

## Educating the Rational Emotions

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EDUCATING THE RATIONAL EMOTIONS: AN AFFECTIVE  
RESPONSE TO EXTREMISM

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**ABSTRACT.** Educating against extremism doesn't just involve seeking to prevent individuals from becoming extremists or radicalized, although that, of course, is a significant concern. There is also an important role for education in teaching the rest of us, the general populace, the best way to react and respond when we learn of a terrorist attack or consider the potential risk of violent extremism in our community, or even worldwide, given we are connected globally via technology. In this article, Laura D'Olimpio argues that educators have a central role to play in teaching young people to respond to the news of violent extremism and the worry about terrorists and terrorism in ways that support our sense of community and personal well-being. Among the ways in which educators may support such aims is by educating the emotions. There are practical and moral reasons to temper our fearful reactions, and it is in our best interest to educate pupils to avoid allowing fear of terrorists or violent extremism to interfere with their daily lives and actions. D'Olimpio claims that our best response to extremism, both representationally and practically, is to refuse to be terrified. By not being overwhelmed by fear or altering our day-to-day activities, we not only better support a well-functioning democracy and our own happiness or flourishing, but we also disempower rather than empower extremists.

**KEY WORDS.** extremism; emotional education; affective education; resilience; social media

## INTRODUCTION

Many of the excellent papers in this symposium attend to the important topic of the role for education and educators in helping to prevent radicalization and extremism. It may be a minority of students who are at risk of being groomed and radicalized, and fewer still who may become violent extremists or terrorists, but it is a worthy task to try and prevent such a fate — not only for the sake of these individuals themselves but also to avoid the potential consequences of the actions of such individuals. Another reason why this topic is timely and worthy of the attention of philosophers of education and political theorists is that it raises the larger question of what kind of society we want to live in. We do not want to live in a society in which we feel terrified or at risk of harm and injury. In responding to this question, we may now consider another perspective — that of the majority: how should we respond when acts of violent extremism or terrorism confront us in various ways?

Educating against extremism does not just involve seeking to prevent individuals from becoming extremists or radicalized, although that, of course, is a significant concern. There is also the important role for education in teaching the rest of us, the general populace, the best way to react and respond when we learn of a terrorist attack or consider the potential risk of violent extremism in our community, or even worldwide, since we are connected globally via technology. Given we live in a world in which there exist acts of terror and violence, how frightened should we be? How do we educate our children to live with the threat of extremist violence and to accurately assess its risk level and the appropriate

responses — behavioral, emotional, and psychological — they ought to have? These are the questions I seek to address in this paper.

I will first consider the rationality of fear and under what conditions fear is a reasonable response to acts of violent extremism (i.e., when hearing about such events or knowing they are possible). In doing so, I draw upon Patricia Greenspan's distinction between representational and practical rationality to argue that our best response, both representationally and practically, is to avoid allowing fear to interfere with our daily lives and actions. In this sense, the educational question arises as to how we might support young people to learn not to be overly anxious about extremism and to learn to manage their emotional responses when learning about such events by thinking through the facts of the scenarios in question and putting them into perspective using logical analysis. Indeed, these techniques are likely to prove beneficial more generally, particularly when we consider the mental health, well-being, and levels of anxiety in our student body.

As educators, we should teach our students that among the best responses we can have to violent extremism and terrorism is to be aware and alert to the risk but not to let this interfere with our day-to-day lives and happiness. This includes refusing to be terrorized, not ceasing usual activities, and not allowing worry about terrorists to preoccupy our thinking. Other important responses include not falling victim to stereotypes and implicit biases that result in discrimination and racism. Acting in compassionate, inclusive ways may foster feelings of trust, respect, and community rather than leading to disintegrated silos of "us" versus "them," which further exacerbate the isolation felt by certain individuals and may lead them to seek a sense of belonging elsewhere (for instance, as members of an extremist faction or group).<sup>1</sup> Still further actions that may help rather than hinder the fight against extremism involve what we might call "slacktivism" or armchair activism, which includes what we choose to like or share and how we react to such events online, using social media. By not providing negative attention to extremist factions or vulnerable individuals, which may be in part what they are seeking to provoke, we can educate people to respond in ways that disempower extremists and instead empower the communities in which we live.

### THE REASONABLENESS OF FEAR

One of the best responses we can have to the acts of violent extremists and terrorists who seek to terrify the innocent in order to achieve some other aim or

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1. Indeed, this is one of the factors explored in relation to the whole-school approach defended by Dianne Gereluk in "A Whole-School Approach to Address Youth Radicalization," and a reason Doret de Ruyter and Stijn Sieckelinck give in defense of a democratic school ethos in "Creating Caring and Just Democratic Schools to Prevent Extremism," both in this issue.

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goal is to refuse to be terrified. Terrorism is the use of violence or the threat of violence against innocent individuals to incite fear or anxiety among the wider citizenry or to coerce a particular response or action from another person or group of people. Because instances of violent extremism are usually unpredictable, occur in public spaces, and attack “ordinary” people doing everyday things, they are anxiety-inducing in the sense of “that could have been me or someone I care about.” But Daniel Baldino notes that feeling fearful helps the terrorist and fails to help us and the community of which we are a part. This is true of the individual as well as at the level of government, policing, and policy.

