
Dialogues in Consensus-building for Governance

Garrett Thomson¹

Abstract: Participatory democratic governance requires consensus-building processes. Consensus usually implies coming to some agreement about a set of propositions, but there is much more involved because consensus is also a set of social relations that allow people to act together and live harmoniously even when there is propositional disagreement. This paper proposes a conceptual examination of some of the different kinds of disagreements that may make consensus seem near impossible. By classifying the main types of discord, we can provide a conceptual map of the dialogues needed for consensus-building processes. We also need to characterise dialogue as such, distinguishing it from debate, discussion, and conversation, and distinguish it from various forms of conflict resolution such as mediation, group-problem solving and conflict transformation. To define the kinds of discord that make consensus difficult, we shall characterise the hermeneutics of listening, as well as the structure of communication. This will enable us to identify how dialogical processes can go wrong in ways relevant to consensus-building. From this, we distinguish four basic kinds of dialogical processes needed for consensus-building governance.

Keywords: Belief, Consensus, Community, Communication, Dialogue, Disagreement, Hermeneutics, Identity, Listening, Participatory Democracy, Semantics

Introduction

This paper is written from the conviction that there are good arguments to the effect that a participatory democracy is the only form of political system that treats people humanely. Representative democracy fails in this regard because it is at heart a way to

¹ Garrett Thomson is the chief executive officer of the Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace, and he teaches philosophy at the College of Wooster, where he holds the Compton Chair. He has a DPhil from Oxford University, England. He is the author/co-author/co-editor of 26 books including, *Needs* (1987), *On the Meaning of Life* (2002), *Bacon to Kant* (2012) and *Thales to Sextus* (2016) and *A Brief History of Twentieth Century Philosophy* (2022). He has co-authored: *Happiness, Flourishing and the Good Life* (2020); *Understanding Peace Holistically* (2019); *Human-Centred Education* (2017) and *Redefining Religious Education* (2014). He co-edited the six-volumes of the *Longman Standard History of Philosophy* with Prof. D. Kolak (Longman's Press, 2006). He has taught at universities in Colombia and the U.K., as well as the USA.

elect rulers who tend to be part of an elite rather than being a way for people to engage directly in collective policy making for the community. Or so we shall assume.

However, there are serious practical obstacles to participatory decision making. In this paper, I will show how various forms of dialogue can constitute an answer to some of these problems, especially insofar as they pertain to the difficulties in reaching agreement. Dialogue can construct the conditions that allow people to agree more readily. Churchill once said that the best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the ordinary voter. One might contend that the current non-participatory system is partly to blame for this! However, one might also reply that a ninety-minute, well-facilitated community assembly would constitute strong support for democracy. When supplemented by dialogue, such assemblies can work.

Thus, this paper has a limited aim. It will not provide a theory of good governance, or a theory of participatory consensus building or try to explain the links between the two. Rather it will try to show what kinds of dialogues are needed to support participatory decision making or processes of governance by consensus. This implies that we need to distinguish the formal process whereby a community assembly reaches decisions by consensus from the informal dialogues that support such consensus-building processes.

The basis of the main argument will be a classification of different kinds of disagreement or discord between persons. There are many forms of such discord. Contradiction in belief, in which one person believes a proposition and the other denies it, is only one form. Acts of communication consist in more than the affirmation of propositions. Indeed, they can express and create social relations that are antagonistic or peaceful. As we shall see, peacefulness is a condition of participatory democracy, and well-run dialogues are conducive to peaceful relations.

Participatory local democracy requires consensus-building processes because the core idea of a participatory democracy is that a community decides its policies together. It would be inadequate democratically for a majority to decide a policy that a minority find abhorrent or reject, without the opportunity for them to share and discuss, especially if there might be reasonable alternatives that might be acceptable to all. All need to be heard.

However, consensus is usually conceived as unanimous agreement, and this implies that consensus-building is simply coming to agreement about a set of propositions. I contend that this is an inadequate understanding of consensus, which must include the social relations that allow people to act together harmoniously even when there is propositional disagreement among them. Consensus can be attained without unanimous agreement when a part of the community feels that, although they cannot

support the proposal on the table, they should not oppose it. They might feel like this because they sense that their views have been heard with openness and without judgment by the group as a whole and that the current proposal reflects this, albeit not as much as they would wish. They judge that further discussion would not be productive. Above all, they feel and are equally members of the community. In this manner, consensus without unanimity presupposes peaceful social relations of respect and trust. This is why consensus-building needs dialogue. Dialogues are necessary for the building of the social relations that are part of consensus.

