A REPLY TO JUAN CARLOS MOUGÁN
AND NÚRIA SARA MIRAS BORONAT

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Both Juan Carlos Mougán and Núria Sara Miras Boronat deal with my understanding of pluralism—especially what I have called “engaged fallibilistic pluralism.” They underscore how central this has been to my conception of creative democracy. Juan Carlos has done a remarkable job in tracing the development of pluralism in a variety of my works. Reading his article led to self-discovery because I was reminded of the way I dealt with pluralism in my 1985 article “The Varieties of Pluralism.” Núria approaches the topic from the perspective of Wittgenstein and Gadamer.

I have been thinking a great deal about pluralism recently but in a different context from the ones that I have dealt with in the past. In recent years I have participated in a fascinating conference that takes place every spring: The Istanbul Seminars sponsored by the organization, Reset. These seminars are held in Istanbul because it is a crossroad for East and West. The seminars provide a rare occasion for scholars and participants from so-called “Western” and “non-Western” countries to come together to discuss some of the most difficult philosophical, political and ethical issues of our time. These seminars are dedicated to the “problems of men” (today we would say the “problems of human beings”) and not just the “problems of philosophers.” The theme this year was pluralism, but pluralism in regard to different religious, ethnic and historical traditions—including the problems in Turkey, India, and a variety of Muslim countries. I was impressed to discover how scholars looking into their own traditions and cultures discovered sources for pluralism and tolerance. I was also impressed how young people from all over the world representing many different religious and ethnic backgrounds yearn for greater concrete pluralism in their own societies. But at the same time I was also depressed to discover how little real practices of pluralism actually exist in many parts of the world; and how much exclusionary dogmatism and fanaticism shapes everyday life. I have been shaped by the pragmatic tradition where the theory—and even more important—the practice of pluralism, of engaged fallibilistic pluralism has been so central. The very expression “cultural pluralism” was coined by Horace Kallen, a student of William James and a close associate of John Dewey. (Kallen was one of the first philosophy teachers at my own institution The New School for Social Research.) I have always believed that engaged pluralism is vital for creative democratic way of life where—to use Dewey’s phrase—“all share and all participate.” I am extremely distressed how today in my own country, the United States, there is
increasing political polarization and barely any responsible public dialogue of the pressing issues of our time. When “dialogue” turns into image making and manipulation, then—as both Dewey and Arendt warn us—there is an “eclipse of the public.” Democracy begins to rot. I also find it distressing that philosophers in the Anglo-American tradition and the Continental tradition barely talk with each other—and are for the most part ignorant of each other’s work. I have never been sentimental or Pollyannaish. I don’t think we should all hold hands together. I strongly believe in the agonistic spirit in philosophy and intellectual life. There are and (I hope) there always will be a plurality of perspectives, orientations, and tradition. But we can aspire to learn from others. And this takes careful listening and hard work. We come to know ourselves as individuals and as members of different communities when we seriously encounter what is genuinely different and other than us (without suppressing the otherness of the other). And I have always believed that pluralism is compatible with a passionate commitment to what one holds dear and valuable. So for me the three words “engaged”, “fallibilistic”, and “pluralism” all have equal weight and importance. To be engaged means to listen, to struggle to understand what is different and other, to be willing to participate in critical examination of oneself and others, and to strongly advocate what one believes. To be fallibilistic is to acknowledge that everything that one believes is and should be open to criticism. Fallibilism is neither epistemological skepticism nor a disguised form of “bad” relativism. Fallibilism is not exclusively an “epistemological” position; it consists of a number of virtues—the ability to listen, to have the hermeneutic generosity to do justice to what is alien and different; and the courage and willingness to change one’s views (and even) one’s life in light of what may be learned through engagement. I do believe—like William James—that we live in pluriverse—that “what really exists is not things made but things in the making.” And like Gadamer—especially when thinking about communities in which an engaged fallibilistic pluralism can flourish—I am happy to quote Hölderlin: “Seit ein Gesprach wir sind...”

I would like to make two further comments about Juan Carlos’s article. I understand what Sartori calls “multiculturalism” and why he is critical of it. As Juan Carlos points out, it corresponds to what (following Popper) I have called “the myth of the framework” where each culture is treated as a self-enclosed monad. But this is the wrong way to think about multiculturalism; it tends to be a caricature. And unfortunately this caricature is used by those who want to exclude immigrants and minorities from their societies—who want to eliminate cultural pluralism. Juan Carlos criticizes me for “failing to give a more precise definition of the social, political and institutional conditions that would allow the development of the true meaning of pragmatic pluralism.” I think Juan Carlos is right, but if we are serious about furthering cultural pragmatic pluralism, then this demands we concern