For example, in relation to the very real threats posed by ISIS and those claiming allegiance with the Islamic State, Baldino writes:

The lesson is not to dismiss the IS [Islamic State] threat but to respond in a proportionate, carefully calibrated fashion, to avoid hyping terror risks and to invest in smart counter-radical campaigns. The building of public resilience — the ability of society to restore calm and for citizens to adapt rationally to random events and unexpected changes (from terror strikes to shark attacks) — remains indispensable.... The more immediate hazard is pointless overreaction and political exploitation of public fears. The build-up of these kind of tensions have had a track-record of leading into knee-jerk and totally counter-productive policy initiatives — like the unnecessary Iraq invasion of 2003.<sup>2</sup>

Building public resilience is vital, even when we know that random, violent acts may occur, and that terrorist acts do occasionally take place in the world. But how easy is it to not be scared in the face of the fearsome? If fear is completely irrational, then we do not have much chance of controlling it or our responses to it, let alone educating young people to do so. Fortunately, much contemporary psychological and philosophical research on the topic sees fear, like other emotions, as having a rational or cognitive component that may be deliberated upon and evaluated, by the agent as well as by others.<sup>3</sup>

There are different kinds of fear (anxiety, anguish, worry, phobia, etc.), but they are all related to something that is deemed to be fearsome.<sup>4</sup> Certainly fear plays a vital role in helping to keep human beings alive by alerting us to dangers and helping us to avoid dangerous behavior. We generally do not walk off cliffs because we are scared to do so and this is a good thing! Martha Nussbaum notes that fear felt for others may also cause us to pause and help them when they are in

2. Daniel Baldino, “First Rule of Fighting Terrorists: Don’t Do Their Job for Them,” in *A Year in the Life of Australia 2014*, ed. The Conversation (Albert Park, Victoria: Future Leaders, 2014), 32.

3. See Andrea Scarantino and Ronald de Sousa, “Emotion,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/emotion/>; Amelie Oxsenberg Rorty, *Explaining Emotions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (London: Vintage, 1994/2006); and Peter Goldie, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009).

4. Christine Tappolet, “Emotion, Motivation, and Action: The Case of Fear,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion*, ed. Peter Goldie (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009).

need.<sup>5</sup> Christine Tappolet, citing Hume, agrees: “As Hume notes, fear for others motivates us to help those for whom we feel fear.”<sup>6</sup> In most instances, this means that there is a judgment made about whether or not something is fearsome, but as Tappolet points out, we can feel fear toward something we do not judge as fearsome,<sup>7</sup> such as when we are “scared” of insects or a fictional monster in a movie even though we know they cannot hurt us. What is worth noting is that we do evaluate our fearful responses — we criticize them when they are not warranted, such as when we are scared of something “silly.” Hence, the emotion of fear, like other emotions, contains a representational element in which we and others judge whether the feeling appropriately fits the circumstance or object in relation to which it is experienced.

Thus, there is a cognitive or rational component to the emotion of fear such that we may reflect upon it. Tappolet explains that:

emotions involve a representational content in the minimal sense that they have correctness conditions. So, they can be assessed in terms of their fittingness. For example, fear would consist in the perception of its object as fearsome. Such a perception represents its object correctly when this object is really fearsome.<sup>8</sup>

In this way, emotions, including fear, sometimes have a role to play in guiding appropriate (as well as inappropriate) responses to others and situations in which we find ourselves or on which we reflect, even if this reflection occurs in an imaginative capacity. For instance, we may feel fear when watching a horror film despite being aware that it is fictional and that we are perfectly safe. Upon realizing we are safe in the movie theater, we do not run screaming from the Blob or the Terminator. Or, conversely, we may realize that the snake on the path in front of us is poisonous and so we turn around and walk quickly in the opposite direction. When we think about fear as an emotion, we can think about the elements involved as (a) a sensory perception (from which we glean information), (b) appraisal (of that information), (c) physiological changes, (d) conscious feelings, (e) cognitive and attentive processes, and (f) an action tendency or motivational component.<sup>9</sup> Understanding emotions such as fear in this way and recognizing the various elements to an episode of feeling fearful help us to recognize that emotions are not always unreasonable; rather, they “are both necessary to the proper functioning of theoretical and practical rationality, and essential to moral

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5. Martha Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 20.

6. Tappolet, “Emotion, Motivation, and Action,” 14.

7. *Ibid.*, 3.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 1–2.

action."<sup>10</sup> Our emotions are informative, in such a way as to lead Robert Roberts to argue they contain propositional content.<sup>11</sup>

Fear tells us when we are frightened of something, and we may reflect as to whether we really ought to be afraid of *X* (a particular person, object, or potential event). Even if we or others judge *X*, which elicited in us a feeling of fear or fright, to *not* be fearsome, feeling fear nevertheless involves a desire to avoid something. And just as we may evaluate the object or circumstance to which we experience this reaction, we may also consider and judge our response, even when the emotion of fear produces a physiological response (such as sweaty hands or increased heart rate) or motivates a certain action (such as running away, for instance). Tappolet favors the desire model of fear, which explains fear as connected to something we wish to avoid. She explains:

The desire model of fear stipulates that: (a) given its physiological underpinnings, fear facilitates but does not necessitate certain types of actions; (b) fear involves a desire that sets a goal, such as the avoidance of a specific harm or loss, and if it results in action, it does so only on the basis of the agent's deliberation.<sup>12</sup>

Here again we see that there is a cognitive element to the emotion of fear that allows us to consider whether or how we should act on that feeling, even after having decided whether or not the feeling itself is warranted and to what extent. This, as Tappolet points out, offers an explanatory model for the multiple ways in which human beings experience fear and the various ways in which we might respond to such feelings:

Now, this certainly seems to be a quite plausible conception of the motivational impact of human fear. It allows for the huge variety of actions that we perform when we experience fear by finding a place for emotion in rational deliberation. But given its stress on the physiological underpinnings of fear, it also makes room for the a-rational influence of this emotion.<sup>13</sup>

Nussbaum also highlights both the rational and a-rational or irrational manifestations of fear. Fear is at once both primitive as well as socialized; "made part of culture or rhetoric."<sup>14</sup> In this way it is able to be manipulated by, for instance, politicians and the media, according to certain narratives and stereotypes. And this is why it is, according to Nussbaum, dangerous and "narcissistic." She concludes, "Fear is a 'dimming preoccupation': an intense focus on the self that casts others into darkness. However valuable and indeed essential it is in a genuinely dangerous world, it is itself one of life's great dangers."<sup>15</sup>

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10. *Ibid.*, 2.

