Reasoning (or not) with the Unreasonable

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Introduction

A thriving democracy requires that citizens, despite different value sets and perspectives (Haidt), find ways to communicate across difference so that, together, they can chart a path forward that is potentially flourishing for all. In his article "Philosophy, Democracy & Education: Reconstructing Dewey," Philip Cam quotes Dewey as saying that, both for thinking in general and democracy in particular, "we need to "think together in face-to-face relationships by means of direct give-and-take." (3).

This give-and-take, this learning to be open to perspectives different from our own, is a central pedagogical aspiration of "The Community of Philosophical Inquiry" (CPI), the pedagogical cornerstone of "Philosophy for Children" (P4C). Being open to opposing positions is likewise a fundamental presupposition in science, something stressed by Peirce, and to whom both Lipman (15) and Sharp (53), the co-founders of P4C, frequently refer. As well, Gardner, in her critical thinking text, *Thinking Your Way to Freedom*, defines good thinking as requiring that one be open to one's opposition (24-36).

These positions seem laudable and within fairly easy reach in a classroom setting in which a facilitator assists in ensuring that vastly different viewpoints find welcome. In real life, however, engaging in the give-and-take of reasoned dialogue in ordinary discourse may sometimes, even often, seem like a bridge too far. Immigration, climate change, sexual orientation, transgender issues, Indigenous people's rights, taxation, trade policy, even behavior of political figures, all these are topics about which many people have strong opinions that seem to require of advocates that they stand firm. Or, at least, the dialectics of discourse often push people to "their corners."

In such situations, individuals who have embraced the importance of engaging in reasoned dialogue (whom we refer to technically as "reasonable") both for their own integrity and the health of the community, may be utterly at a loss when confronted with individuals who absolutely refuse to entertain a position other than their own (whom we refer to technically as "unreasonable"). Should they become ever more assertive? Should they listen silently while carrying on a disparaging inner dialogue about what a jerk this person is? Should they just give up and go home?

In what follows, we suggest several alternatives. First, we argue that it is important not to "take the bait": while the position advocated by the other may be infuriating, expressing fury, more often than not, throws the balance of power to the other side and, in any event, ends any further chance of engaging the other. Secondly, we suggest that an internal analysis (to be clarified shortly) of the

other's position (as opposed to demanding external justification) might prove enlightening. Third, we suggest using a "genetic ad hominem/ad feminem approach;" instead of attempting to focus on the merits of what may be a "meritless" position, or instead of avoiding a discussion of the meritless position altogether, one might attempt to analyze how the person came to cling so firmly to what appears to be an unreasonable position. Lastly, we urge that, even when faced with doors closed in one's face, one hang onto the humanity of the other, as this baseline attitude might be just the sort that will serve as the communicative foundation for future dialogue.

Clearly, with regard to the above suggestions, context is critical. In advocating communicative alternatives when the give-and-take of reasoned dialogue seems impossible, we are assuming the context of common-garden variety communicative exchanges of the sort that Dewy talks about in his book *The Public and its Problems*. We are not advocating these as carte blanche alternatives; we are certainly not advocating these in situations of danger, imminent or otherwise.

More specifically, then, in what follows, we begin with a discussion of the "default value" of reasoned dialogue, followed by an analysis of why those who hold so tightly to that ideal, do so. This will help shed light on why those who value reasoned dialogue can be so flummoxed when confronted by those who cannot or will not so engage. We then very briefly mention why many do not value reasoned dialogue as an ideal. This will be followed by a discussion of alternative communicative strategies and attitudes that might serve as a guide for those with "open-minds" (Sharp 40) when confronted by closed doors. As opposed to increased aggression, developing attitudes of disgust, or simply giving up altogether, such strategies can help maintain a belief in oneself, that even in the face of challenge, one is nonetheless attempting to stay true to one's ideals (albeit imperfectly), while, at the same time, potentially laying out the groundwork for future more productive dialogue.

For those in the field of Philosophy for Children, who either implicitly or explicitly advocate the ideal of open give-and-take reasoned dialogue, reflecting on alternative strategies, when reasoned dialogue is not within one's reach, is both necessary and urgent.

