

# Universalist Grandeur, Romantic Depth, Pragmatist Cunning

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Relativism has been a central topic of philosophical discussion for almost twenty-five hundred years. This is because the very idea of philosophy was a product of Plato's reaction to Protagoras' claim that man is the measure of all things. The Platonic distinction between mere sophists and true philosophers incorporates the conviction that there is something beyond humanity that sets a standard which human beings are obliged to respect. Plato did his best to make 'relativist philosophy' a contradiction in terms.

Twenty-four centuries later, we are still being told that we need to guard against the temptations of relativism – that it is important to the future of civilization that we all line up on Plato's side. Since I think that there is nothing that can correct human practices except imaginative suggestions about alternative human practices, I am on Protagoras' side. So today I shall offer, as I have in the past, a way of looking at moral and intellectual progress that accords with Protagoras' dictum.

My more specific aim in this talk is to differentiate the tradition that unites Protagoras with James and Dewey from another tradition to which it is sometimes assimilated. In the past, it now seems to me, I have tried too hard to assimilate pragmatism to romanticism. Today I should like to make amends by offering an account of the differences between them.

I shall begin doing so by invoking a pair of distinctions drawn by Jürgen Habermas in his book *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. These are distinctions that I have found invaluable in thinking about how to tell the story of modern western philosophy. The first is the one Habermas makes between 'subject-centered reason' – a truth-tracking ability of the sort Plato and Descartes believed to be built into the human mind – and 'communicative reason'. Communicative rationality is simply what exists when there is willingness to hear the other side, to talk things over, to argue until areas of agreement are found, and to abide by the resulting

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agreements. So Habermas's first contrast is between reason as a purported relation of connaturality between subject and object and reason as a set of social practices.

To think of reason as subject-centered is to believe that human beings possess a faculty that enables them to circumvent conversation – to side-step opinion and head straight for knowledge. To abandon this conception of rationality is to see truth as what emerges as a result of a free and imaginative search for consensus, and to think of knowledge as the presence of such consensus rather than as a mental state that enjoys a different relation to reality than does opinion. To think of reason as communicative and dialogical rather than subject-centered and monological is to substitute responsibility to other human beings for responsibility to a non-human standard.

Habermas's second distinction is between the kind of philosopher who remains loyal to the notion of rationality and the kind who celebrates what Habermas calls 'an other to reason'. Habermas uses the latter term to characterize such things as mystic insight, poetic inspiration, religious faith, imaginative power, and authentic self-expression – sources of conviction that have been put forward as superior to reason. Like Descartes' clear and distinct ideas, each of these others to reason is put forward as a short cut to truth.

If you are in touch with such an other, you do not need to converse with other human beings. For if you possess something like what Kierkegaard called 'faith', or if you can engage in something like what Heidegger called 'Denken', it will not matter to you whether other people can be persuaded to share your beliefs. It would debase the relevant 'other to reason' to force into the conversational arena, or to make it compete in the market-place of ideas.

Habermas has sometimes suggested that I stray too far in the direction of relativism when I deny that universal validity is a goal of inquiry. He thinks of my rejection of the notion of universal validity as an unfortunate concession to romanticism, and as putting me in bad company. I, on the other hand, think of his retention of the notion of universal validity as an unfortunate concession to Platonist universalism. As I see it, by hanging on to this notion Habermas remains in thrall to the philosophical tradition that gave us a subject-centered conception of reason.

It seems to me that carrying through on replacing a subject-centered conception of reason with a communicative conception would leave one without any use for the notion of universal validity. For doing so will leave one thinking of rational inquiry as having no higher goal than solving the transitory problems of the day. I should like to think of my quasi-Deweyan version of pragmatism as standing to communicative reason as universalism stands to subject-centered reason, and as romanticism stands to the various others to reason. Habermas and I both distrust metaphysics. But I think that getting rid of metaphysics also gets rid of the idea of universal validity, whereas he thinks that notion must be given a metaphysics-free interpretation, if we are to avoid the temptations that romanticism presents.

