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1

The Conundrum of the Absolute

EARLY ONE MORNING in the New England autumn, a lonely man took a walk in the woods. He headed west as he walked, drawn by, as he later put it, a “subtile [*sic*] magnetism.”¹ He walked alone, at least alone of other humans. He found company with the trees and the scurry of wildlife shuffling through the foliage, occasionally pausing to note the passing bearded figure. Such companions do not contradict your mood, your ideas, your plans. Their lives move to other concerns. So it was peaceful.² But the east rumbled with tumult, conflict, and confusion. For to the east lay the bellowing city: Boston.

It was a contentious time, even more than ours is today. The Abolition Movement was growing in strength and controversy. By the time the lonely man’s essay about his walk appeared in print in 1862, the American Civil War had begun. How should we live? What is just? What is sacred? What is true? How can we best steward the world and care for all its inhabitants, human and nonhuman alike? People found themselves so divided that they were willing to kill each other to settle these questions. The “more perfect union” promised in the US Constitution had never seemed so elusive and unlikely. Eleven states had seceded from the Union. The battles were bloody, some of the bloodiest ever seen—especially the September 17, 1862, Battle of Antietam, where twenty-three thousand soldiers died on a single day, each killed by someone who a few years prior had considered himself a fellow citizen. Bloody as they were, the battles remained inconclusive, and more awful fighting seemed certain to follow.

In the face of such contention, of social life turned to horror, there was much to be said for the lonely life apart from society. As this hardy walker put it, “I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute Freedom and Wildness, as contrasted with a Freedom and Culture merely civil,—to regard man as an

inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society.”³ Here we might learn that “we have a wild savage in us” and that “a savage name is perchance somewhere recorded as ours.”⁴ Here one might escape “Man and his affairs, church and state—and school, trade and commerce, and manufactures and agriculture,—even politics, the most alarming of them all.”⁵ Here one might find a “portion of the earth’s surface where a man does not stand from one year’s end to another and there consequently politics are not, for they are but as the cigar smoke of a man.”⁶

The 1850s and early 1860s were also a time of bounding scientific and technological discovery. Henry Bessemer patented a means to mass produce steel in 1855. The world’s first oil refinery came on line in 1856. In 1859, Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*, and digging began for the Suez Canal. Henry Gatling patented the Gatling gun, generally regarded as the first workable machine gun, in 1861. The first section of the London Underground opened in 1863. Factories grew in size and output, changing the clothes people wore, the food they ate, the homes they lived in, and the techniques of daily living they used to accomplish their myriad mundane needs. Humans dominated the natural world as never before, bending it to their wishes, and sometimes bending it out of recognition.

These advances were not unmixed blessings, at least in the mind of the lonely walker, ever turning west. “Now a days, almost all man’s improvements, so called, as the building of homes, and the cutting down of the forest, and of all large trees, simply deform the landscape, and make it more and more tame and cheap.”⁷ Yes, the science and industry of the east enabled welcome comforts. But we were losing as much as we gained. As he put it, “We have heard of a Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. It is said that Knowledge is power; and the like. Methinks there is equal need of a Society for the Diffusion of Useful Ignorance, what we will call Beautiful Knowledge, a knowledge useful in a higher sense.”⁸ For “a man’s ignorance sometimes is not only useful, but beautiful, while his knowledge, so called, is oftentimes worse than useless beside being ugly.”⁹ Which is why the lonely man found that “Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free.”¹⁰ As he put it in his most famous of many famous lines: “The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world.”¹¹

We are not all like Henry David Thoreau, lonely walkers through the woods of the world, turning ever outward to find the ever inward.¹² But ideas that resonate with Thoreau’s sensibilities continue to resound through the thoughts and social debates that most of us moderns today find ourselves caught up in.

(“Moderns” is not a perfect word to describe the “us” I have in mind, and our origins, but it will do for the present.) Like Thoreau, most of us are deeply concerned about human domination of ecology. Like Thoreau, most of us are deeply concerned about human domination of each other. We often seek in nature a basis for living more lightly and more justly, a basis for the good.

And whether we search for the good in the lonely woods or not, we moderns all find ourselves doing some walking, looking for paths that take us beyond the conflicts of human communities—for absolutes that give us a sense of respite from the smoky vapors of our ceaseless politics.

