Identity dialogues

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Contemporary anglophone political philosophers look to ground liberal politics and social justice in what free, rational individuals would collectively agree to after discussion. The works of John Rawls (1921–2002) is foundational to this approach. The conditions or circumstances in which such dialogue takes place, though, are critical. The discussants should be able to focus on what is good for individuals in general, or to put it differently, what all individuals would want after reflection, not on what individuals like themselves would want. They must think selflessly.

Rawls designs a thought experiment the centrepiece of which is what he calls the 'veil of ignorance' (Rawls, 1971). For the deliberation of individuals to lead to the discovery of social justice or 'fair terms of social cooperation' they must be made ignorant — stripped — of their specific identities such as their gender, class, nationality, culture, religion and so on. So none of the reasoners knows for example whether they are rich or poor, black or white, Christian or Muslim etc. So no one will risk favouring laws and policies that unduly favour a particular class, race or religion, in case — when at the end of the deliberation the veil is lifted and they (re)learn who they are — it turns out they are not of the group they favoured.

Rawls's claim is, then, that the principles of social justice can be only worked out by individuals, intellectuals, lawmakers, benign governments etc to the extent that they approximate to being self-less or identity-less reasoners. That, however, means that dialogue among such individuals is not necessary because, stripped of all their differences, such reasoners are identical. One reasoner can, in theory, produce the just solution without there having to be a dialogue amongst all the citizens. Moreover, behind the veil of ignorance the debate makes no difference to what is valuable in the product of the debate. The product — the principles that a diverse society should live by — are not influenced by who is or is not included in the debate and so they remain the same however the debate goes. That is to say, the principles are not influenced by the debate and could indeed have been known without any dialogue having taken place. More precisely, they are known by reason not by dialogue or by who participates in the dialogue. In his later work, Rawls acknowledged that in the actual world of liberal democracies

people do not have to have this self-ignorance. He allowed that people are often guided by an ethical philosophy or a religious perspective. But as these were various and were the source of deep and intractable disagreement, they were only permissible as sources for politics if they led to conclusions that would be consistent with the principles of social justice of the kind that his original method was designed to establish. Philosophies and religions that did not lead to liberal egalitarian principles were not acceptable sources to reason from.

Dialogue as used by multiculturalists

This is not, however, how multiculturalists have approached political theory. Dialogue rather than abstract reasoning by a sole reasoner or identical identity-less individuals has motivated multiculturalists, who hold that politics must find ways to work with different perspectives without assuming that all will converge on a single rational point or consensus. Multiculturalists assume that the context for politics is already thoroughly imbued with dominant ways of thinking and doing. That is, imbued with cultural orientations such as national history and language, with religious and/or secular perspectives, with institutional norms etc and that these contextual factors cannot be made abstract to identify a set of culture-free problems. Moreover, the relationship between the relevant parties is likely to involve domination–subordination, inclusion–exclusion and that the weaker or newer party is likely to lack recognition or be misrecognised (Taylor 1994). Dialogue rather than identity-less reasoning will be relevant here for at least three reasons.

First, effort must be put into reaching a cross-cultural understanding to help find a solution to the problem or to establish a problem-solving principle. It is not just a question of taking material interests into account but a matter of (re)designing the shared public space and rules of conduct so that diverse cultural commitments and needs are explicitly addressed. This helps ensure that the public space does not simply reflect the dominant culture but also accommodates and welcomes new or marginalised minorities.

Second, this means that the solution is genuinely open. By this I do not mean that 'anything goes.' Rather, that the solution cannot be predicted in advance — that is, there is no predetermined answer waiting to be discovered, as there would be for a maths problem. The dialogue makes a difference: it contributes to a growth of understanding that is genuinely novel or supplementary, and the quality or character of the dialogue is dependent on the

participants. This is not simply in terms of their power of reasoning but in terms of 'where they are coming from' — that is, different parties would produce a different outcome.

Third, the dialogue is important not just in discovering an outcome but in building a *relationship* of trust, co-operation and belonging. These three reasons make the dialogue quite different to the 'behind the veil' reasoning of identity-less reasoners.

The multiculturalist political theorists I have in mind include Iris Young and her assisting people, who are required to understand themselves as oppressed and to discover themselves in collective identities such as woman, black or gay; and to thus develop a liberatory identity and group politics and to use it to engage with other groups to institute a new form of democratic politics (Young 1990).

James Tully has continually emphasised that cooperation under conditions of deep diversity or 'multiplicity' requires a 'multilogue' (Tully, 1995). Bhikhu Parekh explicitly makes intercultural dialogue central to his conception of multiculturalism. His interventions in relation to *The Satanic Verses* affair are exemplary (Parekh 1989). While recognising that in such cases the majority dominate public discourse — and often in a manner that is not conducive to dialogue or mutual learning — he argues that multiculturalism is not about a relativism of allowing each minority to live as it wishes (Parekh 2006). Rather, it is about ensuring that there is a genuine dialogue, that the minority is allowed to express its point of view. Such dialogues inevitably have a majoritarian or status quo starting point because, even while wanting to express unfamiliar sensibilities and bring in new arguments, minorities are primarily trying to persuade the majority. This often takes the form of a minority claiming that their goals are not so different from those the majority has sought for itself at various points. In making this argument, the minority must justify its position by appealing to, and at times seeking to modify, the existing 'operative public values' that shape public debate and determine what is considered legitimate or reasonable within the current polity (Parekh 2006).