What "Being Reasonable" Looks Like

In his treatise *On Liberty*, John Stewart Mill argued that a top priority of any society must be the protection of freedom of speech not because freedom of speech, in and of itself, is of supreme value, but because without being able to hear opposing viewpoints, one is left with no way by which to test the adequacy of one's own position. Habermas likewise argued in his book *The Theory of Communicative Action* that, rather than viewing reason as a solitary armchair activity, engaging in dialogue with those who think differently is a precondition of being able to evaluate whether one's viewpoint is more adequate than another. So being reasonable requires that one be open to opposing viewpoints. This does not mean, however, that one is simply polite enough to listen to the other. This requires, rather, that one is willing and able to seriously *evaluate* the opposing position both in and of itself, as well as in juxtaposition to one's own, i.e., that one evaluate the opposing position both for internal consistency, as well as its merits by comparison to other positions. Being reasonable then, requires also that one has at least some familiarity with the norms of reasoning. In her article, *Selling*

the Reason Game, Gardner (2014) describes reasoning, or what we are referring to as being reasonable in the following way:

> At its best, or perhaps even in its only authentic sense, reasoning is such that all engaged participants must be prepared to follow reasons *wherever* they lead (Gardner, 2009), that they assume that there are norms that govern what each should believe (Darwall, 50-56), that "how speakers and hearers make use of their communicative freedom to take yes- or no-positions is not a matter of their subjective discretion (Habermas, FHN 10)...At its best, then, or, again, perhaps only in its authentic sense, participants who reason together must assume that the conclusion that they come to, or at least ought to come to, is not "up to them," and, because it is not "up to them," they all ought to enter the reasoning game prepared, from the outset, to change their minds when confronted with stronger competing arguments (129).

It is important to emphasize, at this juncture, perhaps emphatically, that being reasonable is thus *not* a function of any particular position held; it is, rather, a function of an ability and willingness to engage in a particular process, namely, one in which one is open to all reasoned viewpoints, and that one has the ability and willingness to evaluate the strength of any reason offered, and, ultimately that one is prepared to embrace what turns out to be the strongest contender to truth.

Motivation for Being Reasonable

It is one thing to characterize what might be described as the ideal of reasoned dialogue, it is quite another to present an argument (even to oneself) as to why one ought to aspire to such an ideal. As Gardner points out in the article mentioned above (2014) "it is not at all clear, in situations in which there is an opportunity to enhance one's status, or avoid ego-damage, or successfully divert blame, why anyone ought to cave to the opposition merely in deference to the abstract goals of reason" (129).

And this, it might be argued, is a lethal fault of many critical thinking courses, namely that little effort is invested in actualizing students' motivation to actually be reasonable. Thus, students might excel in the mechanics of deductive and inductive logic, Venn diagrams, truth tables, and so on, and yet use these skills only to support their own biased view, rather than in the service of ferreting out the best contender to truth.

In response to this problem, Gardner, in her critical thinking book *Thinking Your Way to Freedom* (2009), invites students, at the very outset, to engage in analysis of the **point** of "ferreting out the best contender to truth," and that point is **autonomy**. She argues that, since our biases are not our own but rather introjected from the physical and social environments in which we move, it follows that in order to become our own persons, we need to wash out bias by using reason to evaluate the merits of our own positions against the very strongest possible opposition, and, in so doing, move closer to viewing our own positions with at least some degree of impartiality. Specifically, she says:

The values that you adhere to when you decide how to act in the short, medium, and long term will determine the kind of human being you become, the kind of life you live, and the kind of community that you help to create. To the degree—and only to the degree—that you seriously and impartially reflect upon the values that guide your actions in the short, medium and long term, can you describe yourself as the master of your own fate, as the creator of yourself (36).

Motivation for Being Unreasonable

We all know that the world abounds with people with whom one is unable to reason. Kjartan Sekkingstad, of Norway, who along with three others was kidnapped by Islamist militants from a resort in the Philippines in 2016, and who later witnessed the beheading of two of his fellow captives, knows that in spades. But we don't need to cite extreme incidents to support this point. Your Aunt Sally, who is a fundamentalist Christian, supports this point, as does your father who knows to the bottom of his toes how life should and should not be lived.

