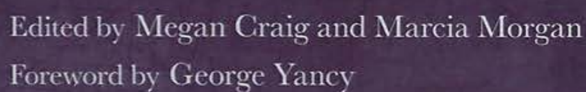

Richard J. Bernstein and the Expansion of American Philosophy

Thinking the Plural

Editors' Introduction

Megan Craig and Marcia Morgan

This book collects papers written by scholars who, although having ventured into diverse and at times even clashing scholarly directions, share one common point of philosophical lineage: we are all students of Richard J. Bernstein. Most of us studied with Bernstein in New York at the New School for Social Research, where he remains the Vera List Professor of Philosophy, teaching and mentoring students in areas such as American pragmatism, social and political philosophy, critical theory and Anglo-American philosophy. He has been a devoted member of the Graduate Faculty since 1989, when, alongside Ágnes Heller and Rainer Shürmann, he arrived to rescue the department from near collapse. This was the same year in which Bernstein was elected president of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association and delivered his courageous address "Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds." He served as chair of the Philosophy Department at the New School from 1989–2002, overseeing its remarkable reconstruction. At the age of eighty-four, Bernstein continues to offer courses there in American pragmatism, contemporary pragmatism, and memory, trauma, and evil; as well as seminars on Hannah Arendt and Hegel. He also consistently and vigorously participates in departmental events, conferences, and national and international symposia up to and including the present times.

Bernstein began his professional teaching career when he was twenty-two years old, giving courses at Yale from 1954–1965. On the advice of Richard Rorty, his close friend from their undergraduate days at the University of Chicago, Bernstein had decided to pursue his graduate work at Yale because it was one of the few places at the time seriously engaged with analytic philosophy without falling prey to what he described as "analytic ideology: the smug belief that analytic style is the only game in town and the rest of philosophy is to be dismissed as simply not really worthwhile, not 'really'

philosophy."[1] This meant that Bernstein was able to work on Carnap, Sellars, and Wittgenstein together with Kierkegaard, Hegel, and Dewey (whose metaphysics of experience became the subject of his dissertation). Between his career in New Haven and New York, Bernstein spent twenty-three years teaching at Haverford College in Pennsylvania. He wrote several of his most influential works in that time including *Praxis and Action: Contemporary Philosophies of Human Activity* (1971), *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (1976), *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (1983), and *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mode* (1986). Haverford and the Quaker tradition on which the school was founded loom large in Bernstein's sense of dialogue and the possibilities for generating and protecting pluralistic communities. Bernstein described several reasons for going to Haverford (a small undergraduate liberal arts college) after famously and contentiously being denied tenure at Yale in March of 1965, including the opportunities it provided for his wife, Carol, to teach at the college level in Philadelphia, the college's history of political activism (including strong stances against the war in Vietnam and McCarthyism), and the distinctive opportunity it provided him to build a philosophy department that would be at the center of the undergraduate curriculum.[2]

Our contributors span the years from 1992 to 2013, although Ed Casey (who supplies the prologue) studied with Bernstein when he was still teaching at Yale University in the late 1950s. Very few of us overlapped with one another in our graduate work with Bernstein, but we have all been informed in one degree or another (and at crucial junctures in our philosophical development) by Bernstein's style of teaching and thinking. In addition, all of us have been aided by his generosity of spirit and his fierce commitment to the well-being (and not only the academic success) of his students.

What is Bernstein's style of teaching? His graduate seminars at The New School typically focus on a single author or book. The bulk of the semester revolves around close readings and interpretations of particular texts, often inflected by Bernstein's animated banging on the table and his gleeful cry, "I only want the truth!" Any attempts to deflect his questions with jargon, self-indulgent rumination, or demur claims of ignorance are met with a steady shake of his white hair and more exuberant calls to look more closely at the text, to return to the basics, or to think about what is motivating a philosopher's point of view. When he really gets going (spit flying, arms waving), the room is a theater of energy and philosophy, seems more like a contact sport than any refined, meditative deliberation. It is typical for Bernstein to get as excited about philosophers with whom he disagrees as with those whose views he endorses or shares. In fact, as a student of Bernstein's, it was often impossible to tell whether he thought a philosopher was right or wrong in the course of a given seminar. Each thinker receives a devotional semester

of scrutiny with the primary goal of understanding what they are trying to say and a deliberate withholding of judgment or critique until one has been able (by a leap of imagination) to inhabit the living possibility of their thought. Bernstein asks his students to proceed slowly and generously as they interpret a text, asking us to look for what is insightful or interesting before seizing on shortcomings or rushing to discredit or dismantle. This methodology, which demands extreme patience on the part of a class, eschews the combative tenor of so much contemporary philosophizing and allows a text to remain open and alive longer than it might otherwise. Perhaps this is why Bernstein is such a master of bringing philosophy to life for generations of students who find themselves seduced by thinkers from Aristotle to Derrida. In Bernstein's hands, each figure in the history of philosophy is allowed to register in her or his strongest light. Such illumination allows students to form their own attachments and to do their own work.

Notably, Bernstein has played a central role in the education of countless philosophers without generating any particular "Bernsteinian" school. He teaches philosophy and never substitutes such teaching for a redeployment of his own theories or concerns. Many of us who studied with him did not grapple explicitly with Bernstein's own published works until we had left graduate school. His intense focus always points outward to some other thinker and never rebounds back to himself. For some of us, this volume presents a first occasion to directly link Bernstein's thinking with our own philosophical preoccupations. His style of teaching has allowed scores of students to find their own centers of gravity, giving them the space and time necessary for developing idiosyncratic philosophical commitments. This is all to say that Bernstein's distinctively demanding and magnanimous pedagogy reflects his lifelong commitment to a pluralism at the heart of American pragmatism. Throughout his career he has been a force of differentiation, inclusion, and dialogue in philosophy.

One can see this in a range of ways, including: the span of courses he has taught and continues to offer at The New School; the diversity of his published works; his outreach across traditions and national borders as he has championed figures like Derrida, Gadamer, Habermas, and Kristeva, bringing them to Pennsylvania and New York and into mainstream philosophical discussions in America; his role as founding co-editor of *Praxis International* and his commitment to the Dubrovnic seminar; his continued teaching each summer at the Diversity and Democracy Institute in Wroclaw; his openness to multiple modes and styles of thinking; and the diversity manifested in the areas of specialization of his students. His research interests in American pragmatism never confined him to American philosophy alone. Instead, the pragmatic sense of a historical, unfinished project of making better truths and forging a more just world lead him to challenge every readymade dichotomy and to reach across

boundaries between clashing camps of philosophers at the very moments when figures seem irreconcilable and fractures seem beyond repair. In many respects he is a deeply American philosopher (born and bred in Brooklyn, devoted to Dewey), but he is one who has been singularly open to international dialogue and who has actively worked in his teaching and his scholarship to challenge the supposed continental/analytic divide. Take, as one example, his 1976 book, on *The Restructuring of Social and Political Philosophy*, in which he includes equally sympathetic and critical evaluations of Anglo-American analytic philosophy of language, the phenomenology of Husserl and Schutz, and Frankfurt School critical theory, showing the ways in which these three prominent movements from twentieth-century philosophy actually focus on similar themes and attempt to solve similar problems without collapsing or conflating their distinctions and differences.[3] Bernstein has been heroic in exposing the fiction of a divide between Analytic and Continental philosophy, insisting that "No *one* orientation or style has a monopoly on philosophical insight. There were no 'bridges' to be built. There is only good and bad philosophy—and there are plenty of both on either side of the Atlantic."[4] As Shelia Greeve Davaney and Warren G. Frisina write in the preface to *The Pragmatic Century*, "Bernstein is perhaps the premier thinker on the contemporary scene who has simultaneously been able to maintain disciplinary integrity while participating in and encouraging cross-disciplinary conversation and a more encompassing critical dialogue. Thus, in an age of extreme specialization, Bernstein's influence has extended beyond the boundaries of philosophy."[5]

Our volume presents and more importantly enacts Bernstein's idiosyncratic pluralism in several ways. The papers collected here show the incredible scope of Bernstein's teaching and thinking as it impacts topics from the ancient Greek question of *praxis* to the contemporary question of violence in the Middle East. Not only are the topics and philosophical figures represented in the volume diverse in their own rights, but the authors themselves reflect a diversity of gender, age, focus, and ethnicity unusual in the largely homogenous field of professional philosophy. This should remind us that pluralism takes many forms. Pluralism makes a practical difference in the kind of thinking that can transpire and in the productive destabilization of traditions that have been historically blind and deaf to different voices.

Although there are no "Bernsteinian" schools or "Bernsteinians"—a testament to the expansiveness of his thinking and to his pluralism—several prominent themes spanning Bernstein's philosophic and pedagogic career have impacted the scholars whose contributions are included here, and these themes therefore illuminate their work. Perhaps the most influential theme in this book to come from Bernstein's teaching is one of hermeneutic generosity. This can be captured in a quotation from Bernstein's introduction to his book *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory*:

> Opposing claimants write and act as if their point of view is the only correct one and the others of "no account at all." If we are to escape from this type of intellectual skepticism, we must try to see how examining a position—what Hegel calls a form or shape of consciousness—with full integrity, how understanding it in its own terms, and probing it to locate its weaknesses and internal conflicts, can lead us to a more adequate and comprehensive understanding. This is the dialectical movement that Hegel calls the movement from *Gewissheit* (certitude) to *Wahrheit* (truth). There is a truth to be discovered—something right about each of the forms of consciousness that Hegel explores; the task is to bring out this "truth," which necessitates showing what is false and abstract in these several moments, and then passing beyond them to a more adequate comprehension. So, by analogy, in our study of the competing understandings [. . .], it is essential to grasp each from its own internal perspective or self-understanding, and to see how its internal difficulties lead us to comprehend both its falsity or one-sidedness, and its truth.[6]

Several chapters in this volume offer a reading of a particular author or text with the aim of inhabiting the thought in order to tease out strengths and weaknesses, or to bring about novel conversations between figures not previously in dialogue with one another. No chapter takes aim at a single author, text, or movement in order to tear it down or expose it as wholly false. While each author exhibits the legacy of Bernstein's teaching in her or his own way, chapter 7 by Rocío Zambrana exemplifies Bernstein's practice of hermeneutic generosity in the form of a "reading strategy" for interpreting Hegel, a strategy that exposes the pluralism inherent in Hegel's own thinking and the role it has played in shaping Bernstein's form of pragmatism.

Two additional and equally emphatic threads tying the chapters together are Bernstein's call for "engaged fallibilistic pluralism" and his insistence on overcoming what he calls "the Cartesian anxiety." Bernstein's engaged fallibilistic pluralism will be discussed immediately below in its specificity and significance to this collection of essays. But first, consider what Bernstein means by thinking and acting without Cartesian anxiety and how this has constructively affected the authors in this volume. Bernstein himself recapitulates what he means by "the Cartesian anxiety" in his epilogue to this volume. Cartesian anxiety relates directly to Descartes's description of his own doubt and panic in the first three of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Plagued by the idea that some of his ideas might be false, Descartes sets out to erect a firm epistemological foundation for himself by abolishing all of his beliefs and attempting to rebuild upon a single point of utter, indubitable certainty. Locked in his room in his nightgown, he worries about everything from the reality of the strangers passing outside his window to the piece of wax melting near his fire. "Cartesian anxiety" describes the manic worry that one cannot begin to know anything at all until one has secured a permanent,

all-anchoring truth. But it also stands for forms of solipsistic philosophizing that issue as thought experiments from an armchair rather than genuine attempts at dialogue with others rooted in the complex social and political realities of the world. Bernstein reminds us that Descartes is the model for one kind of philosopher wracked with one kind of debilitating doubt. Although such doubt is pervasive in philosophy (and sometimes more generally in life), it need not lead to radical skepticism and a systematic leveling of all belief. One can live with doubt. In fact, one cannot live (or philosophize) without it.

To function philosophically without Cartesian anxiety means to avoid the pitfall of conviction that one can only construct knowledge and thereby stand against the radical skeptic if availed of an infallible foundation. In the Introduction to *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, Bernstein provides his most extensive elaboration of "Cartesian anxiety," presenting his defense against Cartesianism, and outlining the latter's damaging effects on contemporary philosophy in the Anglo-American and European traditions. Almost every author in this volume invokes "Cartesian anxiety" at some point in their chapter. Although this was not a planned synchronism, it was clear to us as editors that Bernstein's early and ongoing efforts to relieve philosophers of the oppressive mantle of Descartes and his quest for a bedrock truth have played a crucial role in fostering creative, experimental, and original work by his students. For example, in chapter 8, Espen Hammer counters Cartesian anxiety directly by arguing for a Husserlian phenomenology "without Cartesian anxiety" that would be much more in line with contemporary phenomenologies of embodied consciousness. Through a nuanced reading of Husserl that leaves room for several productive ambiguities, he ultimately shows the resonances between phenomenology and pragmatism. A consideration of Cartesian anxiety weaves directly and indirectly through each of the remaining chapters.

