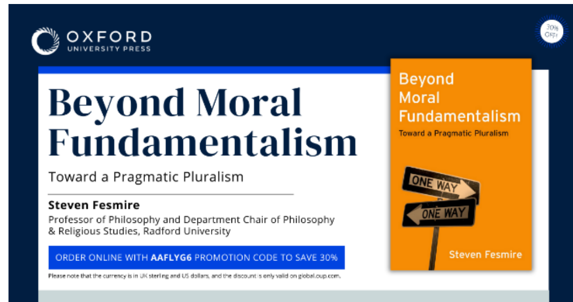
[The final version of this post by Steven Fesmire is published on the OUP Blog, August 2, 2024: https://blog.oup.com/2024/08/whats-the-matter-with-moral-fundamentalism/]



What's the matter with moral fundamentalism?

Steven Fesmire

Inspired by fellow philosopher Anthony Weston, I often ask my ethics students to create a diabolical toolkit of rules that would torpedo public dialogue. The idea here, I explain, is to spell out rules that would maximize the distance between "us" and "them," ensuring that possibilities for cooperatively setting and achieving social goals—like peace, security, justice, public health, or sustainability—go forever unnoticed. For example, consider things like "prepare your comeback instead of listening" or "be angrier and talk louder than others."

I divide students into groups and ask each group to develop five more rules. They invariably come up with an excellent toolkit for sabotaging debate. For example: "stereotype the other side," "be uncharitable: always present your side at its best and the other at its worst," "ignore context," "be smug," "trust your anger; it would never steer you wrong," "inflate certainty," "assume your interlocuter is clueless" "reject complexity," "be visibly offended by any questioning of your conclusions," "approach any debate as a winner-take-all game," "widen the gulf that separates us," "act as though your values and concerns invariably overrule theirs."

Gradually some of the fun fades as we reflect on our diabolical toolkit. Many of my liberal-identified students interpret the activity as a sendup of conservatives. Their imagined toolkit-users sport "Make America Great Again" hats and threaten DEI advocates. Meanwhile, many of my conservative students interpret the activity as damning liberal wokeness, virtue signaling, and cancel culture.

"Do *you* ever follow these rules?" I ask. This is a stretch for some of them, but most of us end up recognizing ourselves. "Have we learned anything from doing this?" The sense of the class is that we purposefully drew up a malicious playbook for undermining democracy, and it mirrored business-as-usual.

In my own writings on moral philosophy, I've come to call this cluster of toolkit-like habits "moral fundamentalism." I'll very briefly explore four questions about it: (1) What is it? (2) Is it really such a bad thing? (3) Is it good for motivating public action? and (4) Are we stuck with it?

1. ***What is it?***

More than a synonym for moral absolutism, a moral fundamentalist may be defined, minimally, as someone who acts as if they have access to: (1) the exclusively right way to diagnose moral or political problems and (2) the single approvable practical solution to any particular problem.

The word "fundamentalism" automatically calls to mind rigid religious dogmatism, which carries the idea that a select few have accessed ideals that should be heeded without public investigation, critique, and reformation. Like its religious counterpart, moral fundamentalism isn't a promising resource for public dialogue, restoration of trust, or reconciliation. It's a resource for reactionary oppression, rage, and fanaticism on all sides. We must find our diverse ways beyond the hell we inflict in the name of righteous certainty.

2. *Is it really such a bad thing?*

For a moral fundamentalist, the main moral, social, or political problem is presumed to be that others don't *get* the problem, as though events carry their own meanings. Or the main problem is presumed to be the failure of others to bow to our brilliant solutions—never mind aspects of the situation that may be obscured by our way of casting the problem or hidden by our principles. We too readily assume that, unlike *their* concerns, ours are value-neutral and free of interest-driven rationalizations and biases. *We* never doctor facts to predetermine results.