For such multiculturalists the principles of social justice are not known in advance or simply by reason but are arrived at by conflict, *learning*, dialogue and negotiation in circumstances of inequality and minority-claims making. This is not a 'veil of ignorance' activity taking place away from conflict with an isolated reasoner or an assembly of identity-less, self-less reasoners. For the multiculturalists the dialogue is claims-based and contentious, and based on *identity-assertion* (relative to other identities), not identity effacement. The dialogue seeks to get beyond — though

it may never fully reach — the conflict or challenge which provoked it, by urging for acceptance of the excluded, those deemed inferior, and misrecognised, by the formation of new, inclusive, hyphenated and overlapping identities.

The dialogue comes into being because of identity-based claims; it proceeds by recognising identities; and its goal, its teleology, is the construction of new identities and new relationships, which are not reducible to redistribution (Modood, 2013). The success of the dialogue is dependent on the development of overlapping identities. It is not just dependent on, as in Rawls, deriving an 'overlapping consensus' from agreed principles of social justice independent of our self-perception as a society trying to achieve a new, respectful inclusion of 'difference'. I hope it is evident how important this kind of dialogue can be to overcome the spiralling mutual mistrust and polarisation that is a feature of our current politics and public exchange.

Public intellectual engagement

The kind of macro-level dialogue that I am speaking of can also be understood as a form of public intellectual engagement. One of the best-known statements on the nature of public intellectuals is by Edward Said (Said 1996). Said writes 'of the intellectual as a being set apart', angry and oppositional, a critic of all worldly powers. Public intellectuals marry the academic's commitment to intellectual values but combine it with a critique of injustice, which is aimed not just at fellow specialists but as wide a public audience as possible. I can offer my understanding of public intellectual engagement by relating to Said's idea of a public intellectual, which I find too one-sided and painted too starkly.

An example of this one-sidedness is the detachment from society that Said attributes to public intellectuals. He argues that their aim is to uphold universal 'standards of truth about human misery and oppression... despite the individual intellectual's party affiliation, national background, and primeval loyalties'. Of course, this kind of integrity is what one requires not just from public intellectuals but from all professionals such as academics, doctors, judges, engineers and so on. It also does not mean that public intellectuals have to be lesser members of their society; or that they share less understanding and concerns with their co-ethnic, co-religionists or co-nationals; or do not care for the well-being of their groups, including if they protest when they think injustice is being done by their groups. Yet, Said describes public

intellectuals as, and indeed exhorts them to be, 'outsiders and exiles' and admiringly quotes Theodore Adorno: *'It is part of morality not to be at home in one's home.'*

Said notes that 'because the exile sees things both in terms of what has been left behind and what is actual here and now, there is a double perspective that never sees things in isolation.' Thus despite presenting a self-image of the intellectual as standing outside or above the society they are engaging with, Said recognises there must be a commitment to a people(s) or concrete institutions and practices — not just to abstract principles like truth or justice or humanity.

My point is that commitments to groups, people, causes, institutions, one's country and so on are not a nuisance, or incidental to an engaged public intellectual. These commitments are as essential to the public intellectual as the commitment to intellectual integrity. A public intellectual should care about a people, a place or a cause and not just about being an intellectual (demonstrated effectively in relation to George Orwell and Albert Camus in Walzer, 2002). The public intellectual must have a home, but this commitment must not be unaware of or incompatible with an equally strong commitment to intellectuality. Just as, of course, there must not be an unconsidered commitment to certain intellectual points of view and theories, including those which have the prefix of 'critical' (a prefix that seems, to some, to be a badge of adherence rather than something to deconstruct). The public intellectual endeavour is to engage in and lead a society's moral, ethical and political conversation. And while some 'outsider' features can offer some epistemological advantages (and no doubt some deficiencies) one needs to be part of the society that one seeks to engage.

Said cites the African-Americans James Baldwin and Malcolm X as exemplars of public intellectuals. Yet they were individuals who knew which side they were on. They were outsiders to certain structures of power, but they belonged and were committed to the well-being of the groups they represented and believed they were part of. It is most unlikely that they endorsed Said's motto of 'never solidarity before criticism'. Moreover, when it comes to multiculturalist public intellectuals they are likely to belong to more than one group and so unlikely to be either wholly insiders or outsiders. This chimes with Said himself, a Palestinian-US scholar with a lifelong commitment to the Palestinian people.

The public intellectual, then, has to negotiate critical outsiderness and epistemological insiderness and belonging, solidarity and rootedness. She does not need to give up entirely on

her social roots; indeed, to do so is to risk losing an important understanding and sympathy for her group or society as well as trust and standing with the group and/or society. So, rather than exile, an unconsidered loyalty, or aloofness from one's group, she instead should move towards developing multiple belongings and possibilities of dialogue.