In addition to demonstrating what philosophy without Cartesian anxiety might look like in action, an overarching goal of our book is to show that thinkers of very different backgrounds, using diverse and sometimes conflicting methodologies, contribute to the understanding of a given problem, issue, or theme. This argument lies at the heart of Bernstein's published works and is central to the critical fallibilistic pragmatism of his pedagogy. Our anthology's main position therefore does not rest on a single answer to a question or a univocal theme, but shows the differentiation of Bernstein's works through the attempt to extend the pluralism of his extant scholarship into territory Bernstein himself did not enter. To get a sense of the pluralism that grounds our volume, consider the following quotation from the presidential address Bernstein delivered in 1988 to the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association:

> [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.[7]

Only this last variation of pluralism, the one Bernstein designates as "engaged" and "fallibilistic," avoids the pitfalls of other less rigorous and less demanding forms of pseudo-pluralism. As with so many of his philosophical distinctions, Bernstein is ultimately less concerned with what we call the phenomenon in question than what it demands from us and how it changes our thinking and our lives. "Engaged, fallibilistic pluralism" entails a special attentiveness and sensitivity to the singularity of others, humility and flexibility with respect to one's own positions, and a willingness to go beyond the mere theorization of difference. Bernstein has stressed the degree to which such a pluralism is not only central to the American pragmatic tradition but also operative across the history of Western Philosophy, from Plato to Kristeva. Bringing American pragmatism into conversation with other traditions is one hallmark of Bernstein's work, and as Vincent Colepietro has noted, the effects of this cross-pollination continue to be dramatic and transformative: "His encounters with other traditions have transformed pragmatism into something other than what it has ever been—something more hermeneutically sophisticated, historically attuned, widely dialogical, deeply critical, thoroughly fallibilistic, truly tough minded, and insistently other focused than the versions of pragmatism articulated by either earlier or contemporary advocates."[8]

Each chapter of our anthology represents an experiment in "engaged fallibilistic pluralism." Ed Casey's prologue, an earlier version of which was presented as a plenary lecture at the first *Thinking the Plural Symposium* in 2014 in honor of Bernstein's scholarship and pedagogy, aptly articulates the spirit in which these papers were written:

> A number of us here today are students of his, recent as well as remote, and each of us can attest to the remarkable range of the topics and figures his teachings have offered. Their variety is not eclecticism but an effort to show, concretely and in detail, how thinkers of very different persuasions contribute to the understanding of a given problem or theme. In the period of my early study with him, I came to appreciate how otherwise very different thinkers can enter into an intense encounter in the alembic of a Bernstein seminar. I recall vividly reading well past midnight in a brightly lit library room the assigned book *Towards Reunion in Philosophy* (by Morton White). It was dense and demanding, but I persisted because I had the sense that what mattered most was how much philosophers of backgrounds as different as logical positivism and speculative metaphysics had to say to each other. I had this sense—this hope—because of my teacher's faith in the value of reading and talking across diverse schools of thought.
>
> In such an experience and many others like it, I was being initiated into a whole way of understanding philosophy: not as polemic in which a single right answer is sought, but as a multilateral discussion among those of very different points of view. Bernstein has a distinct genius for bringing out this chorus of differential voices, where the voices include those of his students present in class as well as those of the authors he teaches and about whom he writes.[9]

In the context of Casey's remarks, the contributors to *Thinking the Plural* have attempted to carry on this tradition by analyzing Bernstein's scholarship and placing it in conversation with thinkers and academic movements beyond material Bernstein has engaged in his own work. In some cases this entails bringing Bernstein into dialogue with thinkers he knows well but has not explored head on. In other case, it entails juxtaposing positions that generate surprising new resonances. In all cases, the authors collected in this volume have reflected on the sprit and the letter of Bernstein's work as it has implicitly or explicitly inspired, informed, enlarged, or challenged their own philosophical thinking and area of expertise.

The contributions to *Thinking the Plural* were specially written for this anthology. Some of the chapters were first delivered as papers at two symposia on Bernstein's pluralism: one held on September 25, 2014 at Stony Brook University in New York, and a second held on September 25, 2015 at Muhlenberg College in Pennsylvania. All of the contributions are works of original scholarship and previously unpublished, with the exception of

sections of part I in Morgan's chapter, which appeared in the context of a longer article in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* in 2014.[10] Christopher Long's essay on "Pragmatism and the Cultivation of Digital Democracies," true to the content of his argument, has been posted on his personal website in an open access forum with a request for comments and review. It is part of his larger online project called "Digital Dialogue," which includes a lengthy video discussion with Richard Lee, Jr. about Bernstein's pluralism (available at http://www.cplong.org/digitaldialogue/digital-dialogue-70-thinking-the-plural/). Long's digital dialogue with Lee was inspired by and serves as a continuation of ideas shared during the first Bernstein Symposium. While each essay reflects on the roots and impact of Bernstein's pluralism—in philosophical substance and pedagogical form—the essays demonstrate the original thinking and unique scholarly directions taken by each author beyond the parameters of Bernstein's philosophical *oeuvre*. For example, in addition to essays that include analyses of Bernstein's relationships to Aristotle, Hegel, Kuhn, Arendt, Freud, Dewey, Peirce, James, Husserl, Marcuse, Gadamer, and Habermas, we have solicited contributions that place diverse and what might appear as mutually conflicting traditions into conversation with Bernstein's thinking. Our book therefore examines dimensions of American pragmatism, German Idealism, classical phenomenology, post-structuralism, hermeneutics and the philosophy of religion, feminist theory, gender theory, critical race theory, and different generations of critical theory—both American and European. Figures not considered before within the scope of Bernstein's thinking, such as John William Miller, Julia Kristeva, and Eva Feder Kittay are analyzed in the spirit of his pragmatic pluralism. Each chapter intersects with the ethical and political core of Bernstein's scholarship and pedagogy, taking this focus into new territory without supplying mere commentary on his previous publications. Texts from the beginning of Bernstein's published corpus to his most recent books in print have variously impacted the authors in this volume and therefore figure in the analyses and insights in the chapters. Our anthology makes evident that many pieces of Bernstein's work can be deployed in generative and provocative directions. We hope this volume inspires work that expands American Philosophy even further and that engages aspects of Bernstein's thinking in increasingly creative ways.

Because the papers collected here engage core insights from Bernstein's distinctive philosophical positions without prioritizing any single period or concept, the volume could begin and end with any one of the contributions. This has made it somewhat complicated for the editors to arrange the chapters. We have been happy for the challenge, however, as it reflects the difficulty inherent in coalescing any genuine plurality or conducting a "chorus a voices" (to quote Ed Casey's phrase). We have decided that ordering is a false concept when applied to the essays in this volume. There is no

one, pure entrance into Bernstein's thinking, only an-*arché*-ic sense that is as productive as it is ungrounding. The ambiguity of sequencing the essays attests to the openness of Bernstein's thinking. Although a common move might be to work from analyses of "theory" to "practice" or from "historical" to "contemporary" influences, this logic does not hold in the context of Bernstein's pluralism. For there is no division between theory and practice in the way he conceives these terms, and the historical for Bernstein is always already caught up in and transformed by an understanding of the present. We have therefore avoided setting up the volume according to either of these two trajectories (historical/theory versus contemporary/practice). Instead, we have grouped the papers into two overarching sections: (I) Judgment and Critique and (II) Hermeneutics and History. These section headings indicate the breadth of Bernstein's various commitments, which are always ethically motivated, politically urgent, and historically grounded. "Judgment and Critique" opens the volume because it provides a lens through which one can see the many prongs of Bernstein's pervasive concerns with how life is lived in community with others. In addition, the papers in this section examine some of Bernstein's most heartfelt convictions about practice and action. The essays collected in part II, "Hermeneutics and History," show the depth of the philosophic tradition crucial to Bernstein's thinking and suggest myriad paths for further elaboration. By putting the more historically grounded papers last and moving readers toward "Hermeneutics and History," the volume ends with a reminder of the living presence of the past and an invitation to new beginnings. We invite readers to follow the trajectory of the book as it is arranged or to read according to their own interests, beginning in the middle or at the end of the volume.

Let us now provide a brief overview of the chapters to highlight their central arguments and interconnections. The book begins with Michael Weinman's essay on "*Phronēsis* in a Post-Metaphysical Age: Aristotle and Practical Philosophy Today," a paper that is equally prospective and retrospective. In discussion with Bernstein, Weinman continues the project of moving "beyond objectivism and relativism" by pointing the reader to Bernstein's emphasis on hermeneutics as a key solution—or at least a beginning answer—to overcoming the pernicious dichotomy between Aristotle's classic account of the "right use of reason" and the American pragmatists' sense of the historically-situated, fallible, and contingent nature of every truth. Weinman suggests that one can find resources in Aristotle for a more differentiated, pragmatic account of practical reason, and he turns to a hermeneutics of friendship to offer a new bridge over the objectivism/relativism divide. Indeed, the theme of friendship, if not explicitly invoked elsewhere, runs throughout the entirety of the book, both at the personal level of Bernstein's pedagogy with

his students, and with the community of philosophers inside and outside the American tradition. As Bernstein himself reminds us, friendship lies at the heart of both ethics and politics.

Karen Ng's essay, like Weinman's contribution, considers the difference between a spectator discovering pre-given "right" judgment and an engaged agent judging contingently according to her historical situatedness. Ng, however, is thinking about political judgment rather than practical wisdom. She works with different figures and arrives at different results. Her chapter, "Human Plurality and Precarious Life: Problems in Hannah Arendt's Theory of Judgment," argues that Arendt's conception of political judgment, modeled on Kantian aesthetic reflective judgment, needs to be expanded if judgment is to "do justice" in the sense that Arendt wants. Ng initiates her analysis of Arendt's theory of judgment by considering Bernstein's and Judith Butler's criticisms of it. Ng then considers ways to expand Arendt's theory of judgment by extending the latter's strategy of returning to Kant and focusing on teleological judgment in *The Critique of Judgment*. Ng relates this move to Butler's description of life as something precarious. Taking into account Bernstein's criticism that Arendtian judgment gives us only a disinterested spectator, Ng concludes by thinking of judgment in relation to recognition, claiming this will allow us to do justice to the notion of plurality that Arendt herself identified as a condition for the *vita activa*.

In chapters 1 and 2 Weinman and Ng lead off the volume by examining Bernstein's thinking about reason and judgment in light of two thinkers, Aristotle and Arendt, who are pivotal interlocutors across Bernstein's work (with Arendt playing a vital role in Bernstein's intellectual life from the time he met her in New York City in the early 1970s until her death in 1975). Chapter 3, Christopher Long's "Pragmatism and the Cultivation of Digital Democracies," extends Bernstein's thinking beyond his own influences in order to show the continuing relevance of his ethical thought and pedagogical practice in the digital age. At the same time, Long challenges Bernstein to consider the implications of his ethical thinking in contexts Bernstein has not explicitly addressed himself. Long juxtaposes his own entrance into graduate school with the advent of the Internet, for they happened in the same year. He parallels the ethical instruction from Bernstein's thinking on Aristotle, Plato, Peirce, Gadamer, and Dewey with the need to cultivate creative digital democracies. Long reminds us of Peirce's seeking "to cultivate in the community of inquirers habits of responsive and responsible communicative transaction." He argues further, "in emphasizing the institutional side of creative democracy, Bernstein recognizes that the 'fullness of communication' entails a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between the personal habits of individual life and the institutional practices of public life." Long sees the importance of Bernstein's claims through the lens of digital communications

that can be transformative in the way Bernstein's pragmatism would want, but in a manner that includes Long's theory of "transactional terms."

Chapter 4, co-written by Brendan Hogan and Lawrence Marcelle, is titled "Any Democracy Worth Its Name: Bernstein's Democratic *Ēthos* and a Role for Representation." This chapter examines Bernstein's insistence on the necessity of a fallibilistic *ēthos* underpinning democratic societies. Such an *ēthos* demands living commitments to and realizations of practical democratic virtues, not only lip service to democratic ideals. As Hogan and Marcelle write: "The task is to articulate and make explicit the democratic *ēthos* if it is to gain self-reflexivity and become intelligent in a pragmatic sense. This entails expressing and deciding what 'we' are committed to, what it is central to address 'our' energies towards, and what is only of peripheral concern, and all of this in a pluralistic context." They argue that a democratic *ēthos* requires not only the practical virtues Bernstein enumerates in relation to fallibilism (openness, courage, listening, dialogue, and others), but also distinctive virtues they associate with representation and representative government, that is, with speaking for others and letting others speak for oneself. Their chapter thus builds on the discussions of practical virtue pervading the first three chapters, especially extending Long's analysis of the necessity of a pragmatic democratic character into a broader context and highlighting the relationship between Ng's focus on *recognition* in political judgment and their own stress on democratic *representation*. Following a through-line of the volume, Hogan and Marcelle tie their discussion of democratic *ēthos* to Bernstein's wrangling with "the Cartesian anxiety" and his commitment to "engaged pluralistic fallibilism."

The last two contributions in Section I grapple with issues of politics and critique, drawing on the conceptual history of critique formative of Frankfurt School critical theory (which was so influential for Bernstein's thinking), and the seemingly irreconcilable conflict between incommensurability and solidarity. In Chapter 5, Marcia Morgan's "Critique, Dissidence, and Aesthetic Emancipation at the Margins," asks the following question, continuing a theme from Hogan's and Marcelle's chapter: Given our mutually implicating influences in a pluralistic age, how can we speak—for ourselves, for our group, for others, or have others speak for us—while not congealing an ideology of discourse that in the end excludes alterity? Morgan's chapter argues for critique (in the forms of dissensus and dissidence) as a productive means for emancipation at the margins of discourse for those excluded because of gender, race, class, religion, sexuality, disability, political convictions, and more. After engaging Bernstein's reading of Marcuse and the latter's form of critique as a "great refusal," she turns to Kristeva's dissident language theory and aesthetics, as well as Cornel West's philosophy of music, as climactic examples of aesthetic emancipation at the borders of contemporary discourse.

Through West's "prophetic pragmatism," Morgan's chapter connects to a theme of non-naïve hope central to Bernstein's pluralism, which plays a role in the concluding section on "Sober Hope" in the final chapter of the volume by Megan Craig (chapter 11). Morgan's analysis likewise intersects with accounts of hope addressed in and foundational to Lauren Barthold's analysis of hermeneutics and the possibility of Christianity in chapter 9. Barthold works with the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, but taken together, Kristeva, West, and Gadamer challenge the notion that one has to give up one's singularity and the uniqueness of one's beliefs in order to fulfill a robust pluralism.

Precisely this false binary—either incommensurability or solidarityis taken to task in chapter 6 by Megan Craig. Indeed, Craig returns us to one of the most crucial junctures in Bernstein's scholarship by working against this specious dichotomy and applying her collaborative insights with Bernstein to contemporary discussions on motherhood and alterity. Craig's contribution, "Incommensurability and Solidarity: Building Coalitions with Bernstein and Butler," examines the tensions between incommensurability and solidarity and brings Bernstein into conversation with Judith Butler by suggesting ways that both of their works bear on questions pertaining to motherhood. Craig suggests that concerns about incommensurability lie at the heart of Bernstein's pragmatic, fallibilistic pluralism but that he, like Butler, retains hope for an aspirational solidarity among peoples who can come together under the right circumstances to build meaningful coalitions and enact crucial change. Craig's paper, like Morgan's and Ng's contributions, reminds us of the activism inherent in Bernstein's thinking (as well as reflected in his life) and the degree to which his work is inflected by a sober optimism in the power of people to put aside differences (without effacing alterity) for the sake of a common cause.