There are multiple reasons why someone might be closed to considering a position in opposition to the one they presently hold. Among them are: 1. Identity protection (including ideological allegiance, tribal membership); 2. Emotional fragility (verbal interchange seems like violence); 3. Narcissism (can't imagine that anyone, holding a different view, deserves to be taken seriously); 4. Extreme principle-ist (disagreeing with me is immoral); 5. Invested monetary interests (e.g., the trickle-down theory); 6. Status (Facebook); 7. Hedonism (tracking truth is too much work); 8. Relativism (no way to judge one position as better than another): 9. A misunderstanding of what reasoning is all about (smart people don't change their minds); 10. A rejection of the value of reasoning (e.g., belief in divine revelation).

Given these multiple reasons for holding tight to one's own viewpoint, those who value the open give-and-take of reasoned dialogue ought not to be surprised when confronted with a closed mind. Indeed, it is not inconceivable that closed minds are more of a rule, rather than an exception. However, this should not serve to discourage those who have embraced reasoned dialogue as an ideal. Rather, it should alert them to the need of having alternative strategies at hand when reasoned dialogue is not within view. There are other alternatives to simply infusing one's own position with more force, viewing the other as an idiot, or simply giving up altogether. The following are some suggestions.

Communicative Strategies When Reasoned Dialogue is not Possible

Avoid Taking the Bait

In the 2016 US presidential election, Michelle Obama's exhortation that "when they go low, we go high," was spoken in recognition of the fact that "being unreasonable" can be "catching." Who isn't tempted to return insult for insult when one is subjected to a flagrantly illegitimate ad hominem/ad feminem attack? Indeed, like junk food, unreasonable maneuvers can be positively

addicting, as they so often catch one's opponent off-guard and often seem like a guaranteed win in a competitive interchange. It is imperative, therefore, that we remember that, like junk food, being unreasonable is bad for one's health in the sense that it jeopardizes one's autonomy, one's dignity, and one's self-respect. Similarly, just as we arm our youngsters against the seduction of junk food by emphasizing, again and again, the merits of a healthy diet, so too, we must, again and again, emphasize the merits of staying true to the anchor of being reasonable, at least as far as any given situation allows, even if the situation is such that the ideal of reasonable dialogue seems like a distinct long-shot.

Wendy Behary, in her book *Disarming the Narcissist,* likewise argues that though we will be mightily tempted to lose our cool when engaged in an interchange with a narcissist, she asks us to keep firmly in mind the difference between "taking a stand for yourself—utilizing an authentic and assertive voice against abuse, control, and oppression—and defending yourself with contempt, criticalness and self-righteousness" (72). In the former case, the possibility of a win-win remains possible, in the latter case a lose-lose is virtually inevitable.

And she reminds us, as part of the strategy of keeping one's cool, that one ought to "angle your awareness toward the other person's face, hand and physical being, reminding yourself that he is just another member of the fascinating and imperfect human species" (Behary 111)—and not allow yourself to be blinded by the glare of his 14-karat ego.

Internal Versus External Analysis

In his article "The dying art of civil disagreement" (National Post, Sept. 30, 2017, A16), Bret Stephens argues that, though disagreement is essential for underpinning our freedom, energizing our progress, and making our democracies real, and though we are getting lots of practice in recent decades - more than ever before - nonetheless, "the more we do it, the worse we are at it." Good disagreement, according to Stephens is the sort that sharpens our thinking; the sort of disagreement that took place over the centuries amongst thinkers such as Plato, Hobbes, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. What is characteristic of this sort of good disagreement is that it is "never based on a misunderstanding. On the contrary, disagreements arise from perfect comprehension; from having chewed over the ideas of your intellectual opponent so thoroughly that you can properly sort them out. In other words, to disagree well you must first understand well. You have to read deeply, listen carefully, watch closely."

This suggests, then, that when faced with a mind closed to alternative views, a productive line of approach would be to thoroughly question the other so that one comes away from the communicative exchange with a deeper understanding of the other's position, rather than worrying about whether or not one's own position is being heard. In the process, one might find areas of overlap that can serve as opening for actual dialogue. As well, one might take this opportunity to probe potential contradictions as they come to light. Thus, when confronted with someone who adamantly maintains that all gays are eternally damned, one might discuss how, for instance, this coheres to a belief that God is loving. While such an approach might enhance reflection on both

sides, one must keep in mind that the other might not be bothered in the least by potential contradiction in her position. Nonetheless, such an exploration might still be fruitful as it will disclose whether, from any vantage point, the position of the other can be deemed justified.