One way to express our disagreement is to say that I cast Habermas in the role in which he casts Hegel – as someone who almost reaches the correct philosophical position but fails to take the last crucial step. One of the central points Habermas makes in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* is that Hegel almost, but not quite, broke free of Plato and Descartes. He almost broke the hold of subject-centered conceptions of rationality. He came very close to replacing it, once and for all, with what

Terry Pinkard has called 'the doctrine of the sociality of reason'. That doctrine holds that an individual human being cannot be rational all by herself, for the same reason that she cannot use language all by herself. For unless and until we take part in what Robert Brandom calls 'the game of giving and asking for reasons', we remain unthinking brutes.

Habermas thinks that if Hegel had managed to carry through on this line of thought we might have been spared the aggressive post-Hegelian anti-rationalisms of Kierkegaard, Bergson, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Foucault and others. But for Hegel to have taken the plunge he would have had to drop the idea of absolute knowledge – a kind of knowing in which everything is so perfectly unified that there is no longer room for distinctions between theory and practice, God and man, subject and object, or time and eternity. He would have had to turn his back on Parmenides, Plato, and the quest for grandeur – a kind of grandeur that becomes possible only when doubt is eliminated, when no participant in the conversation has anything left to say, and therefore history – and perhaps time as well – can come to an end. To do that, Hegel would have had to give up the identification of the divine and the human at which his System aimed. He would have had to rest content with the thought the idea that the conversation of humankind would go its unpredictable way for as long as our species lasts – solving particular problems as they happen to arise, and, by working through the consequences of those solutions, generating new problems.

One way to follow up on Habermas's criticism of Hegel is to think of Hegel as having taken on the impossible task of reconciling the romantic idea that the human future might become unimaginably different, and unimaginably richer, than the human past, with the Greek idea that time, history and diversity are distractions from an eternal oneness. No philosopher did more than Hegel to make us take time and history seriously. Yet he ends *The Phenomenology of Spirit* by telling us that once Spirit has attained full self-consciousness time and history will cease. As with Goethe, much of Hegel's greatness lies in his having heightened the tension between the temporal and the eternal, the classic and the romantic, rather than in his success at dissolving either opposition. It is as if the cunning of reason used Hegel to heighten our sense of this tension, and thus to warn us that we should cease to attempt such syntheses.

John Dewey, the greatest of the Left Hegelians, heeded this warning. Dewey had no use either for theodicy or for the ideal of absolute knowledge. He was interested only in helping people solve problems, and had no ambitions to either grandeur or profundity. Abandoning both of these projects has resulted in his being dismissed as a bourgeois bore. Both Platonists and Nietzscheans regard Dewey as incapable of rising to the spiritual level on which philosophy should be pursued.

So far I have described romanticism simply as a movement that likes to invoke an 'other to reason'. Now I should like to say something more about this movement. Doing so will clarify why I think that philosophy should cease to rise to the spiritual level at which Plato and Nietzsche confront one another. I want to argue that philosophers should drop metaphors of level – both metaphors of height and metaphors of depth – once and for all. By doing so, philosophy would bourgeoisify and de-heroize itself. That, I shall argue, would be a good thing for it to do.

One of Dewey's most trenchant critics, Arthur Lovejoy, was also a distinguished historian of ideas. In the latter capacity, he urged that it was time to put aside the hackneyed opposition between classicism and romanticism – to treat it as an over-used, worn out, historiographical device. In a celebrated essay, Lovejoy sketched a whole series of ideas and intellectual movements that have been labeled 'romanticism', and showed not only that there was little that bound them together, but that some of them stood in direct opposition to one another.

Isaiah Berlin is one of the few historians of ideas who have had the courage to insist that Lovejoy was 'in this instance mistaken'. 'There *was* a romantic movement,' Berlin says, 'it did have something that was central to it; it did create a great revolution in consciousness, and it is important to discover what this is' (RR, 20). Berlin revivifies the notion of romanticism by opposing it not to classicism but to universalism. He thereby transforms it into one term of a philosophical, rather than a literary, contrast. He calls universalism the 'backbone of the main western tradition', and says that it was that backbone that romanticism 'cracked' (RR, 21). Romanticism, Berlin says, was 'the deepest and most long lasting of all changes in the life of the West' (RR, xiii).

