further practices of pluralism in their own societies. But it is also depressing to discover the extent to which all over the world there are powerful forces—religious, cultural, political and economic—that are suppressing any
meaningful pluralism. If we are honest we need to realize the *fragility* of engaged fallibilistic pluralism. If we want to become a concrete living reality then we must constantly struggle to bring about its concrete realization.

Finally, I want to speak to you directly as educators. I am fully aware of all the pettiness that pervades academic life—and the sheer bureaucracy that seems to be getting worse all the time. I remember another saying of Paul Weiss when I was started out on my own academic career. “Dick,” he said, “There is a great deal of mediocrity and nonsense in academic life. But what is really important is always to keep in view the ideals that brought you into the life of the mind; focus on those exemplars of courage, imagination, and intellectual integrity that inspired you—on what is great and noble in the philosophic enterprise. I have tried to communicate this to you in my own teaching and I expect that you are doing this—in your own distinctive ways—with your students. I also hope that you are inspiring your students not only as philosophers but as citizens encouraging them to practice engaged fallibilistic pluralism in their everyday lives. We are living through a very dark period in our own country—where there is far too little genuine dialogue, where public trust and the democratic ethos are threatened in all sorts of invidious ways. Today, to a frightening extent, money rules—not the people. What Dewey wrote in 1930 is even more relevant today.

The business mind, having its own conversation and language, its own interests, its own intimate groupings in which men of this mind, in their collective capacity, determine the tone of society at large as well as the government itself . . . We now have, although without formal or legal status, a mental and moral corporateness for which history affords no parallel. (Dewey 1930: 41)
It is all too easy to despair, to become cynical or indifferent. But the best of the American pragmatic ethos is to try to figure out new ways to further the ideals that we cherish. Cultivating the concrete practices of engaged fallibilistic pluralism is not only important for academic life, but has become increasingly urgent for revitalizing democracy at home and throughout the world.

References