It’s an old problem. In 387 CE, one man sought his respite in a quiet garden in Mediolanum—the city we today call Milan—the western capital of a splintering Roman Empire. He was a confused man in a confused time. “Thither my inner turmoil carried me,” he later described, “where no one could interfere with my deep conflagration.”¹³ The confused man was accompanied only by a close friend, “loyal at my side.” And he carried a copy of the letters of the Apostle Paul, bound together into a book, a new means of assembling writing that was fast replacing the scroll.¹⁴

He had much on his mind—not least his ambitious mother, who had followed him to Mediolanum from their hometown in Numidia, a Roman province in North Africa. Her goal was to straighten him out. She strongly disapproved of his fifteen-year-long relationship with a concubine he had met as a young man in Carthage, and of his lack of a proper wife. Plus his mother was a devout Christian. She had long been disturbed by the confused man’s commitment to Manichaeism, a religion started a hundred years earlier by a Persian sage named Mani. Manichaeism revered the teachings of Jesus, but also those of Zoroaster and the Buddha, seeing them all as divine windows into the same goodness that Mani called simply “light” in the face of the evil forces of the “dark.” The confused man had come to question Manichaeism. The more he considered it, the more simplistic he found it. He had been having many deep conversations with Ambrose, the Christian bishop of Mediolanum. But he had not committed to Christianity. Not yet.

His mother could not deny that he was doing well, though. Although only thirty-two, the confused man held the position of professor of rhetoric in Mediolanum. He could count hundreds of adoring students, and dozens of influential friends, such as Ambrose. He had written a book on aesthetics. But his mother hoped for more, maybe even the governorship of a province like Numidia.¹⁵

The confused man was certainly plenty ambitious. But did he really want a governorship—especially if it was his mother’s idea? In any case, for a governorship he would need a real wife, one from a wealthy family with the money and status to promote his career. His mother convinced him to send the concubine packing, back to Africa. She arranged for a marriage with a girl with the necessary pedigree. But the girl was only eleven. The confused man would have to wait two more years until she came of age. Plus he didn’t love her, and he very much loved the concubine. “My heart, to which she had been grafted, was lacerated, wounded, shedding blood,” he wrote concerning his mistress’s departure.¹⁶

Many found the times confusing, not just this man in the garden with his friend and a book. As Thoreau’s day would later also experience, a civil war raged, one with a long and complex history. A century before, the Roman Empire had split into two, then into four, with four capitals, one of which was Mediolanum—all in addition to Rome, which still held much traditional power, although none of the four emperors lived there. (In a way, there were five capitals.) Eventually, the powerful figure of Constantine pulled the empire back together into one brute being. That didn’t last long, though. On his death, Constantine’s three sons split the empire into three dominions, one for each. They then promptly set about attacking each other until a solitary brother remained to rule the whole empire again. After a few more wars and murders, the Roman Empire split back into two, and then into three again.

In other words, there was ambition aplenty, and thus politics aplenty, in the Roman Empire.

And much more to come. From 376 to 382, the empire struggled to deal with a major invasion by a large group of desperate Goths, who had been displaced from Germania by Huns advancing from the east. No sooner had the Gothic War concluded than a man with the singularly immodest name of Magnus Maximus, general of the British divisions of the Roman army, sailed his forces across to Gaul to start a civil war. After winning Gaul, he invaded Italy and headed for Mediolanum—and was met by an equally large army drawn from other parts of the empire. The situation was tense. After negotiations led by Ambrose, the bishop who later befriended the confused man, Magnus Maximus settled for being declared emperor of the Western Roman Empire, and agreed to go back to Gaul.

A few months later, the confused man arrived in Mediolanum. His mother followed shortly afterward.

So the confused man indeed had a lot on his mind that day in the garden. His meddlesome mother. His own ambitiousness. His breakup with his part-

ner of fifteen years. An impending marriage that horrified him. Civil war compounded by invasion, in both Roman politics and the politics of his personal life, all of which seemed far from over. A deep doubt over the very basis of truth, justice, and legitimate motivation had taken root in his moral thought.

“I was at war within,” he wrote. “So sick was I, so tortured, as I reviled myself more bitterly than ever.”¹⁷

He needed to be completely alone, and moved off deeper into the garden, leaving his friend behind. He lay down beneath a fig tree, “loosing the reins on my sobbing, as tears tore themselves from my eyes.”¹⁸ Then he heard “the voice of a boy—or perhaps a girl, I could not tell—chanting in repeated singsong: Lift! Look!”