Dialogue

We need to briefly define and characterise dialogue as such, distinguishing it from conversation and discussion. The central idea of dialogue is that it involves facilitated talking and listening that transforms conflict or transcends antagonistic relations, towards greater peacefulness. All relations involve conflict, but conflicts between persons concerning their beliefs and interests do not need to be antagonistic and unpeaceful. Dialogues are a specific kind of interchange that performs these transformative or transcending functions. Therefore, it is important to begin by distinguishing dialogue from various forms of conflict resolution such as mediation, group problem solving and conflict transformation.

Conflict resolution consists of a range of activities with conflict settlement at one end, and conflict transformation at the other. There are four broad approaches for resolving apparently intractable conflicts: negotiation and mediation, interactive problem solving and conflict transformation, as well as various kinds of dialogue.²

Negotiation is a discussion between the parties with the goal of reaching an agreement. Mediation is a negotiation in which one or more outsiders, or third parties, assist the disputants in reaching the goal. Arbitration or adjudication is when a third party makes a binding decision about the conflict.³

According to another approach, the core of conflict resolution is problem solving, and in particular how to reframe adversarial win–lose competition into a shared problem that can be solved through cooperation.⁴ This approach usually combines so-called ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ factors.

2 This section draws on Ramsbotham, (2010) Also see <https://www.beyondintractability.org/moos/challenge-complexity>

3 Carnevale, P. (1992)

4 See for example, Deutsch, M. (1973) and Fisher, Ronald (1997)

Recently, many peace writers have moved away from mainstream negotiation and problem-solving approaches towards conflict transformation. Typically, a conflict appears to have an ‘either...or’ structure: either A or B. For example, either Jerusalem is part of Israel, or it is part of Palestine. The transformational model looks towards alternative structures, such as ‘neither-nor’ or ‘and-and’.⁵ The two parties work towards ‘finding how their contradictions could be transcended and their perspectives combined in a higher unity’.⁶ In this vein, John-Paul Lederach criticises ‘either-or’ frameworks and argues for seeing conflicts as complex webs of interactions that can only be transformed by ‘the moral imagination’.⁷

In the context of peace building, dialogues differ from negotiation, problem solving and conflict transformation partly because they are directed towards increasing understanding and trust between the parties. Dialogues are not aimed directly at providing solutions to a conflict, but rather at changing the cultures, feelings and misapprehensions that breed the conflict and render it antagonistic.⁸

Dialogues have the power to transform conflicts and transcend antagonisms towards more peaceful relations. As we have just seen, they function in a way that is different from other peace-building approaches. But to specify more completely what counts as a dialogue, we need to define their main characteristics in contrast to conversation, discussion, and debate.

First, in a dialogue, people come together in a special way. They become a group, suffused with friendliness and good will towards each other. There is a reduced sense of individualism. In this manner, dialogue is distinct from a conversation, which tends to be between individuals. Of course, the creation of this group togetherness is a result of the dialogue itself. It cannot be forced or imposed, but it does not come out of thin air. It is part of the dialogue process.

Second, dialogue contains an implicit commitment to the equal value (and reality) of all persons. This expresses a democratic ideal, namely the quality and equality of listening. The traditional definitions of democracy tend to focus on the right to voice one’s views. However, voice means nothing unless there is relevant and appropriate listening. If democracy requires an equality of voice, then it also requires an openness of ears that respects such equality. This feature of dialogue means that par-

5 Galtung (2004), p.13

6 Ibid. p.57

7 Lederach (2005) 172–3

8 See http://www.ywamkb.net/kb/Mapping_Dialogue_Introduction

ticipants come to the circle *as persons* rather than role-holders. This is one sense in which dialogues are informal. In a dialogue, people participate as themselves rather than as representatives of some organisation or group. This is one feature that distinguishes a dialogue from a conversation.

Third, there is a sense of common or group action in which the members of the group participate together as one, as opposed to engaging in individual actions. Sometimes this aspect of the process is referred to as 'co-creation of meaning'. Sometimes it is experienced as a co-inquiry, and sometimes as a co-sharing. Again, this marks a difference from both a conversation and a discussion.⁹

Fourth, in a dialogue, participants suspend what they think rather than defend it. This requires that people typically put on hold the part of themselves that criticises, blames, and judges. They do not set themselves in opposition to the other: they are usually more open and receptive to others. These qualities define the way in which people listen. Again, this is part of the process. This feature sets dialogue as distinct from a discussion.¹⁰

Fifth, a dialogue usually is not directed to a pre-defined goal, such as the making of a decision. In this sense, it does not seek convergence on an endpoint which would count as closure. Rather, it is open-ended and amenable to new unplanned and unexpected possibilities. In this sense, it is a divergent and continuing process.¹¹ This makes it different from a discussion which tends to be focused on some endpoint.