Section II of the volume begins with a provocative reading of "Bernstein's Hegel" by Rocío Zambrana in chapter 7. Although Bernstein has not published any monographs on Hegel, there is nonetheless an ever-presence of the absolute idealist in Bernstein's work. In "The Romance of Philosophy," he described a graduate seminar on Hegel at Yale as one of his first and most important intellectual breakthroughs, a seminar that "changed my life."[11] Many of us studied Hegel with Bernstein at *The New School* in one form or another, and as Yiramiyahu Yovel (his colleague in The Graduate Faculty) has noted, "Hegel's thought is a major source that energizes and gives substance to many of Bernstein's other interests in European philosophy."[12] With this in mind, Zambrana reconstructs Bernstein's unique position on Hegel and evaluates its role in his pluralism. Zambrana focuses mostly on Hegel's critique of staid binaries and his conception of activity, both groundbreaking for and formative of Bernstein's neopragmatism. Zambrana epitomizes

the animating spirit of our volume: the philosophic methodology, or what she calls a "reading strategy," that is "indebted to Bernstein's insistence on philosophical *openness*." Echoing the epigram in this Introduction, she writes: "Strategies that cross philosophical traditions seek to resist closure at both philosophical and sociological registers because they believe that different and diverging perspectives on a given matter shed light on the truth of the matter at hand." Her essay could be viewed as a theoretical companion to Craig's chapter on solidarity and incommensurability (chapter 6). Zambrana concludes: "Bernstein's Hegel is one that allows us to grasp difference and opposition, and to underscore the significance of gaining insight into the work of any opposition. His reading revises dialectics, allowing it to become a productive resource for responding to the failures of reductive understandings of difference that follow from sheer opposition."

The openness highlighted through Zambrana's "reading strategy" sets the stage for the next three chapters, which take Bernstein's pluralism into analyses that, while not directly relating to his own publications, draw upon the conclusions of his arguments, the ethos of his philosophical framework, and the spirit of his pedagogy. All three chapters voice important Bernsteinian rejoinders to traditional philosophy of consciousness and its false privileging of objectivity and rationality at the expense of corporeality, embodied consciousness, and the multivalence of religious belief.

Chapter 8 by Espen Hammer, "Reading Husserl without Cartesian Anxiety," argues for a reading of Husserl that goes against the grain of Cartesianizing the founder of phenomenology. Hammer writes: "Despite his great interest in pragmatism, Bernstein has also been deeply influenced by Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics of dialogue. As a student of Heidegger, Gadamer stood in the phenomenological tradition, and one might therefore expect that Bernstein would be as open to phenomenology as he is to pragmatism." Hammer suggests that Bernstein is not, however, as open to phenomenology as he might be, in part because he seems to mistrust Husserl and to view him as wedded to a Cartesian paradigm that prioritizes mentalism and rationalism. Hammer's essay thus returns our volume to the theme of working against Cartesian anxiety by showing another side of Husserl, one that is surprisingly sympathetic with Bernstein's pluralistic pragmatism. By bringing Husserl closer to the pragmatic tradition and hence American philosophy and contemporary Anglo-American phenomenology, Hammer implicitly demonstrates the deep theoretical and historical ties between the American and European traditions, and (in concert with aspects of Ed Casey's prologue) suggests new paths for a phenomenologically sensitized pragmatism. Seeds of this were already sown in Bernstein's chapter on "The Phenomenological Alternative" in *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* where he draws upon the German-born phenomenologist, Alfred Schutz, who "established new roots in

American intellectual traditions. [Schutz] was one of the first to discover and integrate themes in American philosophy (especially in the work of James, Mead, and Dewey) that complemented and supported the insights of phenomenology."[13] Hammer's chapter positions Husserl as a figure like Schutz in constructing a bridge between the claims of phenomenology and those of pragmatism. Because Hammer interprets Husserl as a thinker of more embodied and extended forms of consciousness, one can imagine the significance of his reading for notions of consciousness in contemporary critical race theory, feminist theory, gender theory, disability studies, decolonial critique, and more. Our volume addresses and invites continued work on several of these most important and recent movements in the American philosophic academy and their relation to Bernstein's scholarship and teaching.

Chapter 9 by Lauren Barthold's centers on Hans-Georg Gadamer, a close friend of Bernstein's since their meeting in 1968 and a partner in conceptualizing the intricacies of genuine dialogue. As editor of *The Review of Metaphysics*, Bernstein commissioned and published the first substantial English critical study of *Truth and Method* and was instrumental in facilitating Gadamer's visiting lecturing and teaching in New York up until his death in 2002. Barthold strikes a provocative hermeneutic register by defining interpretation as an act of betrayal. Arguing that Gadamer's thought can be used to affirm the possibility of a post-metaphysical Christianity, one that resonates with Bernstein's engaged fallibilistic pluralism, she writes: "If a betrayer is one who crosses over to the other side, then Hermes, the one in constant transversal between mortals and immortals, is the betrayer par excellence. Gadamer's definition of hermeneutics as the 'art of understanding something that appears alien and unintelligible to us'[14] suggests that understanding requires a journey to the unknown." Barthold seeks a more nuanced understanding of Christianity by drawing on Gadamer's hermeneutical concepts of "self-understanding" and "application," all the while drawing out the troubling and potentially transformative connections between understanding and betrayal. Her chapter also engages questions that recall Weinman's chapter (chapter 1) on Aristotle insofar as both authors are concerned with the fate of theology in the modern age. Bernstein has encouraged his students in their multiple devotions, and, following in the tradition of William James, he has never shied away from discussing the role of religion and its relationship to both philosophy and contemporary life. As James noted, "Faith thus remains one of the inalienable birthrights of our mind. Of course it must remain practical, and not a dogmatic attitude. It must go with toleration of other faiths, with the search for the most probable, and with the full consciousness of responsibilities and risks. It may be regarded as a formative factor of the universe, if we be integral parts thereof, and co-determinants, by our behavior, of what its total character may be."[15]

Chapter 10, by Katie Terezakis, analyzes "The Philosophy of Action in John William Miller and Richard J. Bernstein." Miller has not had the attention he deserves in the Pragmatic tradition, and Terezakis begins by providing a historical grounding for reading Miller as a crucial and unique voice in American philosophy. As much as our volume opens up future directions for applying Bernstein's work across traditions and in new contexts, Terezakis's contribution reminds us that there are openings to be found behind us as well, in a history of philosophy that requires constant scrutiny and re-reading. Terezakis sees Miller's work as a compelling response to Bernstein's critique of the Kantianism in Habermas's pragmatism, a strain of rationalism that leaves Bernstein always uneasy. Terezakis writes: "Miller's milieu sustains the shifting appropriations and rejections of idealism, especially in twentieth century thought." She recalls Habermas's and Bernstein's descriptions of the *Zeitgeist* as one of de-transcendentalization and defines the latter as "the project of verifying the iterative, social embeddedness of subjects in a lifeworld, while accounting for the darkened or unobvious conditions of meaning and action in a way that remains fallibilistic and revisable. This is a commitment to account for structures which, if not *transcendental* in the full Kantian sense, are nonetheless universal, binding, and constitutive." Yet again we see engagement with the dichotomy of universally binding "conditions of meaning and action" and the "social embeddedness of subjects in a lifeworld," as we read in chapters in Sections I as well as in Hammer's chapter in Section II. Terezakis takes up the theme of the transcendent and the empirical by turning to Miller as an antidote to Habermas's epistemological realism. She views Miller's philosophy of the act as more capable than either Dewey's or Mead's philosophies of dispelling the epistemological realism intrinsic to Habermas's work.

This book closes with a second contribution by Megan Craig in chapter 11, "Interpreting Violence with Richard J. Bernstein," which centers on his two latest books, *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion Since 9/11* and *Violence: Thinking without Banisters*. In a sense, this chapter brings us into the historical and political present, for both of Bernstein's recent texts have uncanny and tragic relevance in a year that has seen multiple terrorists attacks, race riots and ongoing police brutality in America, a surge of displaced peoples across the Middle East, increasingly urgent impacts of climate change on the most vulnerable populations across the globe, and a US Republican primary contest marked by xenophobic, racist, misogynist, and fear-mongering rhetoric (personified in the figure of Donald Trump). As Craig points out: "Both [of Bernstein's] texts remind us, as Gadamer taught, that the past is never past. They also show us that we have multiple resources for continuing to think in the face of unimaginable horrors." In her analysis, Craig weaves together influences from Arendt and Dewey on Bernstein's pluralism. For

Arendt instructed us that thinking itself needs to be rethought if, in the wake of twentieth-century ethical debacles and political catastrophes, thinking has failed to facilitate *judgment*. This calls to mind Ng's Bernsteinian critique of Arendt's theory of judgment from chapter 2. Craig, however, connects the Arendtian rethinking of thinking with Bernstein's emphasis on Dewey's stress on democracy, critique, and power. She also integrates Nietzsche's notion of requisite forgetting as an important addition to the discussion. Craig concludes by examining case studies of violence that extend Bernstein's analysis into terrain not covered by either of his books, namely, cyber bullying and the US drone strikes in Syria. She describes both as instances of violence from a distance afforded by digitalization in the contemporary age. With this concluding chapter Craig leaves us to contemplate the rapid and distanciated forms of modern life and the need to return to history, with Arendt, with Bernstein, and with our own thinking about thinking.

While this book pays homage to Bernstein and the legacy of his teaching, it is intended to do much more than celebrate a single philosopher. The practical goal of this volume is to show the varied ways in which Bernstein's work and the ethos of his pedagogy spur philosophy in new directions. In a field that is increasingly at risk of narrow specializations, this book stands as an example of plural endeavors to destabilize and reinvigorate philosophical thinking in the present age. In this way, the book fits with the Lexington Series on American Philosophy, as it seeks to enlarge the scope and ambitions of American Philosophy. We hope that the papers collected here give readers examples of how to philosophize without Cartesian anxiety and a sense of what engaged fallibilistic pluralism might include and the multiple registers in which it resounds. These papers are intended as invitations for ongoing collaborative and creative efforts to think outside the confined boundaries of traditions, cultures, and norms. In the present climate of religious and ideological extremism, global terror, mass migrations, and widespread fear, it might seem as if philosophy can do very little. But Bernstein is a living example of the power of philosophy and of philosophers to grapple with the most pressing questions of contemporary life and to do so with a tempered optimism in the power of people to continue working together and forging evermore humane and expansive forms of life (even, and perhaps especially, in the wake of violence and brutality). Such work requires a willingness to take risks and to throw oneself into the fray. It also requires exceptional powers of imagination and creativity. Bernstein's thinking is always oriented toward the wider margins of the world. It invites us to move away from our self-preoccupations in order to meet others in the streets, on the ground. The community of his students, therefore, has the special task of elaborating his work in all of its intricate connection with the world—an infinite charge. We hope this book makes some progress in that endeavor for generations to come.

NOTES

1. Richard J. Bernstein, "The Romance of Philosophy," in *Pragmatic Encounters* (New York: Routledge, 2015) p. 16.

2. Ibid., p. 19.

3. Richard J. Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Politial Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976).

4. Ibid., p. 16.

5. Davaney, Sheila Greeve, and Warren G. Frisina (eds.). *The Pragmatic Century: Conversations with Richard J. Bernstein* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. vii.

6. Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory*, Ibid., p. xx.

7. Richard J. Bernstein, "Pragmatism. Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds," in Richard J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 335–36.

8. Vincent Colepietro, "Engaged Pluralism: Between Alterity and Sociality," *The Pragmatic Century*, Ibid., p. 47.

9. Edward S. Casey, "Richard Bernstein and the Legacy of Pluralism," Keynote Lecture, Thinking the Plural Symposium: Richard J. Bernstein's Contributions to American Philosophy, September 25, 2014, Stony Brook University, New York.

10. We are grateful to the *Journal for Speculative Philosophy* for permission to reprint a section of Morgan's article: "Plurality, Transgression, and the Romance of Philosophy," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 28, no. 4 (2014): pp. 537–51.

11. Bernstein, "The Romance of Philosophy," Ibid., p. 15.

12. Yiramiyahu Yovel, "Hegel's Aphorisms about 'The True,'" in *Pragmatism, Critique, Judgment, Essays for Richard J. Bernstein*, eds. Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser (Boston: MIT Press, 2004), p. 93.

13. Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory*, Ibid., p. 135.

14. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Aesthetic and Religious Experience," in *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 141.

15. William James, "Faith and the Right to Believe," in *The Writings of William James*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 37.

Chapter 6

Incommensurability and Solidarity

Building Coalitions with Bernstein and Butler

Megan Craig

INTRODUCTION

This paper introduces some ideas about incommensurability and solidarity in light of their relationship to Richard J. Bernstein's work and driven by recent political events in America and abroad that have brought new urgency to the terms.[1] These events are, specifically, the repeated instances of police brutality against blacks in the United States that have roiled the nation over the last years, giving rise to the *Black Lives Matter* movement, and the Syrian refugee crisis currently flooding Europe. Although I cannot focus on these crises in this paper, I want to voice them so that we are collectively attuned to the concrete backdrop of my thinking and the times we are living in. My work is divided into three sections. I begin by highlighting texts in which Bernstein has overtly addressed incommensurability and related ethical issues. The second part deals with the relationship between incommensurability and contemporary feminism, with a specific focus on Judith Butler's recent ideas about coalitional unity, and the last section turns to motherhood as a case study in the tensions between incommensurability and solidarity.