11. Robert C. Roberts, "Emotions and the Canons of Evaluation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion*, ed. Goldie.

12. Tappolet, "Emotion, Motivation, and Action," 9.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance*, 55, 56.

15. *Ibid.*, 58.

So, in terms of feeling fear at the thought of, threat of, or hearing about an act of violent extremism or terrorism, we may or may not rightly feel a degree of fear and may or may not respond in various ways, physically, psychologically, and behaviorally. This feeling of fear may be felt in relation to ourselves or to those we care about or for whom we are responsible. What is important to note, and especially relevant to our purposes in this paper, is that even where fear induces a physiological response or motivates certain actions, there is a cognitive, deliberative aspect whereby the agent may judge and evaluate what it is one is experiencing fear toward, whether it is truly fearsome, and what one should do in response. If this is so, then there is room for an education of the emotions, particularly of fear, in response to situations and events that may be felt to be anxiety-inducing, scary, or fearsome.<sup>16</sup> This includes educating the emotional response of fear in relation to hearing about the actions of violent extremists or thinking about the threat posed by terrorists.

#### EDUCATING THE EMOTIONS

As children and young people grow up and learn how to get along with others, one central component of such maturation is learning how to manage and appropriately act on one's emotions. An important aspect to this is learning where and when certain kinds of emotional responses are warranted and what kinds of actions are permitted as a result. Educators are one set of role models central to helping guide and discipline such emotional education, which may be seen as constitutive of moral education or character education.

If we are aiming at rational emotional education, we should attend to the representational and practical rationality of emotions. We may consider whether our emotional response best *represents* the situation in terms of being appropriately fitting, and we may then consider, despite how appropriate the response is, whether that response is *practical* or useful.<sup>17</sup> While it makes sense to be fearful of unprovoked violence, and on the desire model this means wishing to avoid being unexpectedly and undeservedly harmed, it does not make sense to live one's life in constant fear of this occurring. While being caught in a terrorist attack is genuinely fearful, the percentage of people who are harmed or killed in a terrorist attack is low.<sup>18</sup> In much the same way that we do not fear being hit by a car whenever we walk around the city, despite not being oblivious to the danger a car may present,

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16. I acknowledge that for some people in some situations, emotional education may be more difficult, particularly if they have been traumatized and find such a process triggering. For these people, additional support and therapy may well be required.

17. Patricia Greenspan, *Emotions and Reasons: An Inquiry into Emotional Justification* (London: Routledge, 1988); and Michael Hand, *Patriotism in Schools* (IMPACT 19) (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

18. Daniel Baldino, ed., *Spooked: The Truth about Intelligence in Australia* (Sydney: NewSouth, University of New South Wales Press, 2013), 9; see also Christopher Michaelsen, "'Islamofacism' — The Shape of Future Conflict?," in *Spooked*, ed. Baldino, 34.

we do not avoid the city as a result. And, in fact, our chance of being hurt or killed in a car crash is far higher than the threat posed by terrorists.

As educators we may teach our students to evaluate the risk of harm and put this into perspective. Most of us do not avoid swimming in the ocean just because sometimes sharks attack people. But neither do we knowingly dive into shark-infested water. We may reasonably judge the appropriate level of danger in relation to worries about violent extremism much as we do with any risk associated with swimming or traffic. The evaluation of the fear in question ought to accurately reflect the level of risk posed by that which is fearsome. As Michael Hand notes:

[R]ational emotional education ... consists in offering pupils good reasons for moderating or changing their emotional responses, helping them to see why the reasons are good, and equipping them with techniques for bringing about such changes as they choose to make on the basis of those reasons. This assumes not only that emotions are malleable, but that they are susceptible to rational evaluation.<sup>19</sup>

I have already argued that the emotions, including fear, contain a representational or cognitive element that one can reflect upon and evaluate. In this sense, even fearful responses are susceptible to rational education.

Such emotional learning, Patricia Greenspan concurs, is best commenced from a young age and is a form of practical reasoning.<sup>20</sup> Drawing inspiration from Aristotle, we may claim that a good approach to guide our responses is that of the golden mean: not too little (deficiency is a vice), not too much (excess is also a vice), but *just the right amount* (applied in the right way, the moderate response is a virtue).<sup>21</sup> When we educate the emotions in this way we can think about whether we are responding in an appropriate manner, when it may be too much or too little, and how well that response will serve us and others. As Greenspan identifies, this emotional learning has both practical and moral implications:

In prudential reasoning, they bring the future to bear on the present standpoint — reflecting envisioned consequences of action in more or less immediate emotional comfort or discomfort. In relation to ethics, they reflect the social in the individual standpoint, bringing home to an agent the consequences of her action for others.<sup>22</sup>

Returning to Baldino's advice, that we ought to refuse to be terrified by the actions of terrorists — this is not a flippant suggestion. There are both practical and moral reasons to modify our fearful reactions to hearing about the actions of violent extremists and this, I argue, meets both the representational and the practical criteria for the rationality of emotions. It is in our best interest to educate people

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19. Hand, *Patriotism in Schools*, 16.

20. Patricia Greenspan, "Learning Emotions and Ethics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion*, ed. Goldie, 15.

21. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (London: Longmans Green, 1987).