Sixth, a dialogue is not primarily instrumentally valuable for the sake of some goal such as solving a problem. Rather, it is a process that is valuable for itself. In this way, it is more like play than work. For example, in post-conflict situations, sometimes, NGOs offer experiential workshops in which people share their pain, mostly as a means of healing and reconciliation. This may be something good, but it is therapy rather than dialogue, despite the fact that it involves empathetic listening. For example, warring groups may talk to each other only as a means to ending violence. The term 'dialogue' contradicts such instrumentalisation. As soon as an interaction becomes merely a means to serve a political purpose, it is no longer a dialogue. In a dialogue, the content and direction cannot be imposed from outside the community but must emerge from a transformative process within a community. Dialogue is *a part* of having peaceful relations. It is intrinsically valuable because it is a constitutive aspect of peaceful relations. For instance, peaceful families talk to each other. As a

9 Lee Nichol (2004)

10 William Isaacs (1999)

11 Mario Cayer (2004)

peaceful community, we engage in dialogue for its own sake as a way of being together. Dialogue is more like healthy living, and less like taking pills before or after an operation.

However, this does not mean that dialogues do not have ends. For example, dialogues bring people to understand each other better. In this sense, it is like entering into another world. Dialogues can have a strong healing effect. As the group opens up, people's suffering is released, and sharing this cathartic experience can be therapeutic. Dialogues can have goals, but the goals do not instrumentalise the process.¹² When it is instrumentalised, the process is treated only as valuable insofar as it contributes to the goal. In contrast, because a dialogue is a process valuable for itself, people appreciate the experience of it as such.

I am not claiming that all dialogues must have all the six features described above. The relationship is more like a family resemblance.¹³ There is a certain looseness to the term 'dialogue' which this Wittgenstein-like approach respects. This explains why sometimes dialogues will appear to be like facilitated conversations, and other times more like open-ended discussions. Given our earlier discussion, we can define a dialogue as a facilitated interchange directed towards transforming conflict and transcending antagonistic relations, which typically will have all six of the above features.

Given this rough definition, we can distinguish consensus-based community decision-making processes from the informal dialogues that support them. When a community comes together to decide its policies on waste disposal, for instance, this does not count as a dialogue according to the above definition: it fails on the second, fourth and fifth criteria, and possibly also the sixth. However, such community decision-making processes can only hope to reach consensus with the support of dialogues. This clarifies the earlier point, namely that this paper is not about governance and community decision-making processes *as such* but rather about how different types of informal dialogue are needed to make them function well.

Well facilitated dialogues can have an almost magical transformative power. More than anything this is because of the synergy involved in becoming a group that is positive and friendly. By 'positive,' I mean that each person feels listened to without criticism and prejudice, and that each recognises that this is the experience of the other. The transformative power is also due to the creative energy released in an

12 On instrumentalisation, see Thomson, Gill and Goodson, 2019, Chapter 2

13 Wittgenstein (1986)

open-ended, divergent, and non-instrumentalised process which unfolds spontaneously.

Linguistic Communication

To classify the relevant kinds of discord between people, we need to start with a quick typology of linguistic communication. This could be very complicated and intricate. To avoid that, let us be simplistic, while still being principled. We can divide communication into four aspects: the linguistic as such; the speech act; the listening act; and the relationships between the people involved. We will review each in turn in relation to dialogue. Later, we will explain how each gives rise to different kinds of discord.

a) The Linguistic as Such

The linguistic as such consists primordially in sentences, some of which express a proposition. Sentences that do not express a proposition include commands, questions, and exclamations. These are sentences that are not true or false, such as 'Help!' and 'Are you OK?' A proposition is the meaning of a declarative sentence. The simplest kind of disagreement is a logical contradiction in which person A affirms the proposition P and person B denies P.¹⁴ Both cannot be right. Indeed, to affirm that P is to assert that the relevant sentence is true, and it is also to deny not-P.

Sentences are composed of words, and the meaning of a word consists in the way it contributes to the meaning of an indefinite number of sentences.¹⁵ Such semantic meaning is a public or social phenomenon, but it is much more than a mode of communication. We each live in the world as shaped by concepts. In this way, concepts or semantic meanings construct the experiential or phenomenological world that we inhabit. For example, without the concept of tree, one could not experience a tree as a tree. Because semantic meaning is a public phenomenon, it is a field of accord or the common, within which disagreements, misunderstanding and discord can occur. It is the shared background. At the semantic level, we understand each other well most of the time. However, this does not signify that there are not semantic disagreements! Rather it means that such disagreements require a shared backcloth.

14 The sentence 'A believes that p' does not contradict 'B believes that not p'. The contradiction concerns the content of their beliefs.

15 This approach has its roots in the works of Frege (1991) and Donald Davidson (1991a).

Because semantic meaning is largely shared, and because it is also constitutive of our experiential worlds, it has the extraordinary property of allowing us to enter the phenomenological world of others. To allow one to pass into the experiential world of a gardener, all she has to do is to describe her experience in sufficiently vivid terms. This is a remarkable facet of language. For example, in his novel *The Inheritors*, William Golding captures the experience of Neanderthals. Marcel Proust's descriptions of his childhood transport one to a different world. Therefore, in a dialogue, we can find ourselves glimpsing into the world of another person, suddenly seeing things from her point of view.