Prior to the late 18th century, Berlin claims, western thinkers were pretty much agreed on three doctrines: First, all genuine questions can be answered. Second, all these answers can be discovered by public means – means which, as Berlin says, 'can be learnt and taught to other persons'. Third, all these answers are compatible with one another. They all fit together into One Truth. As Berlin nicely puts it, western thinkers viewed human life as a jigsaw puzzle. He describes their outlook as follows:

There must be some way of putting the pieces together. The all-wise being, the omniscient being, whether God or an omniscient earthly creature – whichever way you like to conceive of it – is in principle capable of fitting all the pieces together into one coherent pattern. Anyone who does this will know what the world is like: what things are, what they have been, what they will be, what the laws are that govern them, what man is, what the relation of man is to things, and therefore what man needs, what he desires, and how to obtain it. (RR, 23)

Berlin's own philosophical writings are built around his conviction that the pieces will not, in fact, fit together. He was constantly quoting a saying of Kant's: 'out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing can be made'. The theme of Berlin's best-known essay, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', is that some goods are incompatible with one another. There is no such thing as the one good life for a human being, so no matter what socio-political setup we agree on, something will be lost. Somebody will get hurt. Some people will suffer. This is a view with which Dewey would have entirely agreed.

As Berlin tells the story, the French Revolution forced us to face up to incompatibility. The unity of Truth cannot be reconciled with the fact that 'Danton . . . a sincere revolutionary who committed certain errors, did not deserve to die, and yet Robespierre was perfectly right to put him to death' (RR, 13). The romantic reaction to this paradox, Berlin says, was to attach the highest importance to such values as 'integrity, sincerity, readiness to sacrifice one's life to some inner light, dedication to some ideal for which it is worth both living and dying' (RR, 8).

Berlin sums up the romantic reaction against the assumption that there is always one right answer to the question 'what is to be done?' by saying that what Hegel called 'the collision of good with good' is 'due not to error, but to some kind of conflict of an unavoidable kind, of loose elements wandering about the earth, of values which cannot be reconciled. What matters is that people should dedicate themselves to these values with all that is in them' (RR, 13).

One can of course view such a call to dedication as lending aid and comfort to fanaticism. But it would be more in accord with Berlin's intention in this passage to think of it as of a piece with Matthew Arnold's appeal to his beloved at the end of *Dover Beach*. There he suggests that all we moderns can do is try to be true to one another, for human solidarity is all that is left when both religion and metaphysics are abandoned. Doing so leaves us with the realization that, in Arnold's words:

*We are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

One suspects that pre-Platonic readers of Homer, such as Sophocles and Protagoras, would have thought of Arnold's description of our situation as pretty much common sense. But Plato, by applying the jigsaw puzzle analogy to human life, made it seem as if Homer, and the poets generally, had been too pessimistic. He suggested that we could be true to something quite different from either our fellow human beings or the unreliable and querulous Olympian deities. By inventing metaphysics, Plato extended the reductionist techniques of the pre-Socratics physicalists into new areas. He wanted to do for the moral, political and erotic realms what Empedocles and Democritus had hoped to do for non-human nature and what Greek mathematicians were beginning to do for numerical and spatial relationships.

If we put the *Phaedo* and the *Timaeus* together, we can see the Platonic Forms as simples which combine to produce both our bodies and our minds. By understanding composites as made up of these simples we can achieve certainty about, as Berlin put it, 'what man is, what the relation of man is to things, and therefore what man needs, what he desires, and how to obtain it'.

This idea that everything could someday be seen as fitting together was Plato's bequest to orthodox monotheistic theology. It was the charter of what Heidegger calls 'the onto-theological tradition'. That tradition has always insisted that there is more to the search for truth than merely overcoming anomalies and finding acceptable compromises. By so insisting, the onto-theological tradition has succeeded in pinning the pejorative label 'sophist' on thinkers such as Protagoras and Dewey, and thus insinuating that they are incapable of rising to the level at which philosophy is to be conducted.

The Theory of Forms gave Plato a way to see erotic fervor and the desire to fit all the pieces of the puzzle together as two expressions of the same need. The author of both love poems and mathematical proofs, he wanted to see both as serving a single purpose. If we put the *Phaedrus* together with the *Republic*, we can see Plato as trying to fit his love of the young men to whom he dedicated his poems, his love of Socrates, and his hopes for a just city, together with his passion for demonstrative

certainty. By the time Plato had finished describing the human situation he had made it possible to regard the darkling plain that stretched between the Greek ships and the walls of Troy as an illusion, the landscape of a nightmare from which we were now able to awake. By, as Nietzsche put it, insisting that only the rational can be beautiful, and by identifying beauty with reality, he enabled us to see ugliness and evil as a transitory appearance.

