

“The point is to change it”

Breaking bread with the enemy

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Towards the end of winter 2023, a minor scandal erupted on social media about an event that had taken place in Romania, my country of origin. Someone had filmed a man getting out of his car in a peripheral neighbourhood in Bucharest with two cats in his arms, which he then carefully placed over a low fence of a garden belonging to a block of flats. He then sought to get back into his car, in a rush. The woman who filmed this understood immediately that the man was abandoning the cats. She knew that their fate would likely be grim: they were about to become homeless in bad weather; they would be at risk of attack by stray dogs; and they would also have to scavenge for food, or to be at the mercy of people feeding them erratically. The greatest hazard for stray cats in Bucharest is other stray animals, especially dogs, themselves hungry.

The woman followed the man, continuing to film, and trying to convince him to change his mind, with a mixture of aggressive cajoling and outright shaming and blaming. The man attempted to explain he couldn't do otherwise. The exchange escalated to her calling him names; he fled. As Facebook users learned from this ill-fated dialogue, there was more to the story. The cats had been adopted from the streets as kittens, years before, by the same man. In fact, they were now being returned to the very same garden where he had found them. Not having led a stray life, they weren't streetwise: they didn't know how to chase mice or avoid the dogs that would chase them; they were worse off than their fellow street cats who had never known the protection of a home. It all seemed particularly cruel, and a bit absurd: why rescue cats, house them for years and then callously get rid of them? Many people were outraged, shared the news, and proposed bitter sanctions for the man. One of these people picked up the cats and, I think, eventually re-homed them.

No surprise that the story was made public by animal rights activists and their supporters. I learned about it reading one of their posts on Facebook, alongside plenty of outraged

comments on behalf of the cats. Perhaps I wouldn't have followed it up had I not come across a comment which, like the rest, was condemning the man, and in this case, also stating that his autistic child was no excuse for his actions. I was intrigued and went on to watch the footage myself. In it, the man spoke of the excessive burdens of his parental duties; he had no help outside of the family and was simply not coping. None of the people he asked wanted to take the cats, and there was no room for them in shelters — in short, he had no other solution. I don't remember many commentators willing to cut him any slack for his predicament. I wondered if the story had also been reported in activist circles concerned about the situation of neurodivergent people. I imagined readers coming down fully in the man's defence and expressing rage at those who put animals' fate above that of people.

This little anecdote sounds tamer than it looked on film; where I come from, people don't hold back from showing emotions, at least the unpleasant ones. I felt sympathy with the animal activists' outrage, and then I also felt sympathy for the hypothetical crowd who would probably have been outraged on behalf of the man and the rough treatment that *he* received.

This is the sort of situation that practical philosophers describe in the classroom when we teach ethics — in all its guises, including political philosophy. We try to explain how both the claims of the cats and those of the man matter. But, when something like this actually takes place, it is also the kind of occasion where one wants — where I would have wanted — a philosopher ready to step into a public role. Someone able to articulate the case against abandoning animals, and the case against demanding that people with difficult caring responsibilities push themselves beyond their limits for the sake of their pets. Maybe — I thought — if someone were to give the most persuasive case for both sides, the outpouring of anger could have been pre-empted. With less anger, and more receptiveness to understanding the man's motivations, there would have been less blame. People would have surely understood his reasons. And, who knows, it may have led to better prospects for improving the cats' lot. Not that philosophers have a unique power to throw light on the moral complexity of difficult choices. But, in virtue of our analytical training, and of the oft-repeated desideratum of uncovering and addressing the strongest objections to our views, we should be particularly well placed to do so.