He could think of no children’s game that used such a chant, and concluded it must actually be divine prompting. So he lifted himself up, as the chant instructed. The commandment to look could mean only the book of Paul’s letters, which he had left with his friend. He raced back, grabbed it, and the book fell open, by chance, at these lines:

Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.¹⁹

That was it, the origins of his tortures, and those of everyone else: *desire*—and not just desire for sex and other bodily pleasures but for material gain and other forms of power. Confused no more, at that moment the man who would be known as St. Augustine of Hippo decided to become a Christian and a priest.

Becoming a priest was probably a good career move—although not exactly the career his mother had advocated, despite her promotion of Christianity. It could not have escaped Augustine’s attention that Christianity had become the state religion in 380, when the three emperors who then jointly ruled the Roman Empire issued the Edict of Thessalonica. Instead of persecution, Christian leaders like Ambrose were now entrusted with the most delicate tasks of state. Being a priest did require celibacy, though, for Pope Siricius of Rome had issued the *Directa Decretal* in 386, which stipulated that all priests follow “the splendor of chastity.” But stop, lift, and look: celibacy also presented a way out of his engagement to the eleven-year-old.

Still, we cannot doubt that St. Augustine’s conversion was deeply felt in the innermost tissues of his morality, as is plain on every page of his *Confessions*,

from where we get the story of his garden encounter with the divine. It is equally plain on every page of his *De Civitate Dei*, or *The City of God*, the book he spent fourteen years writing between 412 and 426. By then, Augustine was serving as Bishop of Hippo—a major Roman city in the north African province of Numidia, likely making him as powerful as he would have been as governor. But power, he wrote, was not what he sought. What he sought was to understand power and the origin of our urge for it. Like Thoreau, Augustine saw the source of that urge as lying deep in our urban humanness, in the politics of “the city of this world, a city which aims at dominion, which holds nations in enslavement, but is itself dominated by that very lust of domination.”²⁰ He exhorted us to seek the *Summum Bonum*, the Supreme Good, which is free of politics and cigar smoke and that most basic of desires: pride, or what he also termed “self-love.” For, he asked, “what is the origin of our evil will but pride?”²¹

Thoreau found this supreme, absolute good in nature. Augustine found it in supernature, in his faith in the divine. And both shared a deep distrust of the political ways they associated with the city. Nonetheless, Augustine conceived absolute goodness through the image of a city—albeit a very different kind of city, what he called the “Heavenly City.” Give up the enticements of “the earthly city, which lives by man’s standards,” he counseled. Instead, seek “the Heavenly City, which lives according to God’s will.”²² For “the two cities were created by two kinds of love: the earthly city was created by self-love reaching the point of contempt for God, the Heavenly City by the love of God carried as far as contempt of self.”²³

Billions today look to this second form of love, hoping such goodness will direct us truly, guiding us through and beyond the ceaseless vortex of human desires. Whether conceived as the nature Thoreau sought by walking west or the divine guidance Augustine sought by looking up, we hope to live not just in a city of God but in a city of the good, sheltered by edifices of the absolute.

Nevertheless, despite our searches for goodness, we’ve been arguing a lot lately, as a people and as a planet. And the absolutes we’ve regularly been using to make our various cases don’t seem to be helping us resolve matters. What we thought would settle our debates—what nature and science say, what God and his scriptures say, and so what I say too—have only unsettled them the more, for we are not all using the same absolutes. The arguments go on and on unproductively, one absolute clashing with another, until we turn away in frustration and go a-walking in the woods like Thoreau, or in an urban garden like

Augustine, seeking to escape the stench of the cigar smoke and the cacophony of the smokers.

A great rush of books of late has taken a look at the religious origins of this frustration. Robert Wright has told us about *The Evolution of God*. Richard Dawkins has told us about *The God Delusion*. Karen Armstrong has told us about *The History of God*, *The Great Transformation*, and *The Case for God*. Elaine Pagels has told us about *The Gnostic Gospels*, *The Origin of Satan*, and *Revelations*. Reza Aslan has told us about the life of the historical Jesus in *Zealot*. These are all valuable books, however they may differ in their predictions and prescriptions.