The imperturbable grandeur of the new and radiant world that Plato claimed to have discerned dominated the imagination of the West up until the late 18th century. The One Truth, sometimes thought of as provided by divine revelation and sometimes as the product of rational argumentation, is both an appropriate object of erotic striving and an utterly safe haven from despair. As Nietzsche and Heidegger have taught us to say, the onto-theological tradition that Plato founded denies human finitude by treating tragedy as illusion. For this tradition tells us, in William James's words, that the best things are the eternal things, the things that cast the last stone. It lets us believe that every truth can be reconciled with every other truth, and every good with every other good. This jigsaw-puzzle view survived intact in Hegel's notion of absolute knowledge.

The romantic movement did its best to break apart what Plato thought he had fitted together. It mocked Plato's attempt to bring the mathematically certain and the poetically sublime together. It denied the claim made in Plato's *Phaedrus* that the particular person or city or idea or book one loves with all one's heart and soul and mind is simply a temporary disguise adopted by something eternal and infinite, something not itself subject to contingency or defeat. To quote Berlin again:

What romanticism did was to undermine the notion that in matters of value, politics, morals, aesthetics there are such things as objective criteria which operate between human beings, such that anyone who does not use these criteria is simply either a liar or a madman, which is true of mathematics and physics. (RR, 140)

That is to undermine an assumption common to Plato, Kant, and Habermas: that there is such a thing as 'the better argument' – better not by reference to its ability to convince some particular audience, but because it better tracks universal validity. The idea that there is one right thing to do or to believe, no matter who you are, and the idea that arguments have intrinsic goodness or badness, no matter who is asked to evaluate them, go hand in hand. Both ideas are epitomized in the Kantian doctrine of unconditional moral obligations imposed by pure practical reason. My basic disagreement with Habermas is over his attempt to combine a Kant-style notion of the intrinsically better argument with a Hegel-style doctrine of the sociality of reason.

If we follow Berlin in abandoning the jigsaw puzzle view, we shall no longer be tempted by the idea that inquiry aims at something grander than problem-solving. But Berlin recognized that the Platonic attempt to fuse grandeur and invulnerability had survived within the bosom of romanticism. For one idea that linked the romantics with the onto-theological tradition was that of 'the infinite', an ambiguous term that universalists and romantics use in different ways.

Universalism's idea of the infinite is of something that encompasses everything

else, and thus something against which nothing has any power. To say that God is infinite is to say that nothing outside him can affect him, much less deter him from his purposes. Romanticism's idea of infinity is closer to the one Kierkegaard invokes when he speaks of the passion of the infinite. It is an essentially reactive idea, the idea of removing all constraints, and in particular all the limitations imposed by the human past, all those which are built into the way we talk and think. The romantic idea of infinity has more to do with the figure of Prometheus than with that of Socrates, and more to do with Nietzsche's ideal of human freedom than with Spinoza's.

Berlin uses the terms 'depth' and 'profundity' to describe the romantic version of the infinite. I shall quote at length a passage in which he expatiates on the sense that the romantics gave these terms:

When I say that Pascal is more profound than Descartes (although Descartes, no doubt, was a man of genius), or that Kafka is a more profound writer than Hemingway, what exactly am I trying unsuccessfully to convey by means of this metaphor . . .? According to the romantics – and this is one of their principal contributions to understanding in general – what I mean by depth, although they do not discuss it under that name, is inexhaustibility, unembracability. In the case of works of art that are beautiful but not profound I can explain to you, say, about some musical work of the eighteenth century, well-constructed, melodious, agreeable, even perhaps a work of genius, why it is made in the way it is, and even why it gives pleasure . . . . But in the case of a work that is profound the more I say the more remains to be said. There is no doubt that, although I attempt to describe what their profundity consists in, as soon as I speak it becomes quite clear that, no matter how long I speak, new chasms open. No matter what I say I always have to leave three dots at the end. (RR, 102–3)

Plato thought that inquiry and reflection would eventually bring one to a full stop, to a point beyond which no new chasms opened. His hope that argument will eventually bring us to a point where it is unnecessary to leave three dots at the end epitomizes the jigsaw puzzle view of the human situation – the view that there is a grand overall meaning to human life in general, rather than merely small transitory meanings that are constructed by individuals and communities and deconstructed by their successors. Universalists think that, as Kierkegaard put it, we already have the truth within us, that our self-knowledge is a knowledge of God. So we can recognize the truth when we hear it – recognize that there are no more pieces that need to be fitted together. For if the truth were not somehow already within us, then Sartre would be right: the search for truth would be a futile passion.