At the outset, let me provide shorthand (and by no means total) definitions so that we are sure we are working with roughly the same concepts. "Incommensurability" indicates the impossibility of judging or measuring two or more things by a single, common standard. "Solidarity" means a unity or agreement of feeling, action, judgment, or belief, especially among individuals with a common interest. Things that are incommensurable cannot be reduced to one another or to a third term. Yet solidarity seems premised precisely on shared feeling among those who are, otherwise, incommensurate. The terms are deeply in tension, if not incompatible, with one another. One stands for everything singular, incomparable, and irreducible, while

the other describes the joining together and shared dynamism of those who identify with one another and/or a broader cause. The problem is that each term has ethical/political urgency. We need them both at once, and it is not entirely clear how we might go about fostering or achieving solidarity while recognizing and preserving incommensurability (or for that matter, respecting incommensurability without re-inscribing it into a community of nebulous difference, i.e., we are all the same by virtue of being different).

PART I: BERNSTEIN DEFENCE OF INCOMMENSURABILITY

Bernstein provides a sustained discussion of incommensurability in two places: first, in part two of *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (1983), and later in a chapter titled "Incommensurability and Otherness Revisited" in *The New Constellation: The Ethical/Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (1991). I will sketch the relevant sections of both of these texts as a starting point, but I would argue that a strong defense of incommensurability runs through Bernstein's work and is a hallmark of his pluralistic, democratic, and pragmatic thinking. Incommensurability is part and parcel of what James called the "pluralistic universe," which calls for radical empiricism. James described his radical empiricism and the universe to which it answers in 1909 as "a turbid, muddled, gothic sort of an affair, without a sweeping outline and with little pictorial nobility."[2] Stressing the difference between monistic and pluralistic philosophies, he explained,

> Things are "with" one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything. The word "and" trails along after every sentence. Something always escapes. "Ever not quite" has to be said of the best attempts made anywhere in the universe at attaining all-inclusiveness. The pluralistic world is thus more like a federal republic than like an empire or a kingdom. However much may be collected, however much may report itself as present at any effective centre of consciousness or action, something else is self-governed and absent and unreduced to unity.[3]

Incommensurability is also what Dewey identified as the basis for "moral equality," (distinct from mathematical equality), which entails the recognition of the uniqueness of individuals who cannot be assimilated and therefore require a plurality of standards.[4] Bernstein's recent works on evil and violence, even though they do not treat incommensurability as a stand-alone topic, seem to me emblematic of his efforts to reignite the intricacy of terms that have become banal, to show us that evil and violence are not identical to

each other and not reducible to any primary or overarching form. Their novel, specific manifestations in the world require unrelenting thought and intervention. Throughout, Bernstein reminds us that admitting and honoring incommensurability does not lead to a dead end subjectivism, relativism, or nihilism but instead motivates us to form increasingly imaginative, creative, and engaged communities in a "pluriverse" that outpaces every conceptualizing effort. In the final lines of the epilogue to *The Abuse of Evil*, for instance, he reminds us:

> There is intellectual and practical work to be done to counter the abuse of evil and the mentality that it reflects. The time is ripe—indeed, it is urgent—for a revitalized, passionate commitment to furthering a genuine democratic faith that eschews the appeal to dogmatic absolutes and simplistic dichotomies; a democratic faith that fosters tangible public freedom where debate, persuasion, and reciprocal argumentation flourish; a democratic faith that has the courage to live with uncertainty, contingency, and ambiguity; a democratic faith that is thoroughly imbued with a fallibilistic spirit.[5]

In *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, Bernstein turns to the popular interest in and debate over incommensurability generated by Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend in the 1960s and in the wake of Kuhn's publication of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970). Kuhn was interested in the incommensurability of scientific paradigms (the Aristotelian versus the Copernican theories of the universe for example), the idea that "competition between two paradigms is not the sort of battle that can be resolved by proofs." Instead, he insisted that "the transfer of allegiance from paradigm to paradigm is a conversion that cannot be forced."[6] Certain large-scale shifts in scientific thinking require something more drastic than reasoned argument and recourse to shared standards of experiment and evidence. These shifts can always be retroactively explained as leading into one another in some way. But Kuhn's point was that in the moments of transition from one dominant worldview to another, we don't (yet) have the standards by which to compare or evaluate competing paradigms. One significant upshot of Kuhn's view of incommensurability was that science could no longer be viewed as the linear, incremental fine-tuning of a grand scheme.[7] It, like life itself, develops (and regresses) in fits and starts.

Bernstein is largely concerned with defending Kuhn from critics who associated his views with irrationalism, relativism, subjectivism, or nihilism—all of them part of a pervasive "Cartesian Anxiety" that Bernstein spends much of his book diagnosing. It is an anxiety he describes as "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."[8] Though he cautions that "incommensurability" is "the most exotic, controversial, and perhaps the vaguest theme in these discussions," he goes on to say this:

> It is undeniable that the heady talk about incommensurability has captured the imagination of many thinkers who have had strong opinions about it, both pro and con. Why? The answer, I believe, is that here the *agon* between objectivism and relativism seems to come into sharp focus. For those attracted by the new varieties of relativism, the alleged incommensurability of language games, forms of life, traditions, paradigms, and theories has been taken to be the primary evidence for the new relativism. For those who have a "pro" attitude toward incommensurability, it has been viewed as a liberating doctrine, one that releases us from the false parochialism of regarding our familiar games and standards as having some sort of transcendental permanence. And for those who have a characteristic "anti" attitude, the "thesis of incommensurability" opens the door to everything that is objectionable—subjectivism, irrationalism, and nihilism.[9]

Defenders of the incommensurability thesis see it as a "liberating doctrine," while opponents see it as threatening to the stability of everything they hold near and dear. Bernstein points out that it was mostly *philosophers* of science, and not the scientists themselves, who were anti-incommensurability in the 1970s, as the thesis threatened the coherency of grand narratives, as well as rationalist impulses to adopt a bird's eye view of ultimate (if never immediately experienced) coherence.

Later in Part II, Bernstein pivots from the idea of incommensurability in the natural sciences to the social sciences, looking at various anthropologists' field work and showing how different traditions or forms of life which may be incommensurable are nonetheless able to be examined and fruitfully compared under the right circumstances. He stresses the importance of such research while also underscoring the extreme difficulty and rarity of doing it well, without, that is, imposing one's own biases, concepts, and categories on alien cultures. The task, he writes, is a hermeneutical one, an "art . . . of knowing what are the right questions to ask."[10] This is an *art* and not a science because it cannot be codified into any methodology that one could seamlessly transpose across situations. The artfulness of interpretation entails sensitivity to the case at hand and the creative effort to formulate, rather than merely apply, the right approach. This turns out to be exactly the kind of *tactful* interpretative effort Hans-Georg Gadamer highlights in *Truth and Method,* an effort that has the possibility of enlarging and enriching one's horizon of understanding.[11] The anthropologist who approaches a culture with an openness to being changed by her or his own research is the one who begins a dialogic process of understanding that has no determinate boundary or end. Understanding is never a finished project.

In *The New Constellation*, Bernstein returns to incommensurability with an explicit focus on the social/ethical dimensions of the discussion asking, "What does this strange Continental talk about 'the Other' have to do with the original problematic of incommensurability?"[12] He goes on to discuss Emmanuel Levinas's account of radical alterity—the idea that the Other is entirely unknowable and irreducible to me or to my projects, as well as Jacques Derrida's critique of Levinas in his influential essay "Violence and Metaphysics." Like Derrida, Bernstein is hesitant to accept the wholesale otherness of the Other, preferring a more deflationary, Gadamerian singularity (a historically situated, culturally particular, and context-dependent self) that leaves room for genuine moments of understanding and compatibility.[13] In particular, Bernstein worries that Levinas's stress on the otherness of the other along with his descriptions of "understanding" as a totalizing form of mastery and usurpation preclude possibilities for nonviolent forms of understanding that are crucial for forging communities and coalitions. Perhaps the vogue of "otherness" in continental philosophy ushered in by Levinas leaves not enough room for togetherness (and, as Hilary Putnam put it, no place for laughter or joy).[14] Bernstein does, however, argue that "we see what is silenced or obliterated when we fail to acknowledge the alterity (the incommensurability) of the Other."[15] And he continues, "We must cultivate the type of imagination where we are at once sensitive to the sameness of 'the Other' with ourselves *and* the radical alterity that defies and resists reduction of 'the Other' to the Same."[16]

In opposition to the total unknowability of the Other so central to Levinas's project, Bernstein suggests a both/and approach to incommensurability and similarity, urging us to cultivate a habit of double vision (something he calls imagination) through which we glean what remains irretrievably opaque about others at the same time that we see the things we hold in common. In fact, under the best circumstances of sensitized exposure to others, we tend to co-develop a sense of commonality and difference, as the superficially clear and distinct features of the other erode and morph under scrutiny. The goal is to find multiple means of connection—a project that is never simple. Bernstein writes: "Learning to live with (among) rival pluralistic incommensurable traditions—which is one of the most pressing problems of contemporary life—is always precarious and fragile. There are no algorithms for grasping what is held in common and which is genuinely different. Indeed, commonality and difference are themselves historically conditioned and shifting."[17]

It is worth noting that William James identified the both/and approach to incommensurability and sameness (to singularity and universality) as a worldview he called *radical empiricism*, arguing that it was the only outlook that could account for the simultaneous disjointedness and collective fluidity of the world as we actually experience it, the "unity of things and their variety"[18]—or the sense that "life is confused and superabundant."[19] James was

also concerned with what he called "a certain blindness in human beings," a blindness that predisposes us to underestimate and undervalue the otherness of others.[20] As he described it, human beings tend to see the things we are already looking for and familiar with, and we have trouble expanding our vision or seeing in new ways. This is one reason why cultivating a double vision, enlarging imagination, and breaking psychophysical habits through subjection to new contexts (new cultures, landscapes, novels, poetry, physical exertion etc.) is so important in James's ethical thinking.

Though Bernstein is animated more by Dewey than James (and more by Gadamer and Derrida than by Levinas), he envisions communities of solidarity, friendship, and dialogue that hold in equal view plurality and commonality. These are never given in advance or simple to produce. They require incessant and often heroic labors, as well as a willingness to fail. Once established, such communities (much like friendships) have no guarantee of stability or longevity. Nonetheless, Bernstein is adamant that the fact of incommensurability is never a reason to forego or abandon efforts to come together. If anything, incommensurability itself is a motivator for building bridges between peoples, cultures, and traditions that might disrupt entrenched and oppressive paradigms of segregation and expand the sense of what community means and might yet become.

PART II: FEMINISM, INCOMMENSURABILITY, AND UNIVERSALITY

Though Bernstein does not thematize the links between his own thinking about incommensurability and contemporary feminist work, there are significant areas of overlap. Feminism has historically struggled with the tension between incommensurability and solidarity. As one example, members of each so-called "wave" of feminism in the Anglo-American tradition have critiqued earlier generations for an uncritical evocation of the term "woman"—a word that can seem to stand for one thing but in fact signifies a vast array of lives, experiences, practices, bodies, sexualities and so on.[21] If early feminist thinkers in nineteenth century hoped to stress the intellectual equality of women while downplaying the specificity of the female body and biology (their work linked with the direct feminist political action through the suffragette movement), subsequent feminists hoped to reclaim and re-dignify the bodily dimensions of being a woman, as well as underscoring the very different nature of embodiment for middle-class white women working in the home, women working outside the home in fields and factories, and for black and working-class women whose bodies were forced into labor and often became sites of violence. These were and remain the central criticisms

aimed at Simone de Beauvouir's *The Second Sex* and her seemingly naïve or utopian claim that "women need only to pursue their rise, and the success they obtain encourages them; it seems certain that they will sooner or later attain perfect economic and social equality, which will bring about an inner metamorphosis."[22] Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1979), bell hooks's *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (1991), and Angela Davis's *Women, Race and Class* (1982) are crucial to the ongoing critique and expansion of feminism. The worry has often been that establishing a community of "women" inadvertently disenfranchises those who don't fit into the archetype of the movement (those who are not white, middle-class, college-educated, American, biologically sexed as female etc.). As Judith Butler wrote in *Gender Trouble* in 1990, "There is very little agreement after all on what constitutes or ought to constitute the category of women."[23]

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler diagnoses the problem of identifying and representing women according to overly limited, culturally and historically prescribed (heterosexual) norms. She aligns her own work with "postfeminist"[24] projects of contesting the reifications of gender and identity in order to move feminism in new directions and beyond its own demarcated bounds. In the course of her work, Butler admits her aversion to the term "universal" insofar as it tends to reduce difference and puts unwarranted stress on agreement and collectivity. She is equally uncomfortable with the term "essential" for similar reasons, and she considers what feminism might look like if it could forego the need to identify or circumscribe the category of its members (as well as the type, shape, gender, etc. of oppressors). Keeping the term "woman" open and fluid would entail allowing the word to resonate as contested and never fully articulate. Butler sees some hope in moving away from universalized or essentialist accounts of women in the practices of coalitional politics, which foster the emergence of identities that can "come into being and dissolve depending on the concrete practices that constitute them."[25] She warns that, "the insistence in advance on coalitional 'unity' as a goal assumes that solidarity, whatever its price, is a prerequisite for political action."[26] And she continues: "Perhaps a coalition needs to acknowledge its contradictions and take action with those contradictions in tact. Perhaps also a part of what dialogic understanding entails is the acceptance of divergence, breakage, splinter, and fragmentation as part of the often torturous process of democratization."[27]

In her 1999 preface to the second edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler somewhat revises her take on solidarity and stresses the degree to which she hopes to reclaim a non-pejorative sense of universality as a "non-substantial and open-ended category."[28] She remains suspicious of claims to full agreement

or total convergence among people, but she is interested in "how the assertion of universality can be proleptic and performative, conjuring a reality that does not yet exist, and holding out the possibility for a convergence of cultural horizons that have not yet met. Thus I arrived [she writes] at a second view of universality in which it is defined as a future-oriented labor of cultural translation."[29] Most recently, in conversation with George Yancy in the *New York Times*, Butler invoked this special kind of universality while defending the appropriateness of the phrase "Black Lives Matter." Responding to Yancy's question about those who argue that the movement should adopt the slogan "All Lives Matter," she explained: "Achieving that universal, 'all lives matter,' is a struggle, and that is part of what we are seeing on the streets. For on the streets we see a complex set of solidarities across color lines that seek to show what a concrete and living sense of bodies that matter can be."[30] The phrase "Black Lives Matter" needs voicing precisely because there is a history of lives not mattering in the same way or to the same degree. Very few will disagree that "all lives matter," but Butler points out that the universalizing statement, rather than expressing a truism, indicates a hope for a future which is far from realized. Achieving the phrase "All Lives Matter" requires the "future-oriented labor of cultural translation" Butler associates with a performative universal, that is, a universal that inspires us to perform differently here and now. Rather than inure oneself against past and present injustices with the proclamation of thin universals, Butler suggests we get out in the streets and show each other and the wider world what a living, transformational universality might actually look like.