22. Greenspan, "Learning Emotions and Ethics," 15.

to avoid allowing fear of terrorists or the actions of violent extremists to interfere with our daily lives and actions. This is because, first, while genuinely fearsome, the likelihood of ourselves or someone we care about being harmed by an act of violent extremism is, generally speaking, very small; and, second, even while there is a risk of this occurring, it is better for our own well-being not to let the fear of this harm interfere with or interrupt our daily lives. Furthermore, by not allowing such fear to significantly alter our behavior, attitudes, and actions, we are diminishing the power the terrorists exert and the extent to which their aims may be satisfied.

Let us begin by considering the first point: the representational aspect of rational emotions in relation to violent extremism. While fear is an appropriate response to actually being caught up in a terrorist attack, the probability or chance of this happening is slight. In comparison to the actual risk level, general levels of fear and anxiety about terrorist attacks seem higher than warranted, particularly when compared with general levels of anxiety over things like diseases or accidents that cause far more deaths. As Baldino points out, the percentage of people who are harmed or killed in a terrorist attack is very small:

Open, democratic societies will always remain vulnerable to threats like asymmetric terrorism. The need for smart and cool-headed defense planning is obvious. But to what extent do modern-day citizens, politicians and the media play the role of Chicken Little? For instance, while the word "terrorism" triggers a range of strong emotional reactions, and despite the horrors of 9/11, a lot more people will die annually from traffic accidents and lung disease than of terrorism.<sup>23</sup>

As educators we may teach our students how to evaluate the risk of harm and to put this, like other risks, into perspective. As we have already noted, we generally do not avoid swimming in the ocean despite the chance we could be stung by a jellyfish nor do we avoid flying even though planes occasionally crash. For Greenspan and Hand, fear is representationally rational when its object is genuinely fearsome.<sup>24</sup> But I claim that this alone is insufficient to our considerations here. While terrorist attacks *are* genuinely fearsome, they are also unlikely. I am therefore proposing that fear is representationally rational when its object is both genuinely fearsome *and* likely to occur. Given how unlikely terrorist attacks are, we ought to modify our fearful responses accordingly. This may be difficult if the messages we are receiving (i.e., via the media or from persons in positions of authority) serve to reinforce and exaggerate those anxieties. I will say more about this later.

While terrorist attacks do threaten the safety of both individuals and property, there are many more conventional forms of violence that cause much more harm. The attack of 9/11 remains — to this day — an extreme and unusual event in that

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23. Baldino, *Spooked*, 9.

24. See Greenspan, *Emotions and Reasons*; and Hand, *Patriotism in Schools*.

it is the *only* occasion on which more than a few hundred people were killed in a terrorist attack by a non-state actor.<sup>25</sup> As Michaelsen documents:

It is important to recognise, then, that conventional forms of violence such as traditional and civil wars have almost always been more deadly ... The objective significance of terrorism as a threat to safety and individual physical integrity further diminishes when one compares terrorism-related fatalities to fatalities totally unrelated to political or armed violence. In the United States, for example, terrorism poses a far less statistical threat to life than most other activities. In 2001, three times as many people in the United States died of malnutrition, and almost 40 times as many people died in car accidents during the same year, not to mention the significant number of people who die in the United State every year from gun-related violence. Even with the 9/11 attacks included in the count, the number of Americans killed by international terrorism since the late 1960s is about the same as the number killed over the same period by severe allergic reaction to peanuts, lightning, or accident-causing deer.<sup>26</sup>

Based on these statistics, to be more fearful of terrorists than driving in a car is unreasonable in that the worry felt exaggerates the potential risk under consideration. By applying the criteria of the representational aspect of rational emotions, using logical analysis, we can see that a high level of fear and anxiety pertaining to the relatively low risk of being caught up in a terrorist attack is unwarranted because it does not accurately fit the cause for concern. This is not to say that being caught up in a terrorist attack is not fearsome, because of course it is, but it is unlikely to occur. Furthermore, as I have argued, there are many more potentially harmful events that are much more likely to occur about which most people feel no anxiety at all — Michaelsen points out that the number of people who die each year from the flu (3.9 million) far outweighs the number of people killed, globally, each year by terrorist attacks (approximately 200–300).<sup>27</sup>

The second point has to do with the practical rationality of emotions in relation to violent extremism. Even if the threat is real, it is not useful or prudent to interrupt our daily behaviors and attitudes in response to the worry about violent extremism. For instance, suppose we decide to stop visiting city centers because we recognize that terrorist attacks often take place in populated, international city centers. This is both hugely inconvenient to ourselves and others, but also sees the terror tactics gaining traction because they have effectively changed the behavior and attitudes of everyday folk.

The practical response to the threat of violent extremism, therefore, is to be aware and not naïve when it comes to one's behavior and to act accordingly by not deliberately placing oneself or others in harm's way, but not being on permanent "high alert" and viewing all situations and people as suspicious and potential threats. The damage done to society by constantly looking for the threat, particularly if this involves profiling and applying damaging stereotypes

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25. Michaelsen, "Islamofacism," 33.

26. *Ibid.*, 33–34.