A great rush of writers have also looked at the ecological troubles that cause us to point fingers at each other, and go away snarling. Charles Wohlforth has described *The Fate of Nature*. Michael Pollan has pointed out *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. Jared Diamond has warned us about *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. Al Gore has tried to get us to pay attention to *An Inconvenient Truth*. Bill McKibben has worried about *The End of Nature*, offered a vision of *Hope: Human and Wild* and a *Deep Economy*, and asked us to prepare for *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*.

I have a feeling these concerns and frustrations are connected. In this book, I trace the social history of both these basic forms of the absolute—the natural and the supernatural—and their interrelationship with ideas and boundaries of human community. Nature, faith, and community together form what I find helpful to envision as an *ancient triangle* of beliefs, with nature and faith forming the two sides of the base, sometimes supporting and sometimes conflicting in how they uphold community life, and sometimes supporting and sometimes conflicting with that life.

Today it seems we find more conflict than mutual support emanating from the sides of the base. Yes, some now work to green religion and to sanctify ecology.²⁴ Some have tried to bring concern for climate change to the pulpit and to bring respect for spirit to our battles over pipelines and the latest housing development proposal. They find this mutual support both possible and necessary. But they take on this good work because it needs to be done. It isn't done already.

This good work isn't done in part because we don't agree on what constitutes the good. We don't agree because we can't agree. The very way we usually conceive of our most cherished beliefs makes talking through our differences nearly impossible. If what makes the good is that it is not human, what good is it to debate the good with a human?

This is unproductive. On the thought that we might be better equipped to resolve our troubles if we knew their origins, in this book I offer an explanation for how this triangle of beliefs came about, and how it has been used in the layout, the moral design, of the city of the good. For there was not always a trigonometry of separations, nature from the divine from the human, just as there isn't one everywhere today to the same degree and sharpness. Perhaps it need not be anywhere so.

Here's the gist of my explanation. Why do we so often embrace absolutist notions, even when they seem an unhelpful basis for discussing how we should live together with each other and the planet? Because of an old cultural habit that emerged out of a mighty transformation in human affairs: the expansion of cities in growing states and empires. Inequality grew along with accumulating urban wealth. Desire seemed the new coin of social life. People were troubled by this challenge to justice, either to defend inequality or to confront and critique it. And they found a powerful manner of moral thought to justify their passions: what I will term a *natural conscience*, based on faith in forms of absolute goodness we regard as free of the human and thus free of politics—but that often divide us nonetheless. They sought absolution in the absolute, absolving the human by removing the human.

We still often seek this absolution because it comforts yet today—until you encounter someone who uses a different basis for the absolute. Nature versus the divine, say. Or a different religion. Or a different interpretation of what is natural. Such fundamental differences—truly differences in our fundamentals—can be deeply disturbing, not just emotionally but socially.

So we shut, even shout, conversation down. For to debate the implications of one's moral differences is to risk implicating oneself and all one's close associates. Our ideas are never just ideas. They create and manifest social ties. To trust an idea is to trust the well and watershed from which it springs. To threaten an idea is to threaten our trust in the well and watershed, the idea's source and source's source: community itself. To a social being, there can be hardly any threat greater. And so, largely without deliberate intention, we often use absolutes to close ourselves down to the logics others present to us about social and ecological life. Alas, rather than comfort, much pain and difficulty result, for in so doing we cut ourselves off not only to potentially worthy ideas but to one another. We need what I will term a *multilogical* approach to truth and moral thought to better articulate, learn from, and identify with our varying passions and commitments to each corner of the ancient triangle.

That's an overview of my explanation for the divide that emerged, and that has largely remained, between the top and the bottom of the triangle—between the human apex and nature and the divine along the base.²⁵ Here it is in a clause: because of the moral attraction to urbanizing societies of a foundation for justice apart from human desires. But what about the sides of the base? Why did nature and the divine also separate from each other?

Again for reasons associated with the rise of cities, states, and empires. Culturally, the concept of nature offered to an absolute conception of the divine an account of the origin of desire: in the nature of the body and its ecology. To overcome our nature was to overcome desire, and thus politics. As well, this negative view of nature culturally resonated with a second economic inequality. Not only did the expansion of cities manifest an intensified vertical social conflict over class. It also manifested an intensified horizontal conflict between urban and rural, between what I will term the *bourgeois* and the *pagan*. The wealth accumulation that was the basis for the rise of social class in the city had its own basis in milking wealth from the countryside, harvesting the harvest through taxes and tithes. Associating the people of the countryside with nature's moral backwardness helped justify this horizontal inequality. And it also led to neglect and even disdain for ecological questions, due to the comforting distance that wealth and trade provided from the vagaries of climate, crop disease, soil health, and other matters of sustenance.