Language *per se* has other aspects besides the logical and semantic. An especially important one for our purposes is the rhetorical, which straddles the linguistic and the pragmatic. As a pragmatic phenomenon, rhetoric is the attempt to convince an audience; it is the act and art of persuading. It is something we *do*. As a linguistic phenomenon, it is a feature of words such that they have rhetorical connotations that can go beyond their semantic meaning. For example, the phrase 'illegal immigrant' is rhetorically very different from 'undocumented immigrant', even though the two are close in meaning. As a linguistic phenomenon, words have rhetorical power. This power allows us to be swayed and moved by what people say.¹⁶ It is part and parcel of the tremendous emotional force of language. At the same time, it is an important source of discord. For example, two policies can be very similar in content but very different rhetorically, even when this difference is not a deliberate act.

When we add these various factors together, there are at least three general features of the linguistic as such: the logical, semantic, and rhetorical. It is important to appreciate that the meaning of a word is not a thing or an entity. We are systematically prone to think of mental states and meanings as entities on analogy with physical objects. This is a mistake because such a view overlooks both the intentionality or aspectual nature of semantic meaning and its relational nature. Among other things, the meaning of a word consists in its semantic relations to other words: the term 'chair' is opposed to 'stool' and 'table' within the category 'furniture'. Rather than thinking of the meaning of a word as an object, we can conceive it as a set of relations that specifies what a word means, where 'means that' is an intensional verb

16 Stevenson C.L. (1937)

(with an ‘s’)¹⁷. The intentionality of the verb ‘means that’ and the intentionality of the phenomena of meaning signify that meaning is aspectual or description relative.¹⁸ ‘H₂O’ does not mean the same as ‘water’, even though the words refer to the same substance. The intentional and the relational nature of meaning implies that the meaning of a word will be indeterminate in some regards. In this way, we should not regard the indeterminate nature of word meaning as some form of vagueness (as if it might be cured with a strong dosage of definitions). Word meanings are ineluctably indeterminate, albeit within limits.

b) Speech Acts

Semantics concerns meaning; pragmatics is about how we use words. Some theorists regard the former as primary: words must already have meaning in order for us to employ them to do things such as making promises and issuing threats. Pragmatics presupposes semantics. In contrast, some theorists regard the second as primary: word-meaning or semantics is nothing beyond how we conventionally use words. Semantics presupposes pragmatics. Some theorists try to combine these two kinds of dependency.¹⁹

Pragmatics is generally concerned with four aspects of acts of linguistic communication. The first is the kind of speech acts we perform in uttering sentences. For example, I can *ask* whether the door is open; I can *request* that it be opened; I can *assert* that it is open. In these cases, while the speech-act is distinct, the content is the same.²⁰

The second aspect concerns the contextual and the conversational implications of those linguistic acts. For example, there is a strong presupposition that what one says is conversationally relevant. So, if I assert out of the blue that the door is open, this might be meant and understood as an indirect request that the listener should leave.

¹⁷ Intentionality is the feature of mental states or texts in virtue of which they are about something. In contrast, a sentence is intensional (with an ‘s’) when one cannot substitute in it expressions with the same referent. Lois Lane believes that Superman can fly doesn’t entail that she believes that Clark Kent can fly. Sentences about meaning are typically intensional. Intentionality and intensionality are different. However, they are related because when we describe the intentional as such, we employ intensional sentences.

¹⁸ On the difference between intentionality and intentional sentences, see G. Thomson (2002) Chapters 7 and 8.

¹⁹ The first approach is found in the works of Donald Davidson (1991b); the second in the works of Grice (1989b) and Wittgenstein (1986); one example of the third is David Lewis (1997).

²⁰ John Searle (1970)

Conversational implicature permits us to understand each other without having to say everything or to spell everything out.²¹ Context factors do the same. They allow for the spoken to imply the unspoken. In this way, both make communication swift.

The third aspect of speech acts is that the speaker constructs a narrative or a text, which has a structure. Any speech act is embedded in a broader communicative context. This verbal text is often co-constructed in conversation with others. It might consist in an explanation, a story, a list, a piece of reasoning.²²

Fourth, all speech acts are manifestations or expressions of the mental states of the speaker. For example, most simply, if I assert that the day is hot then the assertion expresses my belief that it is so, given that I am being sincere. Whenever I say something, I express my intentions, beliefs, and attitudes. Moreover, in a conversation, I manifest much about myself, such as my mood and my character, without deliberately wanting to do so. In conversation, these manifestations are interactive and are part of a largely unarticulated communication.