I'm not, of course, suggesting that philosophical analysis could have done any good on the spot. Learning about philosophy in school, and earlier, could have helped: those who teach philosophy to children think that we are most receptive to it before puberty. An

understanding of philosophy in mass media and social media could have helped too. You might find it naive to suggest that philosophy can help those with conflicting interests break bread with each other; or that it can let us see that, often, the issues engaging our passions have no fully good answers, at least not in the short term. But I'm optimistic because I have myself been in those people's shoes. I'm not an animal welfare activist, nor have I struggled to improve the lot of neurodivergent people and their family members — however, I've witnessed many other social issues pitted against other perfectly legitimate concerns.

Because I spent time in activist circles, I know that philosophy can lead us out of our bubble of beliefs and commitments. It has the power to remind us that there are limits to what we should do, and expect of others, for the sake of our most dear ethical causes. It occasionally dispels the self-righteous rage which precluded any dialogue between the man and the woman in my story. While doing this, it also sometimes uncovers the source of the problem: in this case, that state institutions should have, but did not, put aside enough resources to avoid conflicts of existential interests between cats, people with autism, and their parents. Even when philosophy seems helpless in terms of guiding actions, there is something hopeful about it: it casts in a more truthful, better light those who would have otherwise been seen as pure villains. The habit of looking for reasons against one's own views, even against one's moral instincts, makes it impossible to depict as evil a man who cannot look after his child with additional needs and the family pets at the same time. It makes it equally impossible to dismiss animal welfare activists' concerns about vulnerable, cognitively complex animals being at risk of hypothermia, starvation and attack by dogs and other animals.

Russian writer and Soviet dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote: '...the line separating good and evil passes [...] right through every human heart' (Solzhenitsyn, 1973). Engaging with each other in what are, essentially, exchanges that are informed by philosophical candour can move that line, inching towards the good.

My favourite example is not a professional philosopher, but the North American Black jazz musician Daryl Davis, who, over several decades, managed to talk over 200 people out of their membership in the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) (Davis, 1998). He didn't do this by reason alone: he befriended many of these people, often through music and music-related conversations. Yet, the first step was almost always to knock on their doors, introduce himself and ask them about their reasons for being white supremacists. He studied the ideology of the Klan, to understand the racist beliefs that animated its members and meet

them with arguments that went to the core of those beliefs. He did this with the aim of eventually exposing the inconsistency between their racist views and other — better — ethical beliefs these people held.

Davis's accomplishment required him to retain hope that two people committed to radically opposed causes can nevertheless agree on some fundamental principles, and, eventually, on what they should do. He couldn't have succeeded without trust in his interlocutors' desire to justify their ethical commitments to others. That trust was repaid, and so his stories provide some optimism about the prospects of public philosophy, whether or not practised by professional philosophers.

Public philosophy can burst our social bubbles when people practising it assume that those with whom they radically disagree are responsive to reason and might get something right. This might be a controversial view, and, in any case, it invites several objections: that such attitudes are psychologically difficult to sustain, that they are dangerous, that they are perhaps even morally objectionable. There are people — philosophers included — who react with irritation when I tell them about Daryl Davis. Some say that his actions shouldn't be taken as a blueprint for what others can and should do. He is, they think, a privileged person, unlike others in so many ways that it's offensive to suggest that other victims of racial injustice should try and emulate him. Others go further, stating that Davis's willingness to put aside his feelings and talk with KKK members, giving them the benefit of the doubt, is hardly compatible with self-respect. And that engaging in this way is possibly unjust, as it treats the KKK members with undeserved good will. Worse even, it risks empowering them further.

The view of philosophy entailed by these objections is very different to my own. It understands the role of philosophy, when practiced professionally, as providing comprehensive criticism of the wrongful ideologies that pervade contemporary societies, including the mechanisms through which they reproduce, and crafting tools for undoing those ideologies. *Public* philosophy is conceived of as part of the pushback against pernicious ideologies, identifying allies for good causes and ameliorating the world by helping to drive those ideologies into extinction. On this account the line that divides good and evil primarily cuts through the ideological field, pitting harmful and desirable ideologies against each other. The issue of whether and how the line also cuts through the heart of every human being is less important.