Butler's second definition of universality seems very close to Bernstein's account of incommensurability and solidarity, as well as to Gadamer's description of the fusion of horizons—both of which aim for a productive gap between otherness and sameness. In *Truth and Method* Gadamer explains,

> the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. *Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves.*[31]

Gadamer describes the ongoing work of understanding as a process of reevaluation, adjustment, and critique. One is never simply in possession of oneself, one's present, or one's past, since each of these supposedly discrete entities is in fact a shifting multiplicity. Butler's revised conception of universality, like Gadamer's notion of a productive and transformative fusion, is

a way of stressing the possibilities for coming together and identifying with one another insofar as we collectively work to foster and protect the conditions for dialogue and mutual respect. Butler sees the strategic and political importance of solidarity, and her description of a second form of universality as an aspirational category reminds us that movements can mobilize people to identify in ways they had never imagined identifying before. These identifications need not be permanent or ultimate, and they certainly cannot efface differences. But they can alter one's sense of self and others in ways that expand the parameters of communities that are coming into being and must be able to change as they grow.

Let's call Butler's form of universality "aspirational universality." In addition to being future-oriented, it is a form of universality that is invitational and experimental. Never complete or acquired, it serves as a regulative ideal toward which individuals and groups can work and against which they can test their solidarity. It has political urgency because often groups must choose a coherent message, face, or a theme to stand for them (and often this entails compromises that risk fracturing the group). To have leverage and to enact change, they need to project an image of solidarity that might be very different from the lived experience of individual members of a coalition. We don't need actual universality to have solidarity, but Butler reminds us that we do need aspirational universality (some of the time, about some things) in order to act together with measured, and therefore, meaningful solidarity.

PART III: MOTHERS AND OTHERS

I am going to segue now into thinking about solidarity and motherhood, leaving Butler somewhat behind. Neither Butler nor Bernstein has anything explicit to say about motherhood (although Butler explores the psychoanalytic concept of the mother), but their ideas about incommensurability and solidarity are terribly relevant to the topic of motherhood and related feminist issues. Thinking about motherhood is also a way of testing Butler's sense of "aspirational universality" against the lived experiences of women who share something significant in common with one another, but who nonetheless may find it difficult or impossible to come together. Butler's sense of coalition building that happens in direct transaction with others in the streets is crucial to the prospects for mothers to mobilize politically, to secure basic rights, and to voice common concerns. Her tempered embrace of an aspirational universality capable of inspiring and regulating political action reminds us that coalitions are imperfect assemblages that nonetheless hold together disparate parts and engender expanded identities and relationships.

As with the term "woman," the word "mother" is problematic and contested among feminists. The more one tries to identify who or what counts as a "mother," the more difficulties inevitably arise. This has become increasingly true in the modern era of reproductive technologies, where conception and maternity can be engineered outside of the body to various degrees.[32] Some contemporary feminists, like Chiara Bottici, have argued for the relevance of the concrete materiality of the body,[33] pushing back to a degree against the Butlerian stress on the performance of gender. Other contemporary feminists have expressed discomfort with what they see as an over-emphasis on theory and performativity of identity at the expense of the flesh and blood materiality of bodies, leveling this charge against Butler in spite of her direct engagement with the intersection of materiality and performativity in *Bodies That Matter*.[34] Motherhood, which may or may not be biologically determined in any particular case, provides a unique testing ground for competing theories about the lived materiality and the transcendent performativity of gendered and sexed bodies. In fact, to be a mother is to live in the messy, incoherent intersection of materiality and performance.

My interest in motherhood arises primarily from my own experiences as a mother. It is, for me, one of the ways that the tension between incommensurability and solidarity assumes concrete form. Since becoming a mother (and I cannot be exactly sure when that transition happened—whether in the first moments or months of pregnancy or after the birth of my first child), I have felt a sense of solidarity with other mothers that was not either present or possible for me before. This is a terribly abstract solidarity that (for me) transcends the human species. I don't have any expectation that I can commune around being a mother with other animals (which would be ridiculous), but a primal feeling of protectiveness and fierce love for a baby is something that seems to cut across species and link us in a willingness to fight, flee, or otherwise ensure the lives of our offspring.[35] Practically speaking, since becoming a mother I have a new sense of awareness of and empathy toward other mothers (perhaps foremost with respect to my own mother)—but also toward mothers harmed by poverty, racism, violence, sexism, ableism, or homophobia. Mothering is difficult enough without any additional insecurities added into the mix, but many mothers face tremendous obstacles to living at all, let alone feeding, clothing, protecting, and caring for their children. As we cut welfare programs in the United States, refuse to provide adequate paid maternity leave, and continue to lag the developed world in healthcare and early childhood education, we put additional and disproportionate stress on mothers. This is one reason Julia Hanigsberg and Sara Ruddick ask us to examine and push back against the culture of "mother blaming" in the essays collected in their book *Mother Troubles*.[36] Politically, since becoming a mother I feel compelled to speak out for issues that disproportionately impact

mothers (maternity leave, primary school education, universal preschool, healthcare, breastfeeding, etc.).

The sense of solidarity with an expansive group of mothers is based (in part) on having undergone a seemingly universal experience—childbirth—which puts me closer in some respects to those who share aspects of my anatomy and even closer to those who had a similar sort of birthing experience. This is not to suggest that there is only one way of becoming a mother. Clearly there are many ways, and many are not biologically determined.[37] Foster mothers, adoptive mothers, grandmothers, and others all mother whether or not they give birth to their child (and for those who do give birth, whether or not the conception or birth is "natural" or medically assisted). But as I consider the various paths to motherhood, the vague sense of solidarity with mothers of the world quickly dissipates into a more or less localized sense of solidarity with particular others, solidarity that is no longer abstract but based in differing levels of intimacy with specific mothers whose stories, and perhaps whose bodies, I know in some detail. That is to say, there is an uncritical form of solidarity that I sense with mothers everywhere. But under the slightest pressure, this universal solidarity of motherhood gives way to more nuanced forms of actual connection with others—the kind of connection that Butler says is formed "in the streets."[38]

The traditions of midwifery, particularly around the sharing of individual birth stories in work by Inna May Gaskin, seems very important for disrupting the notion that birth happens in one way or according to predictable (measurable) stages. As birth has become increasingly medicalized in the United States, women are subjected to ever-narrower paradigms, establishing metrics for "normalcy" that most women are bound to fail to meet. Birth stories attest to the vast array of births and their incommensurability. They destabilize the notion that birthing is a procedure that conforms to universal standards (of sensation, of timing, etc.). When faced with the intricacy of someone's birth story (often retold by mothers and their partners in the hours or days immediately following the birth), one has to contend with the radical unpredictability and eccentricity of each account. This may help to initiate pregnant women into a space of acceptance for the variability of their own bodies and emotions surrounding pregnancy and birth. It may also help them to prepare them for the ambiguous work of parenting, which requires unending sensitivity and responsiveness to the peculiarities and ambiguities of one's children. Something similar could be said for the medicalization of death in the United States and our failures to listen to the stories from the bedsides of those who are dying. Without such stories, we collectively inure ourselves against the actualities of death and render ourselves unequipped for being with those who are terminally ill or dying. Hospice workers serve those who are dying and their families in a similar capacity to midwives in the

birthing process, but we lack a tradition of story-telling with respect to dying that might give survivors some sense of what to expect, how to be present, how to speak, and how to go on.

In his *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, James reminds us that "relations are of different degrees of intimacy."[39] He continues, "taken as it does appear, our universe is to a large extent chaotic. No one single type of connection runs through all the experiences that compose it."[40] This is such an important part of James's pluralistic thinking. Differing degrees of intimacy relate to shifting registers of solidarity and the stress Butler (and others) put on the limits of identity politics. Although I identify as a mother, I am not only that, and so my sense of solidarity with other mothers has optimal windows of intensity and otherwise waxes and wanes according to my own shifting and conflicted sense of who I am at any given moment. Having a baby is simultaneously a huge and a very minor thing to hold in common with another person. Mothering itself is a complex set of practices that involve effort with regard to a child, which suggests that merely having a child is not equivalent to mothering (one can be a mother who doesn't mother). Being mothers together is not enough to establish either friendship or the solidarity needed to work for concrete political change, and mothers are typically too busy mothering to work for political change anyhow. Being a mother is only one aspect of anyone's identity, which inevitably entails commitments to a host of others (as well as the shifting relationship to one's own child). In her work on dependency, Eva Kittay also reminds us that every mother (like every person) is also the child of some mother. She wonders whether the shared experience of having been someone's child might establish a new form of equality (one I would suggest is akin to Butler's aspirational universality). This kind of equality would not seek to compare or assimilate individuals under neutral terms, but, beginning with "persons as they are in connections of care and concern"[41] would attune us toward shared responsibilities and expectations in relation to specific others for whom we care and from whom we require or desire care in return. Kittay calls it a "connections-based equality rather than the individual-based equality more familiar to us."[42] A "connections-based" equality is yet one more strategy for holding together incommensurability and solidarity insofar as it stresses the universal co-dependency of human beings while at the same time allowing for infinite variation in how those dependencies play out across lives. Kittay reserves a special place for mothers insofar as everyone begins life with the utter dependencies of infancy.

Georgia Warnke has written eloquently about the hermeneutical and transitory nature of identity in her book *After Identity*, and I take it that part of Levinas's focus on the otherness of Others has to do with his sense of the deeply temporal, disjoint nature of human subjectivity.[43] We barely know how to identify ourselves, let alone anyone else. The things that seem so

obviously similar about us (Look! We both have newborns!) often turn out to the be most tenuous connecting threads, for we all have different—and sometimes incommensurable—ways of mothering or otherwise being who we are trying to be. It is crucial, therefore, when thinking about groups—whether women, mothers, or others—to keep in mind incommensurability. For incommensurability is the fact on the ground. It is related to everything singular that resists circumscription by any category or name.

Being a member of a group by virtue of one's lived experience is not enough to provoke a feeling of belonging to that group—not enough to provoke the "tenderness of the people" that Alice Walker associates with genuine solidarity. In an interview with Pratibha Pramar, she explained: "I am a great believer in solidarity. Nicaraguans say something very beautiful. They say that solidarity is the tenderness of the people and real revolution is about tenderness. The sharing of this tenderness is beautiful. If you can make one person's life free from a particular kind of pain, that is really enough. It may have ripples."[44] Walker was invoking tenderness while talking about her work on female genital cutting in the wake of her film *Warrior Marks.* She is supremely sensitive to the women whose lives she chronicles, attuned to their stories, hopes, and fears. Not everyone wants to ascribe to a coalition of those who have endured trauma; most do not want to be identified with their own vulnerabilities. Walker therefore does not assume any specific or necessary coalition of women for whom her work is relevant. She makes no claims about the identity or scope of the community of those affected by genital cutting. Instead, she describes solidarity as something fragile and beautiful that can ripple outward in unpredictable waves. It can never be achieved by brute force. It cannot be dictated from on high. One never knows its limits or its reach in advance. In light of this, she describes the importance of being together with the women she writes and theorizes about, "I want to eat with them, dance with them, see who the priestesses are and who the goddesses are. I want to know what's going on with them and how they feel."[45] If we follow Walker in understanding solidarity as a form of tenderness, then we also see the importance of real contact with others—instances of being together, feeling the weight of another person's body, the heat of their breath. This cannot transpire from an armchair or at a distance, no matter how refined our technologies or well intentioned the outreach. In our digital, globalized world, we are tempted by easy-access solidarity, the sense that we are "in it together" or there for one another (donating money at the click of a button, "liking" a status update, watching live coverage of events transpiring across the world), or more similar than we had imagined we could ever be. Yet we are also increasingly distanced from one another, distracted, disconnected and alien.

Mothers often experience a profound sense of isolation as they navigate the first weeks, months, and sometimes years with a baby. I wonder if this is

more the case in contemporary societies where social media can stand in for, and sometimes replace, live interactions with family and friends. In spite of the enormity of the community one becomes a part of by virtue of being a mother, one can easily feel the world has shrunk to a single room inhabited by only two. Sharing stories, getting outside, and being together with others are all strategies for building a community that requires invention as one goes along. The more real the community, the more one is called on to take responsibility for others and to feel oneself implicated (for better and for worse) in other lives. Building coalitions requires the arduous work of giving up one's own sense of exceptionalism and being willing to continually adjust and revise one's sense of identity. Solidarity requires action.

Bernstein gives us good reasons to think of incommensurability as a welcome challenge to categorical modes of thinking and living. Together with Butler, he helps us to see that we can never achieve perfect union or total understanding, but our overlapping lives together nonetheless have meaningful points of intersection, which can become pivots of genuine solidarities. These solidarities becomes fertile sites of individual and collective transformation. Both Bernstein and Butler invite us to take on the difficult and ongoing work of building coalitions in spite of their inherent fragility and the sacrifices or trade-offs they may require. When we remember incommensurability, we remember that we are not as sure of ourselves or others as we first imagined, and we are called to create new connections and forms of togetherness that stretch our imaginations. Incommensurability keeps us from getting all the way to each other. But this gap that precludes any total or final reconciliation is also the gap that ensures the continuance of unfinished projects of friendship and solidarity (which must be unending if they are to be real). If solidarity is the arduous, precarious project that Bernstein, Butler, and Walker describe it to be, then we will have to do more than be virtually available to one another. As Butler says, we will need to be in the streets together. And then in togetherness, we will need to find ways of honoring incommensurability and letting it redistribute and redefine the parameters of our coalitions and our communities.