The speaker can reduce the misunderstanding of persons through peaceful communication methods. For example, I can be aware that the audience might misread my tone and feel that I am expressing a scornful attitude, even when it was not my intention to do so. The key to peaceful communication is to be aware of how the other might hear and take what one says. By becoming more aware of how an audience is likely to interpret her attitudes, beliefs and intentions, a speaker can shift her verbal and non-verbal communication.²³

c) Listening Acts

In most pragmatic theories, listening usually takes second place to talking, just as reading does to writing. Pragmatic theories are first and foremost speech-act theories. Arguably, this is back to front. Generally, we talk so that we can be listened to; we write because we want others to read. Even soliloquies and notes to oneself can be acts of communication, even if they are not always so.

Like reading, listening is an act of understanding. This takes place at different levels. These reflect the distinctions we have already drawn with respect to the linguistic as such and the nature of speech acts. For instance, we understand the meaning of the sentences that the person utters, and we understand the implications of the way that

21 Grice (1989a)

22 Gadamer (1989)

23 On peaceful communication, see Marshall Rosenberg (2015).

she says it. We also form beliefs about what this *inter alia* expresses about her beliefs, attitudes, and intentions. The phrase *inter alia* indicates that we also rely on many other contextual cues such as gesture, body posture, facial expression, tone of voice, etc. What she says and how she says it manifests something about her and her character. In the act of communication, I come to comprehend or misunderstand her.

This suggests a new level of possible discord: one can disagree or be in discord with the speaker. One might agree with what a person says and even be in accord with the language she uses to say it, but, nevertheless, in some sense, still disagree with *her*. For instance, one can disagree with something she is expressing, such as some implied attitude or some background beliefs. For example, a person's narrative might be expressing bitterness and fear, and I might feel that such emotions or attitudes are not appropriate in this context. In this way, listening as the interpretation of persons forms a distinct source of discord.

The type of misunderstanding that arises from listening acts mirrors those that emerge from the four features of the speech act. Of course, people misunderstand each other by listening badly, but listening badly is not simply a question of not paying attention, of being distracted and of adopting a prematurely prejudicial attitude to what someone is saying. It is also a question of ingrained hermeneutical practices that lead us to systematically misunderstand each other as persons, as we shall see in a later section. The dialogue space to overcome these tendencies is very important for peaceful social relations.

d) Relations

The notion of a communicative speech act is insufficient when it focuses on a single act. As we have seen, speech and listening usually occur within the flow of a conversation, which is itself embedded in an interactive process that forms a social and perhaps a personal relationship. The point is not simply that, without communication, there are no relationships. But rather, more strongly, in part, the relationship in part consists in processes of communication. For our purposes, the relational aspect of communication is the most important. This is because, on the one hand, if the relations of trust and respect are strong, misunderstandings and disagreements can be corrected and overcome. On the other hand, the various disagreements that we have mapped are significant mostly insofar as they contribute to antagonistic social relations, which make consensus seem unobtainable.

A Topology of Disagreement

The discussion has already indicated different kinds of discord and disagreement. We have described a simplistic four-fold typology of communication: the linguistic as

such; the speech act; the act of listening and the relations thereby formed. We have identified at least three aspects of the linguistic as such: the logical, semantic and rhetorical. We have specified four features of speech and listening that are potential sources of discord. We have shown how this leads to relational discord between people. This typology constitutes a classification of the various kinds of disagreement that make consensus-building seem difficult, which will guide us in identifying the dialogue processes necessary for consensus-building.

We can initially define one basic type of disagreement, belief-disagreement, in terms of the simple logical contradiction in which one person believes a proposition and the other believes its denial. However, despite its apparent simplicity, this is not clear for a few instructive reasons.

First, is logical contradiction even a sufficient condition of disagreement between people? Suppose that, if I were asked, I would reply that Jayapura is in Papua New Guinea. If my friend were asked, she would reply negatively. Suppose that these propositions are not important or even in consideration, and even if they were, neither of us would mind being corrected. We have no conviction. Clearly, our beliefs contradict each other, but it seems that *we* do not disagree. In response to examples such as these, one might claim that two people disagree with regard to their beliefs when the content of the beliefs matters to at least one of them, and they would be initially unwilling to change their beliefs without some strong evidence or good reasoning.

Second, the definition of belief disagreement requires that the assent and dissent of the two people is directed to the same proposition. However, in everyday practice, this requirement is not a simple on/off or yes/no condition. This is because, as we have seen, propositions are not objects or discrete units. This is part and parcel of both the intentionality of and relational nature of linguistic belief-states.