27. *Ibid.*, 34.

to particular groups of people, far outweighs any risk of being caught up or harmed in an actual terrorist attack. As Baldino argues:

[W]e need to talk more candidly about resilience and recovery — how societies will, or should, maintain social normality and a lucid rationale in response to whatever fallout might be the consequence of contemporary security challenges. Compounding such complexities, the world of terrorism, security and counter-intelligence tests ethical boundaries, can fall prey to mistrusts and exaggeration and does generate widespread rumour, scepticism and paranoia.<sup>28</sup>

Nussbaum concurs, arguing for a system (of security, say) that proceeds by looking out for well-being rather than acting on “crude stereotypes.”<sup>29</sup> So, for instance, authorities ought to safely and efficiently scan everyone at airports (if this will likely detect and prevent terror attacks) rather than selecting Muslims for screening, so that “the public does not get used to seeing all Muslims as suspected terrorists, and does not move from the availability of 9/11 as a paradigm crime to the false conclusion that a large proportion of Muslims are criminals.”<sup>30</sup> This example assumes that the screening processes at airports are an effective and warranted part of homeland security rather than forms of “security theater” designed simply to reassure members of the general public.<sup>31</sup> Instead of fear, she concludes, we need curiosity and friendship,<sup>32</sup> which is something we as educators ought to be supporting, modeling, encouraging, and facilitating.

What is most needed after a terrorist attack occurs is reassurance and stability. As Dianne Gereluk claims, “when the general citizenry is at a heightened sense of anxiety and panic caused by terrorist attacks, a call for calm and stability often ensues.”<sup>33</sup> A practical response to the fear of terrorism may be to restore feelings of community. Building a sense of community may be done in ways that integrate different groups or fragment them in the name of citizenship, depending on which “patriotic” or “nationalistic” garb is being worn.<sup>34</sup> Thus, promoting tolerance, respect, and forgiveness is an important and prudent way to rebuild relationships, especially within a multicultural community.

Therefore, as a part of the practical response to fear of others who differ from ourselves, we must work to educate against racism. Gereluk here offers specifically educational applications of this idea, aimed at students coming to understand the

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28. Baldino, *Spooked*, 2.

29. Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance*, 42.

30. *Ibid.*, 42–43.

31. *The Philosopher's Zone*, episode, “The Social Contract in an Age of Terror: Who Can You Trust?,” produced by Diane Deane, *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, October 23, 2016, <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/philosopherszone/the-social-contract-in-an-age-of-terror-who-can-you-trust/7946638>.

32. Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance*, 245.

33. Dianne Gereluk, *Education, Extremism and Terrorism: What Should Be Taught in Citizenship Education and Why* (London: Continuum, 2012), 41.

34. *Ibid.*, 42–45.

perspective of others in an effort to “break down stereotypes and single narrative myths that build resentment and alienation.”<sup>35</sup> One aspect of this work is to consider how we present historical and political events when we teach:

Part of the task, then, is to create curricula that critically consider politically and historically contested milestones more robustly. Curricula that more accurately reflect contested historical and political landscapes may help to mitigate youth radicalization by challenging narrow, monolithic narratives, lessening the potential anger, frustration, and silencing.<sup>36</sup>

The idea here is that people who have different cultures and religious beliefs may not agree but can live together peacefully. This may help prevent youth radicalization if marginalized individuals feel “heard” and experience a sense of belonging rather than alienation, but it also may help diminish a more generalized anxiety if fear of the “other” is based on ignorance — for example, fear of Muslims based on the distortion of an extremist interpretation of Islam being applied to all Muslims. As Michaelsen notes, “contemporary terrorism is commonly associated with so-called Islamist or Jihadi terrorism, although the usage of both terms is controversial.”<sup>37</sup> He cites the Australian federal government’s 2010 Counter-Terrorism White Paper, which identifies Islamist terrorism as the biggest security threat to Australia post-9/11, yet concludes that, despite the political rhetoric and fear, there is little evidence of this threat; in fact, “to this day, not a single person has been killed in a terrorist attack on Australian soil in the post 9/11 era.”<sup>38</sup> It is therefore a practical response to the fear of terrorism to *not fear*, i.e., specifically Muslims, and rather to build communities with civic friendship and avoid relying on hasty, inaccurate stereotypes or profiling that undermines a sense of peace and security.

We need to stay calm and reasonable in the face of the threat of violent extremism — not solely because the threat is actually relatively small, but also because a well-functioning democratic society is most resilient when such threats do not prevent ordinary citizens living their lives and going about their daily routines. As John Kay and Mervyn King note, “there are concrete threats from Islamic terrorists, and unimaginable ones from outer space. But robustness and resilience, not the assignment of arbitrary probabilities to a more or less infinite list of possible contingencies, are the key characteristics of a considered military response to radical uncertainty.”<sup>39</sup> Emotional resilience is a useful response we may seek to cultivate educationally so that young people do not feel overly anxious about potential terrorist attacks, and resilience is also a robust political stance that may be adopted by governments, ideally without marginalizing certain groups on

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35. Ibid., 58.

36. Gereluk, “A Whole-School Approach to Address Youth Radicalization.”

37. Michaelsen, “Islamofacism,” 23.

38. Ibid., 38.

39. John Kay and Mervyn King, *Radical Uncertainty: Decision-Making for an Unknowable Future* (London: The Bridge Street Press, 2020), 296.

the basis of fear-induced, harmful stereotypes. By acting from a sense of trust for others with whom we share our communities,<sup>40</sup> we include rather than exclude people, thereby further disincentivizing those who may be vulnerable and at risk of seeking a sense of belonging elsewhere — by joining a group with an extremist ideology, for example.

The task for educators, then, is multiple. It includes helping children and young people learn to manage their emotions, including feelings of fear, and challenging negative stereotypes by promoting friendship and a feeling of community in which diverse people may trust one another and feel a sense of belonging. There are many different ways in which these things may be done, and yet it is questionable as to whether some of the specific policies designed to curtail the pull and threat of extremism in schools are well suited to such purposes. For example, the UK government's 2015 Counter Terrorism and Security Act contains the "Prevent duty,"<sup>41</sup> which, as the Department for Education advises,<sup>42</sup> holds schools and teachers responsible for protecting pupils from radicalization and extremism.<sup>43</sup> While there is some mention in UK government reports of, for instance, relationship-building and a more holistic approach to educating against extremism,<sup>44</sup> it is noteworthy how this mandatory program mostly focuses on the risk of losing pupils to extremist factions, and not on how to alleviate the anxiety felt by the rest (the majority) upon hearing about the actions of violent extremists or coping with the knowledge that terrorism exists in the world.