The growing conviction that there will always be three dots at the end, that new pieces will always turn up and demand to be fitted in, no matter how much argument we engage in, can be taken either as a Sartrean counsel of despair or as an indication that we have been looking to the wrong sort of human activity for redemption. Many of the romantics drew the corollary that it is the poet, or, more generally, the imaginative genius, who will be our redeemer, rather than the sort of thinker whose aim is argumentative invulnerability.

Berlin says that Schiller introduced, 'for the first time in human thought', the notion that 'ideals are not to be discovered at all, but to be invented; not to be found

but to be generated, generated as art is generated' (RR, 87). Simultaneously, Shelley was telling Europe that the poet glimpses the gigantic shadows that futurity casts upon the present. For both writers, the poet – in the generalized sense of the person whose imagination helps make possible a change in our condition – does not fit past events together in order to provide lessons for the future, but rather provides the stimulus necessary for us to turn our backs on the past in order that our future may be wonderfully different. Whereas the universalist is instinctively a reformer, someone who wants to improve things by fitting more pieces of the puzzle together, the romantic is instinctively a revolutionary, someone who wants to sweep the puzzle off the table.

So much for Berlin's account of the universalist–romantic distinction. I have been trying to tie in that distinction with Habermas's picture of post-Hegelian philosophers attempting to construct an 'other to reason'. They make such attempts, I would suggest, because they think of *depth* as providing a kind of legitimacy that will substitute for the universalist kind of legitimacy that consists in the availability of universal agreement. Agreement is, for romantics, as more recently for Foucault, simply a way of procuring conformity to current beliefs and institutions. Depth does not produce agreement, but for romantics it trumps agreement.

The dialectic that runs through the last two centuries of philosophical thought, and that Habermas summarizes in his book, is one in which universalists decry each new other to reason as endangering both rationality and human solidarity, and in which romantics rejoin that what is called rationality is merely a disguise for the attempt to eternalize custom and tradition. The universalists rightly say that to abandon the quest for intersubjective agreement is to abandon the restraints on power which have made it possible to achieve some measure of social justice. The romantics say, with equal plausibility, that acquiescing in the idea that only what everybody can agree on can be regarded as true means surrendering to the tyranny of the past over the future.

Formulating the opposition in these terms brings me to my central thesis: that pragmatism should be viewed, not as a version of romanticism, but as an alternative to both universalism and romanticism. The pragmatist response to the dialectic Habermas summarizes in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* is to say that talk of universal validity is simply a way of dramatizing the need for intersubjective agreement, while romantic ardor and romantic depth are simply ways of dramatizing the need for novelty, the need to be imaginative. But neither need be elevated over the other, nor should either be allowed to exclude the other. Instead of asking epistemological questions about sources of knowledge, or metaphysical questions about what there is to be known, philosophers should make it their business to do what Dewey did: helping their fellow-citizens balance the need for consensus and the need for novelty.

To achieve either intellectual or moral progress we need to make startling new ideas widely accepted. We need to make claims that seemed absurd to one generation the common sense of the next generation. We need to do this not by brainwashing but by explaining how the new ideas might, if tried out, solve, or dissolve, problems generated by the old ones. Neither the notion of universal validity nor that of a privileged access to truth are necessary to accomplish this latter purpose. *We*



can work toward intersubjective agreement without being lured by the promise of universal validity, and we can introduce new and startling ideas without attributing them to a privileged source.

What both Platonist universalists and Nietzschean romantics both find most exasperating in pragmatism is precisely the insistence that we shall never be purified or transfigured, but only, with luck, become a little more grownup, a little more able to avoid the miseries that tormented our ancestors. The trouble with both universalist metaphors of grandeur and romantic metaphors of depth is that they suggest that a practical proposal, whether conservative or radical in character, can gain strength by being tied in with something not merely human – something like the intrinsic nature of reality or the uttermost depths of the human soul.