The intentionality of belief means that what we believe, the content, depends on how it is described. Belief is aspectual. Lois Lane believes that Superman can fly, but she also believes that Clarke Kent cannot fly, even though, in fact, Clarke Kent is Superman. What she believes depends on how it is described. This means that belief-agreement and disagreement are intentional too. For example, John believes that Bacon wrote Hamlet, and Mary believes that Marlow wrote Hamlet. They disagree. But they do agree that Shakespeare did not write Hamlet.²⁴ Whether there is agreement or not depends on how the content of the relevant beliefs are described.

24 Rescher (1993), 44-5.

The relational nature of belief is sometimes called holism. Most, perhaps all, beliefs depend on some others.²⁵ For instance, even when two people both believe that P, there will be relevant background beliefs about which they might disagree. When a young person and an experienced physicist both affirm that $E=mc^2$, their agreement disguises differences in belief that might be important in some contexts.²⁶ Such hidden disagreements abound in the political domain. But this phenomenon can also work the other way too. People can think that they disagree more than they do. I may claim to believe that P but this belief is subject to implicit conditions and qualifications which once spelt out or made explicit will put my original claim in doubt. The holism of belief shows us that belief disagreement needs to take into account the degree of basicness of a belief. For example, two people might agree (more or less) on a basic policy position but disagree on how it should be implemented. If we focused only on their derivative beliefs regarding implementation, we might miss their more basic agreement.

Third, this last point shows that any specification of belief-disagreement also has to take into consideration the semantic and rhetorical factors. Often people think that they agree or disagree when they do not because they are using words differently, and in addition, their word choice reflects rhetorical differences. Sometimes, people are more distant in their views than they might think because of these semantic and rhetorical factors. Sometimes, they are closer.

Having just discussed belief-disagreement, the pending issue now is to describe the other kind of discords, disagreements or disputes between people that blocks consensus-building processes. We are now interested in the various communicative misunderstandings that do not concern propositional content. Such disagreements between people often pertain to the mismatch between the speech act and the listening act, with regard to the four facets of these acts. For instance, it consists in the possibility that what one manifests is not what the other reads (and what the other reads is not always what one thinks she reads). Or a listener might misapprehend the point of the narrative. Without dialogue, these types of discord contribute significantly to unpeaceful social relations.

The Hermeneutics of Listening

To define the kinds of misunderstandings that make consensus difficult, we characterised communication not only as a speech act, but also as a listening act. Listening is plagued by a hermeneutic asymmetry. This is the tendency, in our own case, to

25 Quine and Ullian (1978)

26 Stephen Stich (1985)

only see our own good intentions, and in the case of others, to see only the results of their actions, which are often bad. This means that we are fundamentally prone to apply a double standard: we judge ourselves by the good intentions we have, but we judge others by the results of their actions. I am disposed to see my own intentions as always good, and those of others as bad or, at best, imperfect. This means that we have a tendency to attribute maleficence and to demonise others.

This tendency is important for understanding all human relations.²⁷ This propensity for a double standard is accompanied by a set of allied dispositions, namely:

We tend to assume that we understand others better than they understand us;

We tend to underestimate the differences between ourselves and others;

We tend to be ignorant of our ignorance of others.

Regarding the first propensity: egocentrism supports the belief that I can understand others better than they can understand me because they do not have direct access to my mental states, but I can understand their intentions through their behaviour. This is the same double standard mentioned earlier.

My attribution of bad intentions to the other person will be reinforced by the assumption that she did not see my good intentions. Indeed, I may feel this as a failure on her part and as a hostile act. Furthermore, we can imagine that the other person is engaging in the same reasoning about me. If I perceive that she does her mannerisms, facial expressions, tone of voice, and word choices, then this will further increase the antagonism. Likewise, she may perceive the same of me. The mutual misunderstandings escalate.

The second propensity adds a new dimension to this process: I see the quarrel between us in a certain way, and because I underestimate the differences between us, I tend to assume that she ought to be seeing the situation in the same way as I do. I take my perspective on the situation as the natural one. I assume that she would have the same view if it were not for her ill-will. Therefore, her failure to agree with me is further evidence of ill-will. The fact that she does not see it the same way reinforces my idea that she has ill-will. Meanwhile, she is undergoing through the same process of attributing ill will to me.

The third propensity is a very important factor in inter-personal relationships: our ignorance of our ignorance. The person who is ignorant tends to not know that she is so. If one does not know that P, then one will tend to not know that one does not

27 Thomson, G. (2017) and (2020)

know P. Indeed, to be aware of one's ignorance is a peculiarly Socratic virtue. The escalating mutual antagonism described earlier is reinforced by the fact that both persons are ignorant of the viewpoint of the other. I may not even recognise my own ignorance of the other person's point of view. It may not have even occurred to me that I have missed out something of relevance and importance, namely how she sees the disagreement. Given this second-order ignorance, I tend to portray my view of the situation as the natural default position.