#### ONLINE RESPONSES TO EXTREMISM

I have argued that educators have an important role to play in educating the rational emotions such that students learn not to allow fear of terrorism

40. Laura D'Olimpio, "Trust, Well-Being and the Community of Philosophical Inquiry," *He Kupu* 4, no. 2 (2015): 45–57; and Laura D'Olimpio, "Trust as a Virtue in Education," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 50, no. 2 (2016): 193–202.

41. HM Government, *Prevent Strategy* (2011), [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf); and UK Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015, 26.1, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/6/section/26/enacted>.

42. Department for Education, *The Prevent Duty: Departmental Advice for Schools and Child-care Providers* (2015), [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/439598/prevent-duty-departmental-advice-v6.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/439598/prevent-duty-departmental-advice-v6.pdf); and Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), *School Inspection Handbook* (2018), 4, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/730127/School\\_inspection\\_handbook\\_section\\_5\\_270718.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/730127/School_inspection_handbook_section_5_270718.pdf).

43. See David Stevens, "Recasting 'Fundamental 'British' Values': Education, Justice, and Preventing Violent Extremism," in this issue, for an analysis of why the UK's Prevent policy fails, based on the fact that the fundamental British values exclude vital values of socioeconomic justice and fail to recognize the reality of material inequality that is a driver of extremism and radicalization.

44. For instance, see Joe Bonnell, Phil Copestake, David Kerr, Rowena Passy, Chris Reed, Rachel Salter, Shama Sarwar, and Sanah Sheikh, *Research Report DFE-RR119: Teaching Approaches that Help to Build Resilience to Extremism among Young People* (London: Department for Education, 2010), [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/182675/DFE-RR119.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182675/DFE-RR119.pdf).

and anxiety about terrorists to overwhelm them or interfere with their daily lives. I have argued that by putting such fears into perspective, students may realize that not only is the threat of being caught up in such violent extremist acts relatively low, but also that it is not very useful or conducive to our well-being to be constantly on high alert to the dangers of violent extremism and terrorism. This is not to discount the value of being aware and informed about the risk, but we should not let this knowledge interrupt our day-to-day lives or intrude upon our happiness. However, I have also hinted at some of the obstacles that may impede our ability to temper our anxieties and allay our worries about violent extremism in particular, and in this final section I will explore these obstacles in a little more detail, most specifically in relation to the 24-hour news cycle and our use of social media to convey information and images instantaneously.

While I have argued that the rational education of the emotions is vital in relation to fearful responses to extremism, this may not be simple or easy. As educators, we are but one influence among many in society, but nevertheless we do play a central role in children's early lives as they grow and develop and learn how to manage their emotional responses to the world and all that they learn about and experience. One powerful source of information for young people is multimedia and particularly through the use of social media. When encountering stories or news about violent extremists or terrorists, we are all engaging with societal narratives, including those espoused by our families and friends, politicians and the media, including the broadcast news. In terms of learning to manage our anxiety and fear about terrorists and keeping the threat level associated with acts of violent extremism in perspective, there are features of the way in which violent extremism is discussed in society that makes this more difficult.

The political and social narratives told around violent extremism and terrorist actions often exacerbate the problem, lending power to the feelings of fear, helplessness, and racially motivated anger. Baldino claims:

Group-think is a factor in the production of fears that distort our perception. The pull towards an ugly nationalism might be another. So might the direct consequences of political scare-mongering coupled with glib media coverage about the changing nature of security, power and identity. Adding to the mix is the fact that terrorism and intelligence are entrenched in official secrecy.<sup>45</sup>

Nussbaum concurs, noting that governments are very good at using fear to further their political objectives, and the media picks up on these messages and associated symbolism to reinforce unhelpful equivocations. Nussbaum points to United Nations reports that have criticized governments, politicians, and the media for routinely tying together prejudices, stereotypes, and terrorism such that, for instance, the Western media often promotes the view that terrorism is

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45. Baldino, *Spooked*, 5–6.

garbed in the religion of Islam.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, Nussbaum explains how the media cycle serves to reinforce such problematic and misleading social and political narratives:

These media trends are above all cases of the availability heuristic leading us astray: ever since the cataclysm of 9/11, Americans have seen that day as the paradigm of bad world events and have a strong tendency to read other events in the light of that one. Sudden violence is terrorism, and terrorism is Al Qaeda. And of course the reputational cascade is also at work, as reputable media figures spread the view that is then also taken up by many other people, whose views, in turn, eventually cycle back again, affecting media coverage of new events.<sup>47</sup>

Given that the main way we receive notification about acts of violent extremism and terror threats is via the news and media, the way these narratives are conveyed impacts upon how we feel about such events, including how fearful or anxious we may be as a result. In the 24-hour news cycle we now operate within, aided by technology that connects us instantaneously and globally, news headlines are increasingly sensationalized in an effort to gain views, reads, shares, and provoke online engagement.<sup>48</sup> Thus, the reporting of such events is often done in such a way as to generate an emotional reaction that is usually one of fear and worry, particularly when the reporting occurs in “real time,” and we can watch events unfold as they occur.