Causes, not Reasons: Revisiting the Genetic Fallacy

Though citing dialogue amongst philosophers may be a helpful model in imagining what "good disagreement" looks like as Stephens does above, we ought to keep firmly in mind that such careful framing of one's position, along with anticipating areas of resistance, is not typical of ordinary interaction. When one feels under attack, the capacity to state one's whole case, indeed the capacity to even know the whole or the why of one's own case, is often diminished. So, the strategy of internal analysis as suggested above, i.e., the continual probing and re-probing of the stated case in order to understand better, may not lead to enhanced comprehension simply because the adherent of the position is unable to fully articulate it or refuses to respond to questions about its consistency.

If such is the case, if understanding the other's *position* proves problematic, understanding the *other* may not be. That is, if examining the *reasons* that do or do not support the position of the other seems fruitless, focusing on the *causes* might not be. The question to focus on may be: What is it that prompted this person to hold so tightly to this position?

The suggestion that one examine the causes rather than the reasons for another's position may seem outrageous. After all, this strategy is one that is classified in critical thinking texts as an informal fallacy (either circumstantial ad hominem/ad feminem attack or a genetic fallacy), and hence one to be avoided by good thinkers. And certainly anyone who has been the victim of such a strategy knows well how infuriating it can be. And any man who has suggested to a woman that she is only complaining because "it is that time of the month" can likewise testify to the ferocity of the rage that such a response can engender.

Nonetheless, we suggest that, if the goal is genuinely a deeper understanding rather than an undermining of the other's position, such a strategy would be more helpfully termed a "genetic investigation" rather than a "genetic fallacy." In such an investigation, our attempt would be to create question-rungs that allow us to ladder down into view of the core values of the other. Since beliefs are expressive of values, gaining an understanding of how your beliefs are a product of your values is proof positive that I view you as a rational being; all of which is the very antithesis of permitting myself to dismiss your view as an irrational product of various and sundry causes.

Another way of putting this point would be to say that partaking in a genetic investigation is an attempt to figure out how your position on a particular issue fits within the narrative of your life as you see it (MacIntyre). Or yet another way would be to say that I am trying to see you as a person, rather than just a talking head.

The suggestion that I attempt to view you as a person in situations in which your position is utterly opaque, puts an interesting twist on what was initially described as "bias neutralization," i.e.,

that a reasonable person ought to be open to alternative positions so that s/he might be alert to the possibility that her own position is biased. What the present strategy suggests, by contrast, is that "person perception" helps us to neutralize bias of a different sort: namely, a biased view of "how to be in the world." That is, in coming to understand the narrative of the other, I may see that it has merit, even if it is not a way of life that I would choose for myself. If that is the case, I may be able to double down on trying to find ways in which our differences can be accommodated that do not, in the process, trample either of our desperate core values.

If there is any merit at all to this position, this suggests that, in the long run, diversity requires of us that we speak *two* languages: the "language of reason" with the goal of genuine meeting (Buber) and the "language of understanding" through which we learn to appreciate one another, but from a bit of distance.

If there is any merit to this position, this, interestingly, has implications with regard to communal inquiry (as depicted in *Philosophy for Children* literature). That is, if "person perception" turns out to be a fundamental strategy when a reasoning impasse is encountered, and if reasoning impasses are not uncommon, then clearly utilizing such questions as "how do you think you came to hold that view," or "do you know why you hold that view so strongly," or "have you always held that view," or "is it possible that you hold that view because ...," would be vital probes for enhancing depth all around, rather than being perceived as illegitimate personal insertions in what is supposed to be a purely reasoned dialogue.

Hang on to Your Faith in the Other

In an August 30, 2017 article in the *National Post* entitled "Why reasonable people can still support Trump," Clive Crook explores the implications of the fact that Trump's supporters seem unaffected by virtually anything he does or says, no matter how apparently outrageous. He articulates two main theories: "one is that a large minority of Americans -40% give or take—are racist idiots." "The other is that a large majority of this large minority are good citizens with intelligible and legitimate opinions who so resent being regarded as racist idiots that they will back Trump almost regardless" (A8). And he goes on to say not only that he thinks that the first theory is absurd and the second theory basically correct, but that those who hold the first theory are, in essence, arguing against democracy. They are in essence saying that there is plainly nothing that can change the minds of these people so why even go through the motions of talking and listening to them? In arguing against the tendency to bundle the views of Trump's supporters into packages of "bigotry" and "stupidity," Crook asks rhetorically why this large minority of American people can't be accorded something other than pity or scorn. Crook finishes his article with the following plea: "Democracies that work make space for disagreement. You can disagree with somebody in the strongest possible terms, believing your opponents to be profoundly or even dangerously mistaken. But that doesn't oblige you to ignore them, scorn them, or pity them. Refusing to engage -except to mock and condescend- is counterproductive. Proof of that last point," he adds, "is the dispiriting tenacity of Trump's support." Crook is arguing, in other words, that we need to hang onto our faith that, with time and effort, we may, in the long run, be deeply rewarded by understanding what we may deem to