The original hermeneutical asymmetry that led to this cascade is erroneous. As Plato saw, whenever someone wants something, she necessarily wants it under some description of the thing that reveals it as desirable. This does not mean that the thing wanted *is* always all things considered desirable, but it does mean that the thing wanted is perceived as desirable under some description by the person who wants it. This is a requirement of the claim that a person's intentions always make sense to the person herself.

We can translate this first-person point into a third person understanding because of the public nature of language. This public nature means that, for instance, when I say of you that you are hungry and when you say the same of yourself, and when you say that of me, the word 'hungry' has the same meaning. The public nature of language implies that there is some description of the person's intentions that makes sense to other people such that they can see it from her point of view. This means that there is necessarily a way of making sense of others' intentions. That is, there is a way of seeing what others want as a good.²⁸ However, this Platonic thesis is only plausible if we distinguish primary and derivative descriptions of a person's intentions. For example, my primary intention is to defend myself. It is directed to some good. The derivative intention is to hurt someone, which is not. Revenge and malice as such should be regarded as derivative descriptions of the person's intentions.

The idea that all primary intentions must be for a good contradicts the egocentric tendency to see others' intentions as directed primarily towards something bad. The egocentric propensity makes it psychologically difficult for people to appreciate that there is always some description of any person's intentions that is directed to some good. We succumb to a childish illusion and tend to demonise others. This illusion amounts to the incapacity to come to terms with reality of others, which transcends the egocentric perspective.

Having peaceful relations requires that we overcome this hermeneutic asymmetry. In any conflict, there is some description of her intentions that my enemy thinks of as

²⁸ This does not imply that all virtue is knowledge as Plato claimed. See Thomson (2016) Chs 4 and 5.

good, which I too could recognise as good. There is good reason to acknowledge this, without committing to agreeing with the person's judgments. In principle, one could step into the shoes of even one's worst enemy by realising that her point view must make sense to her. To understand her intentions in this manner requires a willingness on my part to see the whole process that led up to the squabble from her point of view; and likewise, a willingness on my part to see my own actions from her point of view, however unpleasant that may be. This does not mean that I must agree with her judgments, only that I recognise emotionally there is some description of the situation as seen by her that portrays her intentions as primarily aimed at some good and which I could see as good myself. This condition is a requisite for understanding others.

Identity

This hermeneutic asymmetry is accentuated and solidified by identity. Because humans have allegiances, we tend to identify with some group. Insofar as we do so, we tend to not identify with some other groups. Identity necessarily tends to be exclusionary. It is a question of 'us and them', and the 'them' tends to get excluded.

This exclusionary identity socialises and solidifies the hermeneutic asymmetry described earlier. We understand the good that *we*, as a group, intend some good, and that we do not even consider the good intended by the other group. We assume: "*We* intended to do good, but *they* did something bad." The divide between us and them becomes an antagonism between groups. Indeed, the very declaration 'This is my identity' can function as an affirmation of allegiance which commits one to demonising the intentions of opposition groups. Furthermore, insofar as this antagonism becomes solidified in a culture, it acquires the momentum of being a history. It becomes ingrained in collective memory.²⁹

As we shall see, deep dialogical processes are aimed at transforming the basic self-identifications which otherwise would form antagonistic social identities. Such dialogues function by enabling the person to self-identify non-derivatively with themselves in more inclusive ways: for instance, as a human or a person or an 'I' rather than primarily as a member of a specific social group. The more I perceive the other as a person, the more I identify myself primarily as a person (and less as the member of an antagonistic group). Good dialogues shift self-identification towards the human and, in so doing, they undermine antagonistic forms of 'us versus them'.

Peaceful relations require that we transcend the dichotomy between victim and aggressor through such shifts in self-identification. Given histories of violence and fol-

29 Gill and Thomson (2019)

lowing the hermeneutic asymmetry, groups will be prone to perceive themselves as victims and to see their relevant others as aggressors. It is difficult to see others, with whom we do not identify, as victims. Furthermore, it is also hard to perceive oneself, and the groups that one identifies with, as aggressors. These tendencies are a result of three factors: the legacies of histories of violence and dehumanisation; the subjectivity of our experience; and our propensity to identify. Dialogues can help transcend the histories of dehumanisation and the resulting subjectivities and identifications that tend to perpetuate those histories. This means that such dialogues are necessary to find peace because peace requires that we transcend the subjectivities defined primarily in terms of victim and aggressor.

Four Kinds of Dialogue

Suppose that we have a regular local participatory assembly. One of the main purposes of this assembly is to reach policy decisions regarding the governance of the local community. Another, we can suppose, is to make recommendations to a regional assembly. We shall suppose that these discussions would not count as dialogues because they are purpose-driven and convergent. Nevertheless, they need the support of various kinds of dialogue.