As Baldino argues, historically we are not living in a time of peak terrorist attacks, even though it might feel that way.<sup>49</sup> So if the hard evidence doesn't bear this out why are we so scared? If there are not actually a higher number of terrorist attacks than there have been historically, and if we are not more at risk, then why are so many people so frightened about terrorism and threats against our personal and national security? One answer to this puzzle is the fact that we consume more news and media than ever before, and we are reading and hearing about negative news stories almost constantly. When it comes to acts of terrorism and violent extremism, the news plays like an action movie, with terrifying images on constant repeat and with streaming headlines, much like it did when the attacks occurred in the United States on September 11, 2001. The fact is that exacerbating the public's fear of such terrible events recurring is often useful politically to those in positions of power. For instance, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison denied telling senior colleagues to exploit concerns about Islam for political gain, insisting he instead sought to confront Islamophobia. In contrast to this defense, Australian journalist Waleed Aly, who interviewed Morrison on *The Project*, referred to a 2011 cabinet meeting that suggested the party use community concerns about Muslims failing to

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46. Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance*, 49.

47. *Ibid.*, 49–50.

48. Laura D'Olimpio, “Critical Perspectivism: Educating for a Moral Response to Media,” *Journal of Moral Education* 50, no. 1 (2021): 92–103.

49. Baldino, *Spooked*.

integrate as a political strategy to gain votes.<sup>50</sup> The Conservative UK party's Brexit campaign also undeniably played up White British voters' discriminatory attitudes and hostility toward and fear of immigrants, including Muslims, to garner support for leaving the European Union.<sup>51</sup> Such politically motivated fear is reinforced by the media and official government messages that are constantly telling us to report anything suspicious we see, which is often accompanied by racial profiling.

There is a vital role for educators in helping students to learn how to respond to such fearful and fear-inducing narratives — especially online. Discussing these narratives in the classroom and analyzing them is one strategy that can support students to critique the representational element of the emotions evoked in response to such stories as well as the news headlines, along with the practical rationality of such emotional responses. One effect of fear is that we may feel uneasy in society and feel as though we are less able to trust others, particularly others who we judge to be different from ourselves. Generalized trust is an important ingredient for social and political life. In the political sphere, generalized trust allows citizens to work collaboratively in social and political groups and in the social sphere, generalized trust supports people working and playing together across national boundaries and accommodates cultural diversity; it fosters acts of tolerance and promotes acceptance of others. A reduction in generalized trust can result in diminishing feelings of well-being.<sup>52</sup> Therefore it is important to address feelings of fear toward others, particularly groups who are judged to be “Other,” from an early age and instead encourage trust and friendship among children and young people.

Engaging with social media in constructive rather than destructive ways is one way to build a sense of community that may counter feelings of fear and distrust. Given how much of their time young people spend online on social media outside of school hours, without scrutiny or support from educators and parents, teaching them to engage both critically and compassionately with social media and news stories is of paramount importance.<sup>53</sup> Social media can raise awareness about important topics and help individuals to feel connected to a global community. Yet it is also true that the use of social media may be used to perpetuate myths, to spread “fake news,” and to reinforce conspiratorial thinking and epistemic

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50. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison full interview with Waleed Aly, *The Project* (Australian television program), March 20, 2019, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mIC2PyBQQAg>; and Henry Belot, “Scott Morrison Tells Waleed Aly He Always Sought to Confront Islamophobia, Not Exploit It,” *Australian Broadcasting Association News*, March 21, 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-03-21/scott-morrison-attacks-waleed-aly-editorial/10927226>.

51. Sally Tomlinson, *Education and Race: From Empire to Brexit* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2019).

52. D'Olimpio, “Trust, Well-being, and the Community of Philosophical Inquiry”; and D'Olimpio, “Trust as a Virtue in Education.”

53. Laura D'Olimpio, *Media and Moral Education: A Philosophy of Critical Engagement* (London: Routledge, 2018); and D'Olimpio, “Critical Perspectivism.”

as well as moral vices such as arrogance, closed-mindedness, prejudice, and an unwillingness to compromise.<sup>54</sup> I claim that it is not the media platform itself that is inherently helpful or unhelpful, good or bad; such judgments may be made according to *how* the media platform is used by individuals in particular instances.

Educators may make good use of examples from social media to explore in the classroom with their students the various responses to events and the actions of others. Pedagogically, they may use a dialogical approach to facilitate the practice of a critically engaged and compassionate attitude (what I call “critical perspectivism”<sup>55</sup>) and encourage students to pause and judge whether fear (or other emotional responses) are appropriate, fitting, or practical in certain contexts. As the risk of widely disseminating misinformation and promoting fear and negative stereotypes can easily occur when people join social media trends hastily, often without adequate awareness of the historical circumstances and complexities of the specific debate at hand, it is vital that we teach young people the importance of fact-checking before passing along any information that has gone viral. For instance, we want people to get into the habit of pausing to reflect and investigate whether a video or image in question is sincere and epistemically reliable rather than a hoax or a trick (today this is exacerbated by AI-generated “deep fakes” that can look extremely realistic). At the same time, we also want them to consider what emotional reactions these images may evoke by passing along something fearsome or anxiety-inducing, or how a news story might play into discriminatory stereotypes or racist assumptions. What we choose to do in response to the stories we hear matters, and examples can be explored in protected educational spaces, such as a classroom with a teacher, with the aim of enhancing students’ skills and habits in critical perspectivism and the application of rational emotional responses.

Here is one such example that may be used as the basis for discussion in a classroom. It is an example of how social media can be used to prompt compassionate responses instead of fearful racist responses to others in the face of fear and tragedy. This example occurs in response to the Sydney Siege of 2014 that occurred at the Lindt Chocolate Café in Martin Place in the city’s center in Australia, a country unused to terrorist events taking place on home soil. Even as news of the terrible event unfolded, the Twitter hashtag #IllRideWithYou went viral, quickly garnering international praise for demonstrating that ordinary, everyday Australians could respond to the threat of terror, violence, and racism with an outpouring of compassion and a recognition of common humanity. As reported in *The Atlantic*:

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54. Quassim Cassam, *Extremism: A Philosophical Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2021); Quassim Cassam, *Vices of the Mind: From the Intellectual to the Political* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); and Michael Hand, “Education, Extremism, and Aversion to Compromise,” in this issue.