Universalists use metaphors of height to suggest that rational consensus is a matter of the attractive force exerted on the human mind by something super-human, something located, as Plato put it, beyond the heavens – a place where the pieces of the jigsaw have always been, neatly fitted together. Such metaphors encourage an ‘O altitudo!’ frame of mind. People who relish these metaphors see inquiry as having an exalted goal called ‘Truth’, which they think of as something more than successful problem-solving. The traditional idea that truth consists in correspondence with reality is an outgrowth of the jigsaw puzzle view of inquiry.

By contrast, Berlin’s view that the best we can do in politics is to iron out as many conflicts as possible exhibits the same pragmatist attitude as Kuhn’s view that the best we can do in science is to resolve anomalies as they arise. But for those who relish metaphors of height, universal agreement on the desirability of a political institution or the truth of a scientific theory is not, as it is for pragmatists, just a happy social circumstance, but also a sign that we are getting closer to the true nature of man or of nature.

Romantics who relish metaphors of depth, and who share Schiller’s belief that good new ideas are not discovered but invented, set aside the idea of correspondence with reality. So they have a lot in common with pragmatists. But romantics often make the mistake Habermas attributes to enthusiasts for Heideggerian *Welterschliessung*: they neglect their responsibility to make these recently invented ideas plausible by showing how the new institution or the new theory might solve problems that the old institutions or theories could not handle. The romantic often tells us that what is needed is authenticity rather than argument, as if the fact that she has had a new idea were enough to exempt her from the responsibility of explaining the utility of that idea.

Thus when Christ is described as the way, the truth and the light, or when Heidegger tells us that Hitler is the truth of Germany, the claim is that our old ideas, our old problems, and our old projects should simply be shelved, in order that our minds may be completely taken over by the new. The sheer breathtaking novelty of the claim is treated as making it unnecessary to make it plausible. Instead of being awed by superhuman grandeur, we are to be awed by Promethean daring. Instead of being told that we have been elevated to the level of unchanging Truth, we are told that we have finally been put in touch with our deepest self.

If we abandon metaphors of height, we shall see neither the ability to attain universal agreement on some updated version of Newton’s *Principia*, nor the need for

universal observation of the provisions of the Helsinki Declaration on Human Rights, as an indication that these documents have some privileged relationship to reality. Both the prospect of a fully unified system of scientific explanation and that of a world civilization in which human rights are respected have grandeur. But grandeur in itself is obviously not an indication of validity. Grandeur is inspiring, and if we had no taste for it we should make little progress. But it is neither more nor less inspiring than depth. Both the appeal to something overarching and invulnerable, and the appeal to something inexhaustibly deep, are simply public relations gimmicks – ways of gaining our attention.

To see these appeals as gimmicks is a way of reinforcing the pragmatist suggestion that we do not need words like 'intrinsic' or 'legitimate' or 'unconditional' to supplement such banal expressions of praise or blame as 'sounds plausible,' 'would do more harm than good', 'fits the data', 'offends our instincts', 'might be worth a try' and 'is too ridiculous to take seriously'. No inspired poet or prophet can argue from the source of his inspiration to the utility of his enlargement of our sense of what is possible. No defender of the status quo can argue from the fact of intersubjective agreement to the future utility of the theory or policy about which consensus has been reached. Neither consensus nor imaginativeness is good in itself, because there is nothing that is good 'in itself'. But one can still value intersubjective agreement after one has given up the jigsaw puzzle view of things and the idea that we have a faculty called 'reason' that is somehow attuned to the intrinsic nature of things. One can still value imaginative power even after one has given up the romantic idea that the imagination is such a faculty.

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So much for my claim that pragmatism provides a third way between universalism and romanticism. I shall close by taking up the frequently heard claim that events such as 9/11 demonstrate the need for unconditional commitment, commitment incompatible with the Protagorean and pragmatist claim that human social practices are the measure of all things.

One of the best responses to 9/11 I have come across is an article by Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit in *The New York Review of Books* entitled 'Occidentalism'. The authors of this article think of Occidentalism – the institutions and practices of the modern West – as very much worth defending, but not because these institutions and practices incorporate or reflect something grander or deeper than the modern West itself. They suggest that we respond to the terrorist threat to the West with, as they put it, 'the full force of calculating bourgeois lack of heroism'.