be an unreasonable position. The difficulty is in finding appropriate modes of engagement when reasonable dialogue is not possible.

How Does Relating to the Unreasonable Relate to P4C?

Our goal in Philosophy for Children–at least so we presume–is to engage youngsters in communities of philosophical inquiry so that they develop the habit of engaging in reasonable dialogue outside of the CPI space. There is a danger here, however, of oversell. That is, if we give the impression (even though that may not be our intent) that interpersonal communication is of little value unless all participants are equally open and reasonable, and if some find that, on many instances outside the CPI space, they encounter closed minds, faith in reasonable dialogue may be lost altogether. Memories of CPIs may thus coalesce into the assumption that this was a fun, but ultimately, impractical academic experience, and a return to the habit of verbal boxing may thus be reinstated. It is for that reason that we suggest that it behooves all of us, at some point, to comment that what we are doing in a CPI is an ideal to which we all ought to aspire but that, nonetheless, we all ought to be prepared that there will be times when we are stonewalled by those unable to stay open to opposing positions. We need to add that this in no way ought to diminish the personal ideal of being reasonable, as its motivation is grounded in the value of autonomy, not success (see above). As well, it would be helpful to note that, in those instances in which a two-way dialogue fails, there are other ways in which we can connect with others, namely, the one-way street of attempting to thoroughly understand the other's position and why the other is so firmly entrenched. Though it is obviously maddening when the other is closed off to who we are and what we believe, nonetheless we may find that this new understanding is actually enriching, and that our own position may become more nuanced as a result. This new perspective might, in turn, open up the possibility for future dialogue. In other words, if we are prepared to go down a one-way street toward the other, the other, in turn, might be more intrigued by the possibility of reciprocation.

All in all, then, what we are offering is just another tool for the P4C toolbox: that though a central P4C goal is to educate for dialogue that is open-minded and in which we learn to respect each other's views as potential sources of insight (Sharp 51), it is important, as well, to offer strategies by which discourse outside the classroom might nonetheless be profitably maintained even when confronted with minds that are closed.

Conclusion

Though engaging in reasoned dialogue is the ideal, and adopting alternative communicative strategies when confronted with steel-door biases is a second best, we need to keep in mind that, nonetheless, contact with the other's position, or the other person, may not be possible. This point is brought into stark relief by the portrayal, by Erik Larson, in his book *In the Garden of Beasts*, of American naiveté in their continuing confidence of the potential efficacy of reasonable dialogue with the Nazis in the six years leading up the beginning of WWII.

Wendy Bahary, in her book *Disarming the Narcissist,* warns of the despair that may result when one attempts to dialogue with the common-garden narcissist. She writes: "Like the president of a debate club or a judge with a gavel in hand, the narcissist invited you into a conversation that quickly became either a long-drawn-out soliloquy, argumentative or highly competitive. No matter what your response—ignoring him, fighting back, pleading, or even giving in—he is impervious" (Behary 97).

On the other hand, Behary suggests that we can keep despair at bay if we keep the distinction between empathy and compassion clearly focused in our minds. Empathy is the capacity to truly *understand* the experience of another.... It does not mean that you agree with, condone, or support the other person's feelings and behaviour (Behary 137). Another way of putting this would be to say that advocating "person perception" when "position perception" is not possible, is not advocating "love thy neighbour."

Ultimately the goal for a reasonable person is to find ways to protect and foster her reasonable self and the reasonable selves of others, in the face of what sometimes seems like an unreasonable world. We are suggesting here that a deeper understanding of the other, whether it is the other's position, *or the other as a person,* will help to do that. And to the degree that reasonable people are able to maintain that focus in the winds of conflict, to that degree they may serve as models to be emulated and hence ultimately nourish the common good.

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