Nature was not always seen in a negative way, however. Nearly from the very origin of the concept during periods of urban expansion and social class development in ancient Greece, India, and China, nature could be an absolute goodness in its own right, separate from the politics of human desire. Indeed, advocates of nature as an absolute have often seen religion as a human institution, and thus an institution of human politics, not a preserve apart from politics. Religion, in this view, obscures the absolute and its essential nature. Consequently, either nature or the divine—sometimes together, sometimes in conflict with each other—can serve to ground a natural conscience. But significantly, whether conceived as nature or supernature, the idea of absolute good is historically an urban idea, a bourgeois idea, even if today it is also often strongly held by rural people. (You no longer need to live in the city to be largely bourgeois.)²⁶ The city of the good began as the good of the city.

All of which indicates that we have not always separated nature from the divine and from the human. Nor do we everywhere, or anywhere fully, today. The pagan view was and is that nature and the divine are *entangled* with the human—and not necessarily good.²⁷ There is no triangle in the pagan view,

except through triangulation from the bourgeois. The ancient triangle is not so ancient as that, nor as universal today as that. (You no longer need to live in the countryside to be largely pagan either.) Perhaps we have more potential than we commonly recognize for a multilogical relationship to each other and our ecologies, from pagan to bourgeois.

I head far back into human history, and range far across the globe, to explain and substantiate these claims. The book travels among the ancient Sumerians, Greeks, Romans, Chinese, Hebrews, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Mayans, and more. It follows developments in moral thought about the good up to the present day, from religion to science to environmentalism, often conversing along the way with contemporary indigenous and other fine folk that I have had the fortune to encounter in my own travels. Throughout, I relate these developments to their urban and rural circumstances—not to give analytic priority to material and economic conditions, but rather to give analytic balance with the cultural and symbolic.²⁸

I do not intend to be comprehensive about any of this. With so much to cover, to be comprehensive would risk being incomprehensible. My approach is to visit intimately with places and peoples in the fullness of moments, much like I have done already with Thoreau and St. Augustine. By going small, the book aims to connect to the big through an understanding of contexts and their interconnections.

Back in the late 1940s, following the horrors of National Socialism, social philosopher Karl Jaspers found himself searching for something encouraging to say about modernity and its contexts. He hit upon a powerful empirical observation, closely related to the argument I make in this book. Beginning around 800 BCE, he observed, thinkers in several major civilizations came up with a similar new take on faith. The divine was one, good, and transcendently universal, promoting a new “consciousness” of the “unity of mankind,” as Jaspers put it. Zoroaster, Mahavira, Siddhartha Gautama, Plato, Laozi, Vyasa, Hillel, Jesus, and Muhammad all made this case in various ways that remain extremely influential.²⁹ Jaspers called this pivotal period the “Axial Age,” arguing it was as transformative as the Enlightenment.³⁰

Jaspers also noted that these ideas emerged within societies developing from the local social relations of agrarianism into cities and city-states. Expanded trade was leading to new connections, he suggested, and thus a new sense of connectedness. A universal, unified, and transcendent sense of the

divine, and the sense that this transcendent universality was good, resonated with the new connectedness. We are all one, and it is part of that recognition that we also envision the divine as a universal unity of the good, he contended.

We cannot doubt Jaspers's main empirical point: the rise of universalistic, unified, and transcendent notions of divine goodness was closely associated with a dramatic expansion of cities, states, and empires. Karen Armstrong's many books document this main point in far greater detail (and far more compellingly) than Jaspers himself did.³¹ And like Jaspers, Armstrong seeks something encouraging to say about modernity, especially in the face of our constant wars, many of them religiously inspired.³² The social critic Robert Wright makes a related case about the "evolution of god" toward overcoming "zero-sum thinking" that divides ethnicities, nations, and other social groups.³³ We increasingly love a god of the good as we ourselves become good, and vice versa, the Axial theorists contend.