NOTES

1. My thanks to Marcia Morgan and to the members of the 2016 American Philosophies Forum for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this work.

2. William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), p. 45.

3. Ibid., pp. 321–22.

4. In an article entitled "Individuality, Equality, and Superiority," Dewey writes, "moral equality means incommensurability, the inapplicability of common and quantitative standards" (Dewey 1983: 299). Elsewhere he elaborates, "Equality does not signify that kind of mathematical or physical equivalence in virtue of which any one element may be substituted for another. It denotes effective regard for whatever is distinctive and unique in each, irrespective of physical and psychological inequalities. It is not a natural possession but is a fruit of the community when its action is directed by its character as a community." John Dewey, *The Essential Dewey: Volume 1, Pragmatism, Education, Democracy*, eds. Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 296.

5. Richard J. Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11* (New York: Polity Press, 2005), p. 124.

6. Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), p. 52.

7. For the elaboration of this view, see the final chapter "Progress through Revolutions" in Kunh's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), pp. 159–72.

8. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, p. 18.

9. Ibid., p. 79.

10. Ibid., p. 103.

11. Bernstein writes, "Gadamer helps us to understand the 'truth' of the incommensurability thesis and to reject what is false about it. He shows that insofar as the appeal to incommensurability has been used (or misused) to justify the Myth of the Framework or the notion that there is no way of comparing and communicating with alien horizons and forms of life, it is to be rejected as false. But insofar as it is used to point to the openness of all experience and language and to describe our situation as that of being constantly challenged to understand what is alien, and thereby to risk our prejudices, the incommensurability thesis, for Gadamer, is an idea that is basic for an understanding of our being-in-the-world," Ibid., p. 167.

12. Richard J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), p. 73.

13. Gadamer stresses the "endlessness of the task" of understanding, even as he defends the project of understanding—a project that coincides with dialogue. In an interview with Carsten Dutt, Gadamer said, "In conversation one does not know beforehand what will come out of it, and one usually does not break it off unless forced to do so, because there is always something more you want to say. That is the measure of real conversation. Each remark calls for another, even what is called the 'last word' does this, for in reality the last word does not exist." Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gadamer in Conversation*, ed. and trans. Richard E. Palmer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 59–60.

14. See Hilary Putnam, "Levinas and Judaism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, pp. 33–62.

15. Bernstein, *The New Constellation*, p. 74.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., p. 66.

18. James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, p. 44.

19. Ibid., p. 39.

20. In his lecture "A Certain Blindness in Human Beings," James said, "Each is bound to feel intensely the importance of his own duties and the significance of the situation that call these forth. But this feeling is in each of us a vital secret, for sympathy with which we vainly look to others—the others are too much absorbed in their own vital secrets to take an interest in ours. Hence the stupidity and injustice of our opinions, so far as they deal with the significance of alien lives." James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 132.

21. bell hooks and Nancy Fraser, for example, have contested the "wave" terminology and argued for a more holistic feminist movement. hooks in particular worries about the dissolution of feminism allowed by seemingly discrete "waves," each with their own political agendas. She writes, "Feminist politics is losing momentum because feminist movement has lost clear definition." See bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 6.

22. Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Shelia Malovany- Chevallier (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2010), p. 764.

23. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 2.

24. Ibid., p. 7.

25. Ibid., p. 22.

26. Ibid., p. 20.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., p. xviii.

29. Ibid.

30. Judith Butler with George Yancy, "What's Wrong with 'All Lives Matter'?" *New York Times*, January 12, 2015.

31. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 317.

32. See Kelly Oliver's recent work on reproductive technologies in *Technologies of Life and Death: From Cloning to Capital Punishment* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013) and Jana Siwicki's "Disciplining Mothers: Feminism and the New Reproductive Technologies" in *Feminist Theory and the Body*, eds. Janet Price and Margrit Schildrick (New York: Routledge, 2010).

33. Chiara Bottici, "Towards an Anarchafeminist Manifesto," Public Seminar, December 10, 2015 (http://www.publicseminar.org/2015/12/bodies-in-plural-toward-an-anarchafeminist-manifesto/), accessed July 1, 2016.

34. Butler begins her text by asking, "Is there a way to link the question of the materiality of the body to the performativity of gender?" She goes on to write, "what constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as power's most productive effect." Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 1, 2.

35. For more on the trans-species relevance of motherhood and its ethical implications, see Cynthia Willet's *Interspecies Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

36. Julia E. Hanigsberg and Sara Ruddick, eds. *Mother Troubles: Rethinking Contemporary Maternal Dilemmas* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

37. As Elizabeth Grosz reminds us, "Psychoanalytic theory has enabled feminists and others to reclaim the body from the realms of immanence and biology in order to see it as a psycho-social product, open to transformations in meaning and functioning, capable of being contested and re-signified" (Price and Shildrick, Ibid., p. 270).

38. In this case, the streets are playgrounds, ER and pediatrician's rooms, grocery stores, the offices of midwives and lactation consultants, and other places where mothers with young children routinely converge.

39. James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, p. 44.

40. Ibid., p. 46.

41. Eva Kittay, *Love's Labors: Essay on Women, Equality and Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 28.

42. Ibid.

43. Warnke writes: "Just like texts, people have different meanings in different contexts and the meanings they have depend upon the relations, situations, and frameworks in terms of which we are trying to understand them." Georgia Warnke, *After Identity: Rethinking Race, Sex and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 7.

44. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (eds.), *Feminist Theory and the Body, A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 307.

45. Ibid.

Chapter 11

Interpreting Violence with Richard J. Bernstein

Megan Craig

INTRODUCTION

In his two latest books, *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11* (2005) and *Violence: Thinking without Banisters* (2013), Richard J. Bernstein grapples with some of the most pressing ethical/political issues of our age. Written in response to crises of contemporary life, they weave together and interpret lessons from the past. Both texts remind us, as Hans-Georg Gadamer insisted, that the past is never past.[1] They also show us that we have multiple resources for continuing to think in the face of unimaginable horrors. Despite their focus on some of the grimmest chapters of American and European history, both texts exude a sober optimism in the power of people to work collectively toward greater justice and to forge increasingly open and creative democracies.

Bernstein's book on evil responds, albeit indirectly, to the terrorists attacks on September 11, 2001 and the immediate aftermath (the manuscript was finished on August 31, 2001, with a Preface written later in light of the attacks), while the book on violence takes shape against the backdrop of contemporary wars (Iraq and Afghanistan), and uprisings throughout the Middle East from the Arab Spring onward, as well as a rash of mass shootings in the United States. Evil and violence are related but not synonymous. Bernstein aims to clarify and dissect these concepts in order to reignite their distinctive meanings and thereby give us a better sense of what we mean when we invoke the terms. In the epilogue of *The Abuse of Evil*, he remarks: "In times of widespread anxiety, fear, and perceived crises, there arises a craving for absolutes, firm moral certainties, and simplistic schemas that help make sense of confusing contingencies; they help to provide a sense of psychological security. Since 9/11 we have been living through such a time."[2] The ubiquity of the

terms "radical" and "evil" following September 11th, particularly in the Bush administration's rhetoric relating to terrorism and Islamic extremism, accelerated the erosion of the sense of either word and confirmed Wittgenstein's observations that repetition is one way of mystifying ordinary language and that "philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday."[3] In a sense, Bernstein's work on violence and evil wed a Wittgensteinian concern with language games and forms of life with his long-held Deweyian stress on Democracy, power, and critique. One practical upshot of reading his latest texts should be a more restrained and enlightened relationship to the words "evil" and "violence"—both with respect to their deep histories of use and abuse, and with respect to their changing roles in contemporary culture. With a more nuanced sense of what evil and violence mean, we might become more sensitized and ultimately responsive to their multiple, shifting forms. At a basic level, these books have a therapeutic goal. They aide us in learning how to name and talk about the atrocities of our age so that we might resist the ever-present temptation to generalize and conflate horrors under cliché, catchall terms.

My remarks here center mostly on Bernstein's book on violence. I hope, however, to make some broader claims about Bernstein's thinking and his approach to philosophy in the course of this essay. After considering the core argument of *Violence* and its relationship to Hannah Arendt's work, in the second half of the paper I take up Bernstein's invitation to think through contemporary forms of violence by examining two case studies, one local, the other global—both of them related to questions about violence in the digital age. Bernstein's diagnosis of the ubiquity of evil and its historically, culturally specific manifestations in the modern world is crucial for combatting leveling and stupefying rhetoric that creates widespread anxiety while dismantling one's sense of agency or political will. At the same time, his invitation to think through specific instances of evil and violence invites us beyond his historically minded therapeutic texts toward case studies in the psychophysical nature of not only evil, but trauma, memory, and rehabilitation. Extending Bernstein's work on evil and violence and bringing it to bear on two contemporary examples helps us to see the continuing relevance of his work, as well as the unique challenges posed by the speed, anonymity, power differentials, and virtual connectivity of our digital, globalized world.

PART I: WHAT THINKING MEANS

As Bernstein states in *Violence*, we live in a time when "we are overwhelmed with talk, writing, and especially images of violence. Whether on television, the internet, smartphones, films or the video screen, we can't escape representations of actual or fictional violence—so much so that we easily

become numb and indifferent to yet another report or depiction of violence."[4] Violence is everywhere, and we are largely inured to its manifestations. Yet Bernstein points out that in a culture obsessed with violence in so many forms, we remain unable or unwilling to *think* about violence. In fact, a capacity to think about violence seems to recede in proportion to the proliferation of instances and kinds of violence in a given society: violence leaves no time for thought. This claim relates to Hannah Arendt's point in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* when she writes, "To be sure, efforts to rehabilitate Stalin and to curtail the increasingly vocal demands for freedom of speech and *thought* among students, writers, and artists recur again and again, but none of them has been very successful or is likely to be successful without a full-fledged re-establishment of terror and police rule" (my emphasis).[5] Arendt links the stifling of speech and thought with the omnipresence of terror characteristic of totalitarian regimes, and she argues that under conditions of extreme violence, when evil becomes banal, thinking becomes nearly impossible. Notably, Arendt ascribes the ability to keep thinking under extreme circumstances not to professional philosophers, but to "students, writers, and artists." These are the figures in her work who heroically keep open the possibilities for creative, poetic thought and thereby cultivate a crucial margin of indeterminacy and freedom.

In his own work, Bernstein adopts Arendt's notion of what genuine thinking entails, describing it as "an activity that must be *performed* over and over again in order to keep it alive" (V, vii).[6] In *The Human Condition,* Arendt explains: "The activity of thinking is as relentless and repetitive as life itself, and the question of whether thought has any meaning at all constitutes the same unanswerable riddle as the question for the meaning of life; its processes permeate the whole of human existence so intimately that its beginning and end coincide with the beginning and end of human life itself."[7] Bernstein's subtitle borrows Arendt's phrase "thinking without banisters" to indicate the necessity of learning to continue evaluating, questioning, and discussing in the midst of what she calls "dark times." In the Preface to *Men in Dark Times*, she writes:

> That even in the darkest times we have the right to expect some illumination, and that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that we given them on earth—this conviction is the inarticulate background against which these profiles were drawn.[8]

As Arendt acknowledged, dark times call for exemplars of humanity, points of possible, if only dim, illumination. Dark times entail thinking that can grope without any assured passage forward or back. Such thinking must

remain paradigmatically unsteady and opaque, bearing no similarity to the Cartesian paradigm of clear, distinct ideas and firm epistemological foundations. Bernstein celebrates "thinking without banisters" as "the alternative to both foundationalism and nihilism" (V viii) insofar as this kind of thinking acknowledges the impossibility of relying on any permanent ground of support without thereby renouncing hope in the creative power of thought. Dark times demand ingenious thoughts and astounding perseverance. They are times without precedent, which offer us no good reason to believe that thinking will be effective or amount to anything, times Emmanuel Levinas believed were characteristic of every ethical encounter (which always takes place in the dark): singular, without any rule, without support.[9]

Thinking in dark times becomes a heroic undertaking. Yet, as Arendt also knew, there is nothing exceptional about dark times—they are erupting all the time. Dark times describe historic periods of war and genocides, but also the lesser-marked chapters of individual lives plunged into despair. One of the critical claims of Bernstein's book is that violence is ubiquitous, and yet every particular instance of violence has something unimaginable and unprecedented about it. Any final definition of violence or of evil will always fail (even as the temptation to define the terms once and for all stubbornly persists). As Bernstein reminds us, we don't need more precise definitions. Instead, we need to find ways to remain open to the vagaries and particularities of each new circumstance. In this, as in other ways, Bernstein remains committed to the fallibilism and pluralism central to James's and Dewey's pragmatism. Violence comes in many forms, each requiring its own diagnosis and response. The singularity of disparate forms of violence leads Bernstein to reread *The Wretched of the Earth* in his fourth chapter, which details the particular kind of violence manifested in colonialism and Fanon's radical call for its recognition.[10] There will never be a final definition of violence, just as there will never be a singular policy or law with respect to violence that could apply to every case. It seems to be the nature of violence to shatter norms and call forth new categories. Abstract, universalized characterizations of violence or evil (the "War on Terror," for example) are bound to fail, since they are monolithic and static, while violence proliferates in ever-new forms.

Violence, whether systematic and prolonged or random and instantaneous, challenges one's ability to keep thinking, which is precisely why thinking—when it works—proves to be so powerful in relation to violence. Arendt diagnosed her own times and described her mission in *The Human Condition* in the following terms: "thoughtlessness—the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of 'truths' which have become trivial and empty—seems to me among the outstanding characteristics of our time. What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing" (HC, 5). Such thinking is neither easy nor terribly

common. Thoreau wrote that "the mass of men live lives of quiet desperation." Arendt's point is that the mass of people live lives of quiet thoughtlessness. Her analysis of "thoughtlessness" relates to Heidegger's thinking about the inauthenticity of *das Man* in *Being and Time*, but it also describes her assessment of Eichmann as one extreme example of the thoughtless masses who perpetuated the Nazi regime. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she examines the concept of "the masses" in close detail and writes, "The term masses only applies where we deal with people who either because of sheer numbers, or indifference, or a combination of both, cannot be integrated into any organization based on common interest, into political parties or municipal governments or professional organizations or trade unions. Potentially, they exist in every country and form the majority of those large numbers of neutral, politically indifferent people who never join a party and hardly ever go to the polls."[11] Based on her definition, more than half of the people living in America today who routinely fail to vote qualify as thoughtless masses. True thinking entails self-reflection and critique that require restraint and patience, virtues not often lauded in contemporary cultures that champion strength and speed. Such thinking also requires space, whether in the form of Virginia Woolf's call for "A Room of One's Own," or some more minimal insularity from the onslaught of modern life. In the spirit of Arendt's call to thinking, Bernstein's book draws together different thinkers of violence to exhibit the power of examination and attention in grasping instances that challenge or defy thought.