Moral fundamentalism is a drag on democracy. This drag is to be expected when people feel backed into a corner, or when their social position limits opportunities. But fundamentalism anywhere blocks communication and inquiry across differences. Whenever people suppose their reading of a problem is exhaustive, they autocratically predefine what's relevant and they covertly prejudge alternatives. They assume, as a matter of course, that others are stubbornly refusing to accept the interpretation that is staring right out at them.

When we disagree about problems, it's one thing to reflectively conclude that others are willfully refusing to face conditions. It's quite another thing to *start* with the default assumption that we alone are taking the wide view.

Despite these habits—not *because* of them—moral fundamentalists have historically done many good things through their dealings with opposing fundamentalisms. But what else have they done that might in future be minimized by delegitimizing moral fundamentalism? When we take up the one-way mentality, what happens to opportunities for learning our way toward a healthier, more just, and more sustainable future across the dynamic spectrum of values, beliefs, and concerns?

3. *Is moral fundamentalism good for motivating public action?*

We're used to assuming that a kind of fundamentalism is the irreplaceable steam that powers activism and advocacy, that resistance to injustice is unintelligible without it, and that the virtues of moral clarity and conviction somehow imply a my-way-or-the-highway approach.

However, does activism actually require and benefit from moral fundamentalism? In order to motivate actions that restructure conditions and redress wrongs, must people harden their hearts and minds against the clamor of contradictory theories, both speaking and acting as if they're governed by final truths?

This idea that incorrigibility is a virtue of activism and advocacy makes some dubious assumptions about the public. To some intellectuals, the international resurgence of gaslighting demagogues and self-seeking cronyism is incontrovertible proof that we can *ultimately* expect very little of the public. On that view, the public switch is permanently set to dim, and it's up to intellectuals to take up the civilizing burden of enlightenment. If this requires us to proclaim finalities, then so be it.

Disagreements about what we can reasonably expect of a democratic citizenry have a long history, from Plato's *Republic* to the *Federalist Papers*. The clearest modern statement of alternatives was arguably the debate in the 1920s between American philosopher John Dewey and journalist Walter Lippmann. Dewey rejected what he took to be Lippmann's coziness with paternalistic rule by elite experts who oversimplify problems so that citizens will accept the reality that is bureaucratically packaged for them. Nothing made Dewey's democratic blood boil more than Lippmann's idea that intellectuals must lift the burden of inquiry from the provincial and parochial little heads of the masses while conferring the "mandate of heaven" on certain ideas.

Does Lippmann's enlighten-the-masses outlook reveal intellectuals at their best? People cling to the illusion of ironclad certainty, and Lippmann exploited that illusion. Dewey's alternative, in contrast, was to free public intelligence to creatively direct change. Accordingly, he focused throughout his life on the educative capacity of human experience. He argued that prophecies of public incompetence are self-fulfilling. We've expected *too little* of the public, and these low expectations continue to exact a heavy price.

4. Aren't we stuck with moral fundamentalism?

Yes, but its shape and extent are educable. Moral fundamentalism is at odds with the greatest educational need in any democracy. Drawing again from Dewey, that need is to improve "the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is *the* problem of the public."

Moral fundamentalism is a vice because it obstructs communication, constricts deliberation about what's possible, and underwrites bad decisions. Social inquiry is more honest, collaborative, rigorous, and productive when youths learn to be patient with the suspense of reflection, open to discomfort and dissent, resolute yet distrustful of tunnel-vision, aware of the fallibility and incompleteness of any decision or policy, practiced in listening, and imaginative in pursuing creative leads.

We should teach students to value friction, and we should help them become compassionate, active, and informed problem-solvers. Instead of teaching them to oppose others' fundamentalism with more of the same, we need a more genuinely radical approach that is not Pollyannaish. We need democratic engagement and resistance without puritanical zealotry, courage in mediating troubles without certainty, bold action without fatalistic resignation or paralyzing guilt, and moral clarity without oversimplification.