But Axial theory does not consider the ecological implications of these new urban ideas. Nor does it reckon with the social inequalities that accompanied the rise of the new religions. The Axial theorists suffer from what we might call a civilizationist bias—emphasizing the ways in which our growing urbanism, technological development, and globalization reflect an increasing commitment to good things like democracy and justice. I do not wish to turn the tables here and argue the reverse. My point is not that the city of the good is really the city of the bad. Yet the motives and consequences of the growth of cities, states, and empires seem to me considerably more complex and contradictory. A new commitment to the good there may have been, but at the same time the new urban societies, states, and empires saw a new disregard for ecological questions and a dramatic rise in social inequality, both vertical and horizontal.

The Axial theorists also imply, and sometimes overtly state, another bias closely related to civilizationism: an evolutionary bias toward seeing social change as directional. Here they are joined by an old academic line of argument, especially pronounced in the writings of Émile Durkheim and Ferdinand Tönnies, two of the founding figures of my own profession, sociology.³⁴ Durkheim and Tönnies suggested that it is helpful to distinguish between two broad ways of organizing community life. Durkheim called the differentiation of roles most characteristic of the city "organic solidarity" and the ties of similarity he found most characteristic of the countryside "mechanical solidarity." By organic solidarity, he had in mind ties between professions like doctors and lawyers, carpenters and plumbers, all of whom rely on each

other's difference. By mechanical solidarity, he had in mind the kinship of family and tribe, the members of which rely on each other's similarity. Tönnies made a related distinction between the instrumental social relations of the city, what he termed "gesellschaft," and the affective ties of the countryside, what he called "gemeinschaft." Although they framed the matter somewhat differently, both Durkheim and Tönnies suggested that human social life is steadily evolving away from the past of mechanical solidarity, gemeinschaft, and the rural toward the organic solidarity, gesellschaft, and urbanism of the future. Durkheim and Tönnies were a bit ambivalent about whether this change was a wholly good thing, though. The Axial theorists are not: the Axial ideas that emerged in cities are morally better, they contend.

Again, I do not intend to argue the reverse. But I think we need to take care not to mistake history for evolution. Yes, the idea of the good—envisioned, as I will argue, via a triangle of separations, nature from the divine from the human, and thus emancipated from politics—first arose in cities. Yes, people of the countryside had different concerns and ways of community. But those concerns and ways did not go away. They did not go away in the countryside, nor did they fully diminish in the city. In their better moments, Tönnies recognized that "the essence of both gemeinschaft and gesellschaft is found interwoven in all kinds of associations," and Durkheim noted that mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity "are two aspects of one and the same reality."³⁵ These are matters of social context, not the unstoppable flight of time's arrow.

I offer the terms "bourgeois" and "pagan" as more contextually sensitive terms. Different contexts raise different concerns. By "bourgeois"—a word derived from the Latin for a fortified town—I mean the concerns over the justice of desire and the vicissitudes of wealth that originally arose in the city, but are no longer so confined. By "pagan"—a word derived from the Latin for a country dweller—I mean the concerns over the troubles of disloyalty and the vicissitudes of agriculture and ecology that originally arose in the countryside, but are also not so confined. They are not so confined because our contexts are not so pure. (And I should stress that by "pagan" I do not mean New Age. I mean the ancient and living traditions that descend from the concerns of rural context the world over.)

However, we should not switch from determinism by time to determinism by context. Our ideas are not so compliant. Ideas have an independence of their own that we carry with us into a context, as anyone who has ever found that they misunderstood a situation (which must be everyone) will know, or as anyone who has ever surprised themselves with how well they coped with

a situation (which I hope is everyone) will also know. Our ideas often serve us well. And they often do not.

I have tried to write the book in a way that manifests a sensitivity to both time and context, without slipping into a determinism of either. Although the book follows a loosely historical narrative, I often bounce from instance to instance and situation to situation. One moment I am talking about the ancient Maya, the next I am talking with a Cabécar Indian from Costa Rica, and the next with my old friend Mpumelelo Ncwadi, who hails from present day South Africa. I do so to make connections and comparisons between pasts, between presents, and between pasts and presents. And our potential futures.

For better or for worse, most of us now live in dominantly bourgeois societies, whether we live in town or in the countryside. Bourgeois concerns increasingly worry all of us, in both developed countries and developing, and our moral orientations need to speak to those anxieties. We also remain more pagan than we generally recognize, and I believe we need ways to attend to those passions as well. But I do not write to advocate a rejection of bourgeois concerns.