This seems to me to strike exactly the right note. It asks us to be cunning and pragmatic in our response to these new dangers, rather than either re-examining the worth of western ways of life, as leftists have suggested we should, or stoutly affirming the eternal truth of the principles on which western institutions are based, as rightists have suggested we must. Our failure to attain a global consensus on the values and practices that emerged in Europe and America during the Enlightenment should not, itself, make us doubt the value of those practices. For those dedicated to

their destruction have simply not had as much experience with them, and of alternatives to them, as the West has had. On the other hand, all that we can say on behalf of those practices is that they have served us well, and that no alternative set of practices within the present scope of our imagination seems likely to serve us better.

We who treasure the institutions of contemporary Europe and America are not more in touch with the intrinsic nature of reality than are the Islamic fundamentalists. Nor are their convictions more deeply felt or their actions more deeply motivated than ours. But we do know more than they do – not about the nature of man or reality or goodness or justice, but simply about how various alternative socio-political arrangements have panned out in practice. We in the West have performed, and observed the results of, more social experiments than has anybody else.

It is pointless to argue that people in the West are more rational than people elsewhere, but it is entirely correct to say that they are much more experienced. Whatever else we westerners may eventually learn from other cultures, these cultures have little or nothing to teach us about how best to fit together various things that once seemed dubiously compatible: for example, freedom and equality, bureaucracy and civil liberties, market economies and social welfare, property rights and universal suffrage, moral intensity and secular education. Europe and America have spent the last 200 years acquiring invaluable experience about how these tensions can be eased. The West acquired this experience, to be sure, only because of the wealth it accumulated through brutal colonialist oppression. But the utility of the experience is not impugned by this fact, any more than the utility of the Roman road system was impugned by the fact that those who built it were slaves.

Utilitarianism and pragmatism have often been viewed, by romantics on both the left and the right, as philosophical apologias for modern, western, bourgeois, secular society. So, among other things, they are. These philosophies are intertwined with, and are implausible apart from, the experiences of the Europeans and Americans over the last few centuries. They do not have, and should not claim, any authority independent of that body of experience. Once one has given up on subject-centered reason, one should not expect philosophies to be more than public relations devices for making certain kinds of individuals and certain kinds of societies look good. So Buruma and Margalit seem to me on the right track when they define ‘Occidentalism’ not in terms of first principles or fundamental values but by reference to distinctively western institutions and practices.

Buruma and Margalit explain what they mean by Occidentalism by enumerating four things that the modern West prides itself upon, and that the Islamic terrorists despise: the City, the Bourgeoisie, Science, and Feminism. This off-the-cuff assortment of praiseworthy institutions seems to me a sensible way of making clear what is good about the West, but many other lists would have done as well: for example, the Rule of Law, Redistributionist Taxation, Secular Education, Gay Liberation, and a Free Press. I greatly prefer such lists of such representative institutions and movements to claims that the West stands for Reason, or for Human Dignity. Such lists are much better suited to remind us of what the terrorists are threatening, and of why they must be defeated, than are statements of principle.

Protagoras asked us to compare human lives and social practices with one another and then decide which seemed preferable. Plato demanded to know what criteria we

were supposed to use when making this decision. He made this demand for criteria sound plausible by telling his story about the Forms. That story incorporated the jigsaw puzzle view of things and the conception of reason as an innate, subject-centered, puzzle-solving faculty. Plato then tried to deduce the value of Socrates' life from that theory.

Had it been left to Protagoras to defend the life of the mind, the life he shared with Socrates, he might have gone about it in the way that John Stuart Mill later adopted: by saying that anyone who had experience of the life of an intellectual and also with other sorts of lives would always prefer the former. Protagoras would have waved Plato's question about criteria aside by saying that the defender of any form of life or any society will easily be able to dream up criteria that will justify his or her antecedent preference. But in the end, he would have insisted, these appeals to first principles and ultimate values are public relations gimmicks. There is nothing wrong with such gimmicks, he might have added, except the temptation to take them more seriously than they deserve.

Both individuals and communities choose their lives on the basis of how they seem when compared to other lives, experienced or imagined. The universalists are right that we should do our best to justify those choices to our fellow human beings. The romantics are right that unjustifiable imaginings are indispensable for moral and intellectual progress. The pragmatists are right that it takes a lot of unheroic bourgeois cunning to balance the continuing need for justification with the continuing need for novelty.

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