55. D’Olimpio, *Media and Moral Education*; and D’Olimpio, “Critical Perspectivism.”

Monday's hostage crisis in Sydney, Australia may be over, but the circumstances surrounding the incident — in which three people, including the gunman, died and four others were injured following a 16-hour standoff — remain murky. Little is known about the motives of Man Monis, the suspect in the episode, or the details of the police operation that ended the crisis.

It was amid this prevailing uncertainty that a backlash against Australian Muslims started online. As reports spread quickly about the hostage situation — including the religious identity and nationality of the gunman, as well as the involvement of a black flag with the words of the shehada, the Muslim affirmation of faith, on it — the primary hashtag for the episode on Twitter, #SydneySiege, came to embody the occasional and predictable ugliness of the Internet. Xenophobic and anti-Muslim tweets went out and the Australian Defence League, an ultra-right-wing group, threatened confrontations in the Muslim-majority Sydney suburb of Lakemba.<sup>56</sup>

In the wake of such racial profiling and the vilification of Australian Muslims wearing traditional headdresses, some Muslim women removed their hijabs in order to be able to travel peacefully on public transport. A passenger on a train in Brisbane reported seeing a Muslim woman removing her hijab, ostensibly out of fear of being the target of negative commentary or actions. This passenger told her to put it back on and offered to walk with her in solidarity. Upon hearing of this story via Facebook, Sydney TV content editor Tessa Kum, (Twitter handle @sirtessa) was moved and posted to Twitter the bus route she usually took along with an offer to ride with any Muslims who wanted company. In an effort to come up with a Twitter hashtag for other users to do the same, #IllRideWithYou was started, gaining momentum and going viral after being used in almost 120,000 tweets within hours. This example of an outpouring of compassion was heartwarming, as it accompanied the broadcast news coverage reporting on the fear and facts of the Martin Place hostage situation as it played out December 15–16, 2014.

By using examples such as this one in the classroom in a pedagogical manner, the education of rational emotions may take place and encourage young people to consider how they might react or respond to a situation even when fear or anxiety is evoked. In the example given above, Tessa Kum and others were able to empathize with Muslim women who may have felt uncomfortable traveling alone and a tangible form of assistance was offered to strangers who needed it. On a larger scale, the people who joined in to support the #IllRideWithYou hashtag were empathizing with Muslims who were being discriminated against. This online response had a corresponding practical benefit that saw ordinary people refuse to give in to terror and refuse to encourage discrimination. In this way the action represented an offering of civic friendship that allowed for inclusivity at a time when fearful responses threatened to see certain others as worthy of exclusion. Recognizing common humanity can motivate an ethical response to a situation and that response may involve a spontaneous outpouring of compassion

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56. Adam Chandler, "The Roots of #IllRideWithYou: How Monday's Hostage Crisis in Sydney Spawned a Social-Media Movement against Anti-Muslim Intolerance," *The Atlantic*, December 15, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/12/illridewithyou-hashtag-sydney-siege-anti-islam-australia/383765/>.

that is guided by a rational, pragmatic approach. The #IllRideWithYou response exemplified a useful, situated, compassionate reaction to others who are different from oneself and yet recognized as one's neighbors and fellow citizens. It is stories such as these that may be used in classrooms to support the rational education of emotions and encourage compassion instead of fear and hatred, along with a critical engagement with narratives encountered via the news and social media.

### CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have explored how we can educate people to respond to the news of violent extremism and the worry about terrorists and terrorism in ways that support our sense of community and personal well-being. By not being overwhelmed by fear or altering our daily routines due to the fear and worry about unpredictable acts of violence, we not only better support a well-functioning democracy and our own happiness or flourishing, but we also disempower rather than empower extremists. Among the ways in which educators can support such aims, I have defended the pivotal role they play in educating the rational emotions. This argument has been made by drawing upon Patricia Greenspan's distinction between representational and practical rationality to claim that our best response, both circumstantially and practically, is to refuse to be terrified. I have further argued that fear is representationally rational when its object is both genuinely fearsome *and* likely to occur. Given how unlikely terrorist attacks are, and acknowledging the benefits of emotional resilience, we ought to modify our fearful responses accordingly.

By putting their fears into perspective, students may realize that the risks of terror-related activities are relatively low and that it is not prudent to alter their behavior or to become overly anxious in relation to the possibilities and actualities of violent extremism and terrorism. I illustrated these arguments with a particular example of media-conveyed content which demonstrates that online engagement with such stories and accompanying narratives that contain politically motivated stereotypes may be constructive or destructive, in the sense that our response to hearing about terrorist events may further perpetuate and promote fear and discrimination, or may instead promote compassion and civility toward fellow citizens. Either response may accompany a condemnation of the actions of violent extremists, but it is the latter which does so even while seeking to maintain harmony within a multicultural society.

Therefore, educating citizens for a rational response to the threat of terrorism and the actions of violent extremists must not only consider the powerful emotions elicited when hearing about such incidents (i.e., fear, disgust, and anger), but must also consider the ways in which such narratives are discussed and disseminated through the media and amplified by politically motivated rhetoric that does not always seek to unite diverse groups of people within society. It is precisely due to the power and impact of social media that we need to educate users to be critically as well as compassionately engaged with it, particularly when it comes to how

we receive and respond to stories about violent extremism. Educating the rational emotions in schools is one component of a multipronged and holistic approach to building resilience and helping to educate against extremism.

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