Nonetheless I am troubled by how dominantly bourgeois people like me typically seek the good. Orienting our moral thought around ideas of absolute goodness helps resolve many issues for us, but many other issues come with that form of consideration. We have come to love the absolute, in its many manifestations, as a way to resolve the moral troubles raised by bourgeois life. Placed back in social context, however, such comfort soon leads to discomfort. We've got a lot of talking to do. Yet absolute answers that are beyond discussion make it very difficult to have a discussion. Starting with positions that we believe are good because they are beyond the political makes it very hard to have good politics. Rather than dialogue, we fall into monologues, shouted by bullhorn from the heads of our advancing armies of supporters and conscripts. For if our views are absolute, we feel no compulsion to listen to what others have to say. Our minds, and our motives, are made up already.

A heartbreaking consequence is what might be called the *conundrum of the absolute*. Some of the most wonderful, selfless, and beautiful things that people have ever done have been in the name of absolutes, variously understood. But as well, some of the most horrific, selfish, and ugly things we have ever done have been in the name of absolutes.

Magnificently, in the name of community with nature, we have saved the tiger, the elephant, the American bison, and the California condor. We have

established vast wilderness preserves, feeling, like Thoreau, that in wildness is indeed the preservation of the world. We have begun to clean up the water, air, and land upon which all life depends, generally in the face of political forces who have strongly and slyly opposed these efforts. We have found common cause with others because we recognized in them the same natures we find in ourselves.

Through faith in supernature, we have fed the starving and given shelter to the homeless and the ill-housed. We have strengthened commitments at home and abroad, reaching in to reach out, reaching out to reach in. We have limited ambitions that, on reflection, served only to advance our dominance in our own little realms and no broader purpose. In service of both nature and supernature, we have sacrificed much of our selves for collective ends that we came to understand we should hold dearer.

Yet in the name of nature, we have also expropriated land from the poor to make way for parks and tourism. We have competed with the disadvantaged on unequal terms for homes and lives that are comparatively free of the pollution and danger of industrialism. We have tortured, enslaved, and slaughtered those we deemed to have natures apart from and beneath our own. In the name of our faith in supernatural absolutes, we have waged divisive moral campaigns. We have suppressed the rights of others and crushed their self-regard. And we have tortured, enslaved, and slaughtered those who committed to supernatures we deemed apart from and beneath our own. Our transcendent beliefs are supposed to motivate our compassion and faith in the golden rules of human and ecological relationships. Sadly, they have often motivated and justified cruelty and leaden rules of relationships.³⁶

For these moral ideas are also ideas of community and its boundaries. Our conceptions of both nature and the divine have led us to open our ears and our eyes to others, but also, when envisioned as absolutes, to shut them. We come to fear difference rather than relish the creativity of the multilogical that comes from dialogue and debate, through which we are always learning and becoming, even when we do not fully agree (which may always be the case).³⁷ We come to fear difference especially in moments of political conflict. Such moments are precisely when we find the monological character of the absolute the most seductive, for monologue suppresses difference. Such moments are equally when those seeking means to manipulate the many find the absolute most useful to their goals. As we look out across the world, we seem to be in such a moment of heightened political conflict today, and thus heightened attraction for answers from beyond—even as they lead us, or are used to lead

us, astray. Absolutes are always deeply political, at the same time that they appear to provide a basis for action that is beyond politics.

These are the perils of innocence. Yet, the Russian social philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin noted, monologue is never completely absolute. As Bakhtin put it, “there is neither a first nor a last word.”³⁸ Monologue always contains strains of dialogue and the multilogical, for it must take its audience at least a bit into account to make its case. And often more than a bit. In other words, the absolute is never absolute. Across the long history of natures, faiths, and communities, we have oscillated from more monologic to more multilogical moments and modes of interaction and debate. Sometimes even in the midst of heightened conflict we have found ways to open conversation, to learn from each other, to jointly construct new alternatives with broad and diverse benefit.

I find much cause for hope in this potential non-absoluteness of our absolutes—hope that we may come to accept the certainty of uncertainty in a world that is ever unfinished, always open, full of difference and conflict, and therefore ceaselessly intriguing, alive, and creative.

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