One problem with this model is practical: contemporary societies contain multiple, complex and only partly overlapping ideological divides. Therefore, once we broaden the scope of our concern to include all the causes worth fighting for, few alliances can be stable enough to be effective. Worse still is the problem of principle. Many conflicts of interest don't have (politically feasible) solutions which fully satisfy all the legitimate claims. For instance, parents of autistic children cannot always continue to look after domestic animals who need their protection and who may have gotten attached to that family in particular; it's either one kind of suffering for one party, or another kind for the other, or maybe suffering of a lesser magnitude for all involved. And stories like this raise questions about public policy: for example, under what circumstances should people be legally able to abandon their pets? Without principled rejection of an 'us versus them' attitude, it is easy to become polarised about these matters and fail to do justice to all parties.

Anyone interested in ideology critique will of course note that the conflicts of interests in this case occurs because the background institutions that allocate resources do not work as they should. Our societies are rich enough to enable considerable luxury for a large minority, and should make it a priority to address non-luxury issues: for example, to ensure that children with special needs and their parents don't find themselves in practical conundrums like the one above, and that animals are shielded from hunger, cold and violence. But, until and unless institutions provide adequate resources, — that is, the collective "we" — do their job, we will continue to be caught in similar conundrums. It is important how we react to these conundrums, and how the public reacts to those who make the choices.

Besides, it is not possible to pre-empt all conflicts of interests through better collective action and more just institutions. The difficulty can be inherent to the problem: should we, say, impose high risk of ill mental health and serious developmental problems on young children for the sake of protecting the lives of others, and in particular the elderly? Should we do this even if the younger generation has worse life prospects than those of their grandparents? Readers will recognize the inter-generational conundrum raised by the recent pandemic. And in some cases, the conflict can involve different but similarly weighty interests of the same party. For instance, is it more important to prevent suffering so extreme that it might end in suicide in pre-pubescent children with gender dysphoria by providing access to puberty blockers; or ought these children to be protected from embarking on a momentous process whose bearing on their lives they are too young to evaluate? Unlike situations like the man abandoning his cats, these issues tend to polarise not only public

opinion, but also many professional philosophers. It is a mistake to dismiss some of the arguments on each side in these and similar dilemmas; in the most charitable interpretation of issues such as these, both sides are animated by reasonable concerns.

I submit that an important role of philosophy — whether done in conference rooms and journal articles, in classrooms, or in more public venues — is to reduce polarisation. Well-executed public philosophy is needed to show how the deepest disagreements of our age might involve people who are all motivated by the same fundamental principles and values, yet focus their attention on individual pieces of the practical puzzles at the expense of the general picture. To gain such understanding, philosophers must assume that the puzzles really are puzzling, that they lack obvious solutions. People are already engaged in this enterprise of public philosophy, which is proof of its possibility, though there is no denying the psychological burden involved. But is the alternative of not doing it less burdensome? According to one understanding of self-respect (Bird, 2010), its pinnacle is reached when one can withstand others' mistreatment without doubting one's own moral worth. If so, it's worth taking the moral risk of genuine dialogue with KKK members. And the fact that so many of them responded to Davis's influence and abandoned the Klan suggests they deserved his generosity.

Public philosophy is necessary for figuring out some of the most pressing problems of the day, from economic policies to cultural wars, without vilifying the supporters of different solutions. This little essay, then, turns out to be as much about the role that philosophy should have in public life as about what professional philosophers would have to do if our work is to play that role. It is not really a piece about what philosophers-as-they-are can do to improve things, but about what philosophers-as-they-could-be would be especially well-placed to do. The problem confronted by Davis is philosophically easy; many others aren't. This is why we should marshal not only our analytical tools but also our experience with the complexity of ethical problems to reject glib solutions; and, while doing so, reject the sentiment expressed in Elizabeth Anscombe's verdict: 'I do not want to argue with him; he shows a corrupt mind' (Anscombe, 1981).

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