But is *thinking*, in the robust, Arendtian sense Bernstein intends, the *only* nonviolent response to violence? Bernstein champions the power of reflection in its ability to ground one in the present moment and orient one toward justice, but I am reminded of gestures of normalcy W. G. Sebald highlights in *On the Natural History of Destruction*: weeding gardens, pouring tea, sweeping the street—and his analyses of a human determination to continue banal rituals in the midst of devastation and ruins: "Kluge's account of the destruction of Halberstadt begins with the story of Frau Schrader, employed at a local cinema, who gets to work with a shovel commandeered from the air raid wardens immediately after the bomb falls hoping 'to clear the rubble away before the two o'clock matinee.'"[12] Such examples do not seem like paradigmatic cases of Arendtian thinking, though they do seem crucial to the incremental continuance of life. Perhaps these are also forms of "thinking without banisters" and ways of forestalling a crushing sense of terror or hopelessness. One of the aspects of Bernstein's book that I am most interested in is the way in which physical violence relates to psychological violence, which can far outlast the traces of physical harm. Indeed, Bernstein does not attempt to discuss trauma in his book, preferring to stick closely to the examination of key texts in the philosophical history of thinking and

writing about the nature of violence. But some consideration of trauma and the various long-term effects of violence seems inevitable if not crucial to the story. In some cases, thinking about violence (or testifying to violence) rekindles the scene of endured crimes, when what is most needed is a new beginning unhinged from the suffering of the past. Perhaps what is needed, in addition to Arendt's call for more thoughtful action, is a form of thinking that entails a Nietzschean forgetting. As Nietzsche reminds us, "Forgetting is essential action of any kind, just as not only light but darkness too is essential for the life of everything organic . . . *there is a degree of sleeplessness, of rumination, of the historical sense, which is harmful and ultimately fatal to the living thing, whether this living thing be a man or a people or a culture*."[13] Responses to instances of violence in the world should keep in view not only justice, but also happiness and the possibilities for future joy. This is one reason I am (like Bernstein) skeptical of violence in response to violence, since additional violence necessarily narrows the parameters of life and the chances of escaping cycles of victimization and cruelty. We have only to revisit *The Oresteia* for a grim reminder of this. But I am also concerned that the concept of "thinking" be expansive and flexible enough to include the mindless repetition of gestures like those Sebald highlights and the mindlessness Nietzsche associates with joy. These would be registers of thought less heady, intellectual or focused than anything that Arendt had in mind, but not without their own dignity and timeliness. In fact, in the immediate aftermath of violence, they may be the very things that hold open a margin for future thinking in any form.

PART II: CASE STUDIES

Given Bernstein's sensitivity to different registers of violence throughout his text and his explicit challenge to his readers to "become aware of new forms of violence, to understand their structure and dynamics, and to bring them to public self-consciousness" (V, 177), I will focus my remaining remarks around two cases of contemporary violence: the case of Rebecca Ann Sedwick, a twelve-year-old American who committed suicide in February 2013 after incessant bullying, and the August 2013 Syrian chemical attack and its aftermath. On the surface, these seem like utterly opposed examples. The first is the case of an individual and her domestic life, compared with the global and catastrophic scale of the Syrian government's use of chemical warfare against its own civilians. In many ways, disparate violent acts are never comparable. That is part of the cruel nature of violence: its reach and the degree of its power are impossible to determine in advance or to measure categorically in its aftermath. And yet, there are many ways that these cases are not only opposed (the one local, the other global, the one near, the other

far) but also strangely similar. Both of them entail violence aimed at children, perhaps one of the only forms of violence that still has the power to shock a global community. Both of them also raise questions about technology and the new forms in which violence can be inflicted in the digital age.

Cyberbullying

There has been an explosion of research into bullying and its links to social media in recent years.[14] Several prominent cases of suicide by children who were relentlessly bullied by their peers have made national headlines and have prompted schools, parents, and local governments to put in place guidelines for trying to identify and deal with cyberbullying. A quick Google search for "cyberbullying" will take you to stopbullying.gov, an American government website devoted to explaining, preventing, and reporting instances of cyberbullying for teens and their parents. The homepage displays photographs of kids grouped around a cell phone, a parent and child at a laptop, and a young child alone at a computer looking anxiously over his shoulder. Next to the first photo, you can read the now standard definition of cyberbullying: "Cyberbullying is bullying that takes place using electronic technology. Examples of cyberbullying include mean text messages or emails, rumors sent by email or posted on social networking sites, and embarrassing pictures, videos, websites, or fake profiles."

In one prominent, recent case of cyberbullying, Rebecca Ann Sedwick, a twelve-year-old from Florida, jumped to her death from an abandoned cement factory after being bullied in person at her school and then online over websites like AskFM and Kik messenger.[15] Rebecca's case garnered national attention in part because she is one of the youngest suicide victims of cyberbullying and in part because of the intensity and extreme nature of the bullying she endured. Prior to taking her own life, her mother had taken her out of one school and enrolled her in a new school to physically distance her from the group of fifteen or so girls who were known to bully her. Her mother also carefully monitored her online activity and put limits on her use of her phone and computer. In many ways, Rebecca is representative of the growing number of teenagers and preteens (a disproportionate number of them girls) who find themselves ostracized and demonized by their peers, their insecurities or indiscretions writ large on the Internet for the world to see. Paradoxically, the very sites that encourage sharing and community building are the same sites that can intensify the feelings of isolation and estrangement already so poignant in kids who are desperate for acceptance just as they are coming of age. Often, as in Rebecca's case, parents or guardians have no idea how severe or all consuming the bullying has become, as most of it transpires in flickering texts and photos across the screen of a phone. The media itself seems ephemeral and benign.

Bullying is not a new phenomenon by any stretch of the imagination. In some ways, cyberbullying is just a modern version of an ancient problem. What is new is the degree to which a bully can pursue and torment his or her prey. There is no longer a safety zone once a child leaves school, moves to a new town, or finds some other way of establishing physical distance from a bully. Bullying is no longer the domain of the physically largest aggressor in a group nor is it a matter of locker room traumas, stolen lunch money, and black eyes (although these forms of bullying still happen as well and are no less traumatic than they have always been). Low-tech bullying can take the form of mean or insidious notes, hazing, and other psychological warfare. But now, in the digital age, bullying can happen everywhere and all the time, much as the 24-hour news cycle berates viewers without reprieve. Additionally, the bully can remain abstract and faceless, able to act alone or in concert with others, without the victim having any idea who, or how many, she is dealing with. Bernstein remarks that violence has a Proteus character—always hiding itself and taking new shapes.[16] Social media is a good example of how something that seems innocent at face value (more sharing seems basically good) masks a potential and/or actual violence. There is no limit to the bully's reach once they have tapped into social media, just as there is no limit to the victim's paranoia once they realize they have no place of solace and no way of knowing decisively who is bullying them or how many others are involved or following any particular thread.

One might argue that kids should just stop using their phones, ignore message boards, and develop a tougher skin. Or perhaps parents have a greater responsibility in confiscating their child's devices and monitoring their online activities (as Rebecca's mother believed she was doing). But phones and computers are tied to practical needs as well as social acceptance and popularity, and policing someone's online activity is nearly impossible without drastic, ongoing measures. New social media sites proliferate at warp speed. Often a child who is already outcast in some way will find herself more so if cut off from the virtual lives of her peers. We have no way of gauging the degree to which the social life of the next generation will take place in virtual reality and what the effects will be on socialization, self-esteem, and a host of other factors. One of the most difficult challenges facing parents today is keeping up with and navigating the ever-changing terrain of social media with their children. Modern parents can know exactly where their child is located geographically (safely in their room upstairs for instance), and yet have no idea where they are virtually or with whom they are interacting at any given moment.

Despite the ubiquity of social media and the nearness of the technology (literally in the palm of one's hand), it remains difficult to think about cyber violence *as* violence. There is also an inherent ambiguity to responsibility

built into social media—an ability to say or do things without being face to face, while parading as another person, or in the guise of a "game." The online perpetrator of violence never has to witness the reactions or pain of her victims. In Rebecca's case, a post by the fourteen-year-old girl who was believed to be primarily responsible for the bullying (both in person and online) prompted local authorities to accelerate their investigation and issue an arrest. In Internet shorthand, the girl had updated her Facebook status to read: "Yes I know—I bullied Rebecca and she killed herself," adding that she didn't (expletive) care, and including a heart and an emoticon to underscore her point. Social media lends itself to quick, thoughtless updates uploaded with the hope of generating an outsized response (hundreds of instantaneous "likes" or comments on Facebook for example). For teens experimenting with their public personas, virtual realities provide an arena without filters and devoid of responsibility. The lack of remorse in Rebecca's bully shows the degree of evasion enabled by technologies that grant someone a wide audience without making them be responsive to anyone in particular or in person.

What kind of violence is cyberbullying? What are its distinctive features? Perhaps to begin with, it presents itself as anonymous: the perpetrators often remain faceless, operating under pseudonyms or in diffuse, shifting groups. It is largely carried out by children and aimed at other children. It also has a less decisive reach than instances of physical violence. Often what begins as cyberviolence ends in physical violence, as it did for Rebecca, and more often than not, the violence it leads to is self-inflicted by the victim: self-mutilation or suicide. Rebecca was a victim of both. When she first began cutting herself, her mother removed her from school and found her a therapist. She seemed to be doing better in a new school, until the bullying intensified over new message boards, including explicit pleas for Rebecca to kill herself. Often cyberviolence is only seen as an act of violence once physical violence has taken place, that is, when it's too late to do anything about. This mirrors aspects of domestic violence and rape in which victims must show physical proof of their abuse to obtain a restraining order, arrest warrant, or other legal intervention for their own protection. In essence, bullying and abuse reflect the degree to which we, in America (though not only here), are a society of reaction rather than prevention. We are a culture slow, if not inept, in responding to anything but gross physical evidence, and this renders virtual reality a hugely problematic and shadowy domain. Moreover, in instances of cyberbullying, there is a reluctance to locate blame or to hold kids responsible for a death in which they seem tangentially implicated, particularly in cases of suicide like Rebecca's. This may indicate that cyberbullying is a particularly insidious form of violence, one that aims to harm and dismantle its victims from within (exposing and then exploiting a perceived weakness).

What might Hannah Arendt have said if she had lived to see this new form of violence, which seems deeply tied to disempowering individuals who find themselves isolated (on and off-line)? What would she say about the cyber bully who has such an extensive, seemingly limitless, reach into the lives of her victim from the comfortable confines of her own room? Though Arendt emphasizes the positive potential of *power* and opposes power to violence, her claim that "power like action is boundless; it has no physical limitation in human nature" (HC, 201) sounds ominous in light of the cyberbully's virtual extension and transformation. As Bernstein beautifully emphasizes, power for Arendt has to do with *empowerment* and people working together.[17] Strength is something related to individual will and brute force, but power, in Arendt's sense of the term, arises when people orchestrate themselves into communities of solidarity and exercise their rights. When communities take shape largely in cyberspace, however, what changes take place in the very concept of empowerment? What happens to thinking in a digital age characterized by (1) the radical isolation of individuals who communicate increasingly through technology and (2) the equally radical impossibility of being alone in a world where one is constantly under surveillance, available for virtual interaction via phone and email, and logged on to any number of social media sites?

I do not have answers to these questions, but Rebecca's case should spur our thinking about them and taking steps to identify the kind of violence proliferating online and targeting some of the most vulnerable, youngest members of society. To begin with, if empowerment arises when we act together, then we need actual, not only virtual, spaces of community. If thinking requires some minimal respite from life's barrage, then we need actual, not only virtual, experiences of being quietly alone with ourselves and our thoughts, unplugged.

Syria 2013

In August of 2013, the United States weighed a targeted military strike against Syria following its use of chemical weapons against civilians. The initial rationale for the strike revolved largely around President Obama's response to a reporter's question during an August 20, 2012, press conference in the White House briefing room, in which he decreed the use of chemical weapons a "red line."[18] The threat of military force was meant to keep Syria in check, but once the line was drawn it seemed inevitable that it would be crossed, and it also threatened to preempt debate. In his first reactions to the attack, Obama invoked the images of dead children cradled in their parents' arms, while Secretary of State John Kerrey urged swift and targeted military action—mounting a coordinated effort to sway the hearts and minds of Americans weary of war.

What followed was surprising: an about-face by the president in the wake of a Russian-led effort to engage the UN as well as the international community in pressuring Syria to admit to and relinquish its chemical arsenal. Calls for airstrikes were replaced by pleas for patience. The heat of the moment gave way to days, then weeks of deliberations—blunting the effect of those first graphic images of victims. Syrian rebels railed against the lack of American resolve and the Syrian government's ongoing tactics of evasion and delay. July of 2014 saw the tail end of a complex UN-led inspections mission and process of chemical disarmament. Although the final results of the disarmament cannot be decisively confirmed, the last of Assad's stated chemical arsenal was loaded onto a Danish freighter to be destroyed on June 23, 2014. This took place with little fanfare and without much play on the American news cycle in spite of the enormity of the mission and its historic completion.[19]

One of the questions raised by the case of Syria is whether its use of chemical warfare against civilians constitutes one of the "exceptional cases" Bernstein considers in *Violence*, cases in which violence can be justified.[20] Throughout his text, Bernstein returns to the question of what defines an exception, all the while refusing to provide criteria that would inevitably be used to justify future violence. At the international level, the question of the exception is as old as nations, but it has taken on increasing urgency in the modern eras of genocides and crimes against humanity. Is Syria an exceptional case? If not in the face of chemical warfare against unarmed civilians and children, when is violence justified?