We should suppose that the assembly makes its decisions by consensus rather than by majority vote. The assembly is part of a participatory democratic system and, as such, the voices of minorities should be part of the community deliberative process. The process is inclusive because all people are equal. We would not want a system that marginalises and tends to disregard minorities because of their views. All people are equally part of the community. Furthermore, a participatory democracy would run on the process of constructing consensus rather than a polarising debating format that sets people up against each other. We do not want a system that creates winners and losers. In short, the process of policy making will need to be peaceful.

All relationships between individuals and between groups are conflictual. People have different interests, emotions, and understandings; ineluctably, this means conflict. Thus, peace cannot be defined as a lack of conflict. Indeed, peacefulness as a value only becomes operational when there is conflict. In part, peacefulness means that conflictual relations will not make destructive waves. It is the quality that allows conflictual relations to exist without displacing other non-instrumental goods that constitute human flourishing, such as trustful community relations and our capacity to act together as a group. In participatory democracy, the community acts together, as a whole, deciding the policies that steer the community towards the common good.

How can the required peaceful consensus be attained? If we are to avoid defining consensus as unanimity, there needs to be a culture of trust and solidarity that permits people to feel that they have been listened to respectfully and openly, and that their voices have had an impact on the policy statement, even when they feel that they cannot support it. This culture of peacefulness needs to be constructed, and the main way to do this is through well designed and well facilitated dialogues.

Earlier we saw that communication has four basic facets. Among these, the most important is the relations in which communication is embedded. The other aspects of any communication breakdown, such as the various disagreements and misunderstandings, are secondary to the relations. If the relationships are based on trust and good will, then the other kinds of discord can be corrected or repaired. Indeed, for consensus, the other forms of discord are important insofar as they contribute positively to peaceful relationships. However, good relations are constantly threatened by the hermeneutic asymmetry that we analysed, which is itself solidified by parochial non-derivative self-identifications.

On the basis of this analysis, one can distinguish four kinds of dialogical processes relevant to consensus-building:

The first kind of dialogical process concerns getting to know and understand others, especially their life narratives. This process should be treated as valuable in itself. However, it will help everyone to understand how people's political attitudes are shaped by their life narratives. In this regard, often, the experiences of childhood are important. People's political views are often formed by their experiences of being exploited or undervalued by others. The dialogue process will help people understand others in ways that help transcend victim/aggressor relations. It allows us to understand how others perceive situations such that they see themselves as willing the good. It permits us to enter the phenomenological reality of their point of view. This glimpse into the world of another is a powerful experience. It can be transformative insofar as it allows a person to transcend the subjectivities that define oneself as victim and the other as aggressor. However, this dialogical process should not be instrumentalised to these aims. It should be valued in itself, even when it does not follow in the expected direction.

The second kind of dialogue can be called 'belief exploration'. It is focused on belief disagreement in its various aspects, such as the semantics and rhetoric of the terms that constitute (in part) a political worldview. However, the general aim of such a dialogue is not to have a discussion or a debate, but rather to understand better the beliefs of others. Therefore, this kind of dialogue requires an approach similar to critical appreciation. Understanding better the beliefs of another will often consist of discovering where we agree. Even when people disagree deeply about a particular

policy proposition, nevertheless, they may agree about other propositions related to the policy in question, even if the propositions they agree about are conditional. Importantly, it will cover why we disagree both in terms of more basic beliefs and in terms of our live experience.

The third kind of dialogue is called ‘deep dialogue’, which aims to shift people’s identities or self-identifications. Like the first process, it involves people listening to each other non-judgmentally and openly, but this time, the aim is to provide the space for transcending non-derivative identifications and their underlying dynamics. It indicates the willingness to enter the subjectivity of someone whom one would previously have considered an enemy. Forgiveness and reconciliation processes can be instances of deep dialogue. A community will be peaceful when it practices deep dialogue at the heart of its processes. In short, the term ‘deep dialogue’ refers to dialogues that involve listening non-judgmentally and openly with the aim of transcending antagonistic, non-derivative self-identifications.

The fourth kind of dialogue concerns building relationships of trust. In the context of democratic governance, such dialogues often pertain to the ethical use and abuse of power. Community policy-making assemblies will often need and want to delegate functions and tasks to individuals and groups. For example, the community will want to appoint someone or people to participate on their behalf in regional assemblies. Such acts of delegation presuppose trust, and members of the community will feel sometimes that this trust has been betrayed. This will necessitate trust-building dialogues.

Conclusion

We cannot expect people to form a trusting community which makes decisions as a group without their knowing, understanding and respecting each other, and this requires special purpose-built dialogue processes. In comparison with other forms of exchange, dialogue has special characteristics that allow it to serve this kind of purpose. It may *seem* paradoxical that among these features is non-instrumentalisation: dialogue is not only a means to an end. It is valuable in itself as an integral part of people’s lives as members of a peaceful community.

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