A similar one-sidedness characterises Said's distancing of public intellectuality from 'specialisation' and 'expertise', overlooking that a public intellectual must be part of an intellectual discipline. He argues that 'the particular threat to the intellectual today... [is] an attitude that I will call professionalism', which he describes as treating intellectual work as just a job, on a nine-to-five basis, the demotion of an intellectual vocation for what today is likely to be called 'work–life balance'.

Said also worries about intellectuals seeking acceptance, prestige and honours. I agree that some university institutional cultures — such as those in Britain today — encourage a narrow scholasticism, typified by an appreciation for disciplinary jargon and a disregard for clarity, but Said is too dismissive of professional expertise. He overlooks the fact that scientific and professional expertise improves material living standards, public services and personal well-being. It is about engaging with the pressing needs of individuals and communities, such as seeking a cure for cancer, reducing world poverty or contributing to the advancement of 'the knowledge society' with an objective to improve regional and national productivity and promote technological innovation. We may agree with Said, however, that such activity is not public intellectual engagement. And as for an intellectual seeking honours — while that cannot be the primary motive, there is — and should be — honour and recognition, and social status in public intellectual engagement. And it is odd that Said, who received such acclaim — including being chosen to deliver the prestigious Reith Lectures, in which he presented the views I am discussing — should fail to mention it.

A better understanding of how the professional and the personal interplay — what might be called 'honourable ambition' — is captured in this description of public intellectuals as 'those who live with the tensions generated by the contrasting pulls of specialist focus and peer recognition, on the one hand, and on the other the risks and thrills associated with being known as someone who addresses a much wider range of publics on issues of general concern' (Kenny, 2008: 7). Of course, these elements are not always in harmony, but it is important to recognise the reality of competing motives alongside defining public intellectuals in ascetic and purist terms.

Despite Said's tendency to sometimes express himself in a one-sided way, he also offers a more complex characterisation and is closer to the mark when he does so. For example: 'There is therefore this quite complicated mix between the private and the public worlds, my own history, values, writings and positions as they derive from my experiences, on the one hand, and on the other hand, how these enter into the social world where people debate and make decisions about war and freedom and justice'. There is however one issue on which I do not simply think Said has a preference for one-sidedness but where our views collide: where Said's combination of intellectual elitism and wanting to be on 'the same side with the weak and unrepresented' becomes unstuck.

When I previously referred to Parekh as a multiculturalist public intellectual I evidenced his interventions in relation to the crisis around Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*. In these he argued for the importance of listening to and conversing with Muslims who are angry and feel they have been humiliated. It happens that Said too refers to this crisis and states that to have failed to have defended this novel is 'to betray the intellectual's calling'. This is because 'uncompromising freedom of opinion and expression is the secular intellectual's main bastion'. It may be that by 'secular' Said does not mean non-religious but as someone who does not have a 'belief in a political god' or 'a total dogmatic system'. If so, I share that view and have warned of 'the danger of ideology' in discussions of multiculturalism (2013: 118-122).

Yet, my view is that we should challenge secularist one-sidedness just as much as religious militancy, avoiding the appropriation of 'truth' or 'light' for any exclusivist perspective. Instead, we should foster a diverse and broad spectrum of both secular and religious intellectual voices. Similarly, a public intellectual must be politically free to be left-wing, right-wing, centrist, religious, secular and so on — and of course to argue for her point of view by attending to other, especially dissenting voices, and respond to objections and critiques. Public intellectual engagement is of course political, not neutral, but it is a dialogue or a multilogue of complementary and contending intellectual-political positions, which together weave together a diverse public sphere.

Dialogue can take more than one form. For example, most of Plato's early dialogues, referred to as eristic, take the form of an interrogation. Socrates is portrayed engaged in a hostile series of questions aimed to show that his interlocutor, often a well-known 'Sophist' or public philosopher, does not know what he is talking about. Socrates sets out to destroy the argument of his interlocutor and to discredit him as a teacher or a learned

person or an authority on wise conduct. These dialogues typically end in a breakdown, with Socrates's opponent alleging that Socrates is constantly twisting his words for his own self-aggrandisement so there is no point carrying on.

The other kind of dialogue, of which *Republic* is the most famous example, is more like an interview and consists of a rational cooperation to discover the truth. It is most important that the first kind of dialogue does not dominate the public sphere but is subordinated to the second, as in Plato. This duality must not be reduced to oppositionalism, deconstruction or the merely 'critical'. A public intellectual must be creative and constructive as well as critical. In this regard, Andrew Gamble's description of an eminent British multiculturalist effectively captures the genre:

> 'The political theorists of multiculturalism such as Bhikhu Parekh... have been active participants in politics in the sense that they seek to advance the political education of citizens, by articulating choices, framing questions, offering alternatives, and challenging orthodoxies and entrenched attitudes. They address themselves to the public, not to [just] coteries of experts, or office holders. They are essential builders of the public sphere...' (Gamble, 2015: 297).

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