A striking feature of the Syrian case is that, at first, Obama and Kerrey made a strong argument for military intervention. In the hours and days following the attack, a violent retaliation (though "targeted" and "precise") seemed all but inevitable. And yet, over time the rhetoric changed. Negotiations, debates, inspections—these all take time. Certainly to the rebels and the civilians who lost loved ones or who were wounded in the attacks, taking additional time seemed offensive and unjust. Violence and counter-violence thrive on speed. This is one way, among several, that violence and thinking are always at odds. Part of the justification for violence usually entails a plea for speedy action and a sense of crisis that precludes time for debate.

It remains unclear how the Syrian conflict will play out in the long run.[21] Did the disarmament work? Did the investigation prolong and tacitly legitimate Assad's rule, as Obama's critics feared? Some things seem certain: airstrikes by the US military would have produced additional casualties and traumatized additional civilians. They would have provided fodder for radical extremists seeking new recruits. It is also possible they would have tipped the scales in the rebels' favor, allowing them the critical margin of power needed to overthrow Assad. One could conduct similar thought experiments

around the current tensions and military escalation in Israel and Palestine today. I'm interested in the case of Syria, however, because it represents a moment when, on the brink of violent intervention, the United States chose nonviolence (a relative rarity in US foreign policy, particularly since 2001). It chose a course of time-consuming and unverifiable debates with untrustworthy counterparts. As Bernstein notes, "Even in dark times, when opposing violence may seem hopeless, it is essential to keep alive the idea of what nonviolent power can achieve" (V, 182). This statement is emblematic of the hopefulness underpinning Bernstein's texts on evil and violence. Proponents of nonviolence are often tagged as indecisive doves, devoid of political will. Many of the criticisms of the Obama administration in the wake of the decision to pursue UN inspections boiled down to the idea that Obama was too thoughtful or intellectual to take decisive action (a "waffler") and that he was too weak to engage military force. Bernstein helps to show that nonviolent power is incredibly powerful, and its prospects for fostering democratic ideals are much greater than the use of violent force alone. Though he does not adopt nonviolence as a principle to be blindly adhered to, he advocates strongly for keeping nonviolent options at the forefront of public debate, reserving violence as a last resort. He urges us to realize that violence can only dismantle or disrupt. Nonviolent power is required for building anything new. The route of diplomacy in Syria has been circuitous and uncertain, but it may yet prove to have greater lasting implications for future stability than airstrikes, which only aim to destroy.

Notably, the kind of military intervention Obama was calling for in the first place was a modest, targeted airstrike, most likely carried out by drones. Those planes would have been operated remotely by pilots who trained using sophisticated video games. The show of American force in Syria was meant to be dramatic but without casualties (especially without American casualties).[22] The use of drones is another example of the ways in which distance and technology collude to complicate what intervention and violence mean in modern warfare. This brings us back to the technological impacts on violence of various kinds and the links between the bully who pushes "send" on her cell phone and the pilot who pushes "send" on her military console. Bullying and chemical warfare come together around the speed of technology that allows for violence (local or global, individual or en masse) to be perpetrated at the push of a button and initiated from a distance, blurring games and life. One could think about mass shootings in America and the semi-automatic weapons largely used to carry them out along the same lines. When the push of a button or the pull of a trigger releases more lethal ammunition over a greater distance, there is a troubling imbalance between the power required to initiate an act and the act itself, which has been radically intensified via technology. Violence craves speed. In the globalized world, speed and the

technologies that enable it require the serious thinking Bernstein underscores for identifying violence *as* violence when he writes, "One of our most constant and difficult challenges is to become aware of new forms of violence, to understand their structure and dynamics, and to bring them to public self-consciousness" (V, 177). Once we are able to see something as violence, to understand its violent logic and the ways in which it stifles, subjugates, and victimizes, we are in a stronger position to protect those most vulnerable and to stand up collectively in opposition. Put otherwise, recognizing violence *as* violence is the first (but by no means the final) step in responding to violence.

Syria, for most of us living in the United States, seems far away. But perhaps Rebecca's case in central Florida seems remote as well. Perhaps we are stunted in our thinking by our own sense of alienation or exceptionalism, the sense that violence happens elsewhere to someone else. When violence transpires at a physical distance, it is far easier to think about it than when it descends closer to home. Violence one lives through remains paradigmatically unthinkable, in part because of the unpredictable ways in which trauma reasserts itself for the one who survives a violent crime. This may indicate that thinking through violence necessitates the presence and interaction of those I would like to call *thinkers-at-a-distance*: not so great a distance that they remain untouched in their daily lives from the effects of a particular form of violence, not so far away that they can dismiss or forget about it. But also not so close that they are traumatized by the violence they have witnessed. There seems to be a more or less ideal standpoint from which one might witness violence without becoming entirely victimized. Internationally, organizations like Doctors without Borders (Médicins Sans Frontières) attempt to occupy this margin, moving within conflict zones to aide those most afflicted by political violence while retaining some measure of neutrality without which they could not continue their work.

Bernstein's book is not about trauma or even about particular forms of violence in contemporary culture, but insofar as it entails a plea to *think* more carefully and deeply about violence, it also inspires reflection about how thinking and violence relate to one another and how trauma inflects, frustrates, or fuels thought. What are the conditions in which thinking can transpire? Who has the privilege of thinking? When is thinking possible or impossible?

I am curious about the relationship between distance and violence in part because of my work on Levinas and his insistence on the embodied, interpersonal sites of ethical encounter (and its failures).[23] Levinas uses the term *proximity* to describe the nearness of those who stand face to face.[24] They need not be visible to one another (ethics can take place in the dark). But they do need to be close enough to sense the heat or breath of the other person's living body. Levinas also reminds us that violence always aims at a face—that

it always seeks the most vulnerable, fragile, and open sites of exposure. Perhaps we need both more embodied, facing of one another in daily life as well as more proximate thinkers—concretely those who work alongside victims of violence in the places where violence transpires. Perhaps in their proximity they can be simultaneously touched and left untouched enough for thinking without banisters, as well as for reporting about, reflecting on, organizing, counseling, and comforting those in desperate need of support.

PART III: SOBER HOPE

I would like to conclude with a few general remarks about Bernstein's work on evil and violence and how it relates to a Bernsteinian ēthos that has played such an important role in my own philosophical education and thinking. I noted earlier the strand of optimism running through these books, in spite of their commitments to paradigmatically dark subject matter. It is an optimism that goes hand in hand with an incredible generosity of spirit that I know well from seminars with Bernstein at The New School, when he would turn his full attention to a particular text in order to understand what it had to say, to read it in its strongest and most persuasive register. One sees him doing the same thing with the thinkers he examines in *Violence*: Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Frantz Fanon, and Jan Assmann. In the preface to *Men in Dark Times*, Hannah Arendt wrote, "this collection of essays . . . is primarily concerned with persons—how they lived their lives, how they moved in the world, and how they were affected by historical time" (MDT, vii). Bernstein writes with a similar attention to the person and the personal. He allows thinkers the breadth to voice themselves without rushing toward critique, never building them up just to knock them down. Like Arendt and Gadamer before him, Bernstein practices a deeply historically aware kind of philosophy and never engages in cherry-picking concepts or erecting straw men. The texts he considers, even those most worked-over, are given sincere devotion and fresh light.

Bernstein has trained generations of young philosophers in this generous, hopeful, and politically engaged style of philosophizing. He has asked us to find the truth, however obscure or buried, in the texts we have examined, and he has implored us to connect those truths with the difficult realities we are in the process of living. In the process, he has been living proof that philosophy is more than a game of wits. It is, instead, a never-ending training in thinking together so that we might be together more thoughtfully.

It is one thing to believe in ever-open possibilities for change and quite another to adopt a Panglossian view that "all is for the best." The first is genuine optimism, while the second is naïve, blind, or simply cruel. Certainly everything is not for the best. Bernstein's latest works invite us to reflect upon some of the most horrific and worst aspects of recent history and of

being human. Yet, he turns us back to ourselves and our failures with a sense of what we can learn and how we can go on with greater sensitivity to one another. His philosophical seriousness is matched with a pervading sense of love of life. Unlike philosophers who rely on irony or who aim to shock their readers into attention, Bernstein employs a less flashy style, preferring dialogue to decree, description to prescription. His never-failing commitments to plurality and fallibility remind us of the strongest assets of American pragmatism and the degree to which it can continue to respond to the crises of modernity without retreating into the false safe haven of absolutes.

Ultimately, Bernstein's thinking about violence is emblematic of his ongoing efforts to make philosophy resonate with life, reminding his students, colleagues, and readers of their infinite responsibilities to one another and to the wider world. In this, as in other ways, Bernstein stands a model of public philosophy and an exemplar of Gadamer's claim at the opening of *Truth and Method*: "What man needs is not just the posing of ultimate questions, but the sense of what is possible, what is correct, here and now. The philosopher, of all people, must, I think, be aware of the tension between what he claims to achieve and the reality in which he find himself" (TM, xxxv).

NOTES

1. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* Trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 242. Hereafter cited as TM.
2. Richard J. Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), pp. 120–21. Hereafter cited as AE.
3. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), 38.
4. Richard J. Bernstein, *Violence: Thinking without Banisters* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. viii. Hereafter cited as V.
5. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1994), p. xxxvi. Hereafter cited as OT.
6. In his essay "Arendt on thinking," Bernstein writes: "thinking is a pervasive theme of [Arendt's] entire corpus." One could argue the same thing about Bernstein's own work. Richard Bernstein, "Arendt on Thinking" in *The Cambridge Companion to Arendt*, Ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 277.
7. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 71. Hereafter cited as HC.
8. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1983), p. ix. Hereafter cited as MDT.
9. Arendt wrote about thinking while Levinas wrote about the touchstones of ongoing sense found in the fragility and ambiguity of another person's face.
10. Rather than interpret Fanon's text as a call to violence, Bernstein emphasizes Fanon's "critique of violence," insisting that "far from glorifying violence, Fanon

argues that violence must be enlightened, controlled, and directed to achieve liberation" (V, 112). Later he adds, "Because spontaneous violence is self-defeating, Fanon underscores the need to channel, direct, even *restrain* this spontaneous violence. . . . Fanon insists that the aim of liberation is to *destroy the cycle of violence and counter-violence*" (V 124).

11. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 309.

12. W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, Trans. Anthea Bell (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2004).

13. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, Trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 62.

14. See, for example, *Cyberbullying: Bullying in the Digital Age*, by Robin M. Kowalski, Susan P. Limber, and Patricia W. Agatston (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

15. "Girl's Suicide Points to Rise in Apps Used by Cyberbullies," *The New York Times*, September 13, 2013.

16. Bernstein writes, "There is a protean quality about violence; it can take ever new forms. We cannot anticipate the ways in which violence will manifest itself in the course of history. Like Proteus, violence disguises and conceals itself. One of our most constant and difficult challenges is to become aware of new forms of violence, to understand their structure and dynamics, and to bring them to public self-consciousness" (V, 177).

17. Bernstein insists, "Power is *essentially* nonviolent. It relies on opinion and requires persuasion and debate among human beings. Power to Arendt is not *power over*; it is *empowerment* that comes into existence when human beings act together." (V, 166).

18. Contrary to popular opinion, Obama did not mention a "red line" in his 2013 State of the Union Address. In the August press conference he did use the phrase, saying:

"I have, at this point, not ordered military engagement in the situation [in Syria]. But the point that you made about chemical and biological weapons is critical. That's an issue that doesn't just concern Syria; it concerns our close allies in the region, including Israel. It concerns us. We cannot have a situation where chemical or biological weapons are falling into the hands of the wrong people.

We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation."

19. In a July 9, 2014, Op-ed in the *New York Times*, Michael Cohen noted: "Nine months ago, President Obama eschewed military means to punish Syria for its use of chemical weapons and instead negotiated an agreement to remove them. Critics like Senator John McCain blasted it as a 'loser' deal that would never work. By refusing to back up a stated 'red line' with military force, Mr. Obama had supposedly weakened American credibility." He continued: "at the outset of practically every international crisis, to bomb or not to bomb becomes the entire focus of debate. That false choice disregards the many other tools at America's disposal. It doesn't mean that force

should never be considered, but that it should be the option of last resort. Force is a blunt instrument that produces unpredictable outcomes (for evidence, look no further than Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya). "Obama's Understated Foreign Policy Gains," *New York Times*, July 9, 2014.

20. The discussion of the exception centers largely around Benjamin's essay, "Critique of Violence," in the last chapter of Bernstein's book where he examines the concepts of "mystical and divine violence." Arguing that Benjamin's essay raises more questions than it answers, Bernstein writes, "even if one grants that there is no universal rule or law to decide what counts as an 'exceptional circumstance,' what kinds of considerations are relevant for deciding that we are confronting an exceptional case that justifies violent killing? Even if it is granted that one must struggle with this decision in 'solitude,' how is this to be done?" (V, 164).

21. This essay was completed before the mass flight of Syrian refugees into Europe and across the globe came into full focus in the summer of 2015 together with the expanding reach of ISIS and its global terrorist attacks. Given additional space and time, I would consider these developments in light of digital media (the twitter accounts, chat rooms and other platforms ISIS employs to recruit disaffected individuals to its cause) and the lethal combination of fear and xenophobia characteristic of so many countries' responses to refugees, particularly Britain's vote to exit the European Union in June of 2016.

22. As we have seen repeatedly in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, drones and human errors in operating them are responsible for an untold number of civilian causalities, including the airstrike that decimated a Doctors Without Borders medical facility in Afghanistan on October 3, 2015, killing 42.

23. See Megan Craig, *Levinas and James: Toward a Pragmatic Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

24. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes, "The dimension of the divine opens forth from a human face. . . . The proximity of the Other, the proximity of the neighbor, is in being an ineluctable moment of the revelation of an absolute presence." Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), p. 78.