

---

---

# THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

VOLUME LXXXVI, NO. 1, JANUARY 1989

---

---

## WHY DIALOGUE?

**B**EGIN by considering the role of dialogue in the life of a morally reflective person—a person, that is, who seriously asks himself how he should live and tries to live his life according to the answers he finds most plausible. How does talking enter into this exercise in self-definition?

Well, it all depends. Surely Socrates's response remains relevant: compared to the question of the good life, do not all others pale by comparison? And how better to discover the truth than to engage in discussion with anyone and everyone who professes an answer?

And yet I cannot allow Socrates to monopolize my moral vision. His fixation upon his single question threatens to distort the shape of human life—when will I get on with life itself if I am forever hung up on the question of how I ought to live? This is not to say that I should close myself off from moral questioning after adolescence; only that I must walk a tightrope, taking irreversible steps in the moral twilight while retaining the courage to stop and pause later on to peer among the shadows—at the risk of learning that my earlier decisions were worthless or worse.

This reflection leads to second thoughts about the happy image of Socrates roaming the forum in search of the next know-it-all who might be snared into serious conversation. If answering Socrates's question does not amount to the whole of my life, I shall have to be far more selective about my conversation partners. I shall have to listen hard when others tell me that one book is a waste of time, another worth reading; this person a fool, another worth talking to. The need for extreme selectivity engenders, in turn, doubts about the value of the dialogues I actually do conduct. Perhaps there is some Socrates out there who would, if I only spent more time searching for him, help me discover the absurdities in the plausible-sounding-stuff-I am-listening-to?

Such anxieties may lead to the exploration of two very different paths—both of which lead away from a dialogic view of ethics. One path leads to the question of faith: Given the fragmentary character of the real-world dialogues I conduct, the real question is whom should I trust in helping me pick appropriate talking partners—which church or school or tradition?

But I need not ask myself this question. Instead of appealing to external authority, I may appeal to myself. “Bruce, don’t be too impressed with what Kant said, or your Aunt Selma for that matter. You will have to think for yourself. Talking to others is no substitute. Admittedly, your own moral insight isn’t much to write home about; but, in the end, it’s all you’ve got.”

For all its hubristic dangers, I subscribe to this individualistic view. For the present, though, I am not interested in defending individualism against the partisans of authority. Instead, I want to emphasize an aspect of moral phenomenology which both sides recognize. As a real-world matter, neither side supposes that talking to others is of supreme importance in moral self-definition. The key decisions are made in silence: Whom to trust? What do I really think? Although talking to others can be useful in thinking things through, a little talk may go a long way; a lot may lead nowhere. The moral value of my life does not merely depend on how I rationalize it in conversation, but upon the intrinsic value of my moral beliefs, and my success in living up to them. Thus, I do not really think less of somebody who refuses the offer of some would-be Socrates: “Stop bothering me, Socrates, I’ve better things to do with my time than blab with you.” Such a response may well be a symptom of some deeper spiritual disease; but it may merely serve as a marker for the mature recognition that there is more to the moral life than mere talk.

All this gives me a real problem when I turn from personal morality to public life. Here I want to reverse field and proclaim dialogue as the first obligation of citizenship. Although a morally reflective person *can* permissibly cut herself off from real-world dialogue, a responsible citizen *cannot* with similar propriety cut herself off from political dialogue.

My task is not merely to suggest why this is so, but to confront the asymmetry problem: to explain why dialogue seems so much more fundamental in public than in personal life.

#### I.

But perhaps I am making problems for myself? Perhaps there is no fundamental asymmetry between the status of dialogue in public and personal life?

One way to reestablish symmetry, of course, is to demote political dialogue and deny that it is any more exigent than talk in other domains. A second way is to reassert the ultimately dialogic character of all morality—personal as well as public. I shall start by considering this second, more positive, way of reestablishing symmetry: if, despite appearances, dialogue is more generally important to morality than I have supposed, then maybe I am wrong in thinking I must solve the asymmetry problem to redeem a dialogic view of political life?

To take this line, it is not necessary to ignore the moral phenomenology with which we began. One need only deprive it of foundational importance. Sure, each of us may appropriately shut himself off from moral dialogue on countless occasions in personal life. But real-world exigencies should not blind us to the regulatory role of an ideal speech situation in our search for moral enlightenment. Despite our excusable failure to live up to the discursive ideal, we nevertheless suppose that we *should* be prepared to justify our moral choices if we ever found ourselves in an ideal dialogue with Socrates, Freud, and whomever-else-might-be-around-at-the-time. Indeed, we implicitly claim as much whenever we try to justify our life to ourselves (or others). To wax ontological: moral truth just is the name we give to those conclusions which would be reached in an ideal speech situation; nothing more and nothing less.<sup>1</sup>

This, transparently, is quite a mouthful; and I am skeptical about its ultimate validity. For the present, though, it is not necessary to explore these doubts with you. Even if we ultimately came to endorse the dialogic ideal of morality, I do not think we will do so in a way that reestablishes symmetry with the dialogic responsibilities of public life. To explain why, I must emphasize that I am not interested in emphasizing the role of talk in some ideal world we shall never inhabit. I am talking about the very imperfect world in which we live. So long, then, as the partisan of the ideal speech situation excuses the real-world evasion of dialogue when people confront the moral dilemmas of personal life, he is still left with a troublesome asymmetry: Why does a dialogic ideal that allows such easy escape by

<sup>1</sup> This theme has been developed at great length, and from different angles, by Jürgen Habermas throughout his career. Compare his *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Jeremy J. Shapiro, trans. (Boston: Beacon, 1971) with *Legitimation Crisis*, Thomas A. McCarthy, trans. (Boston: Beacon, 1975) with *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Thomas A. McCarthy, trans. (Boston: Beacon, vol. I: 1984; vol. II: 1987).

real-world people in personal life *not* allow such an easy escape when these very same people confront the dilemmas of public life?

This is, I think, quite a hard question to answer—so long, at least, as we continue to look upon dialogue as a tool for the discovery of moral truth. For the world of practical politics does not seem at all close to anybody's idea of an ideal speech situation. Politicians do talk a lot, but it is not unduly cynical to suppose that they mean less of what they say than other folk. Thus, if I were trying to carve out a limited area of practical life where I had an especially strong obligation to participate in the dialogic search for moral truth, politics seems an unlikely place to start. However imperfect a philosophy classroom or church discussion group or psychoanalytic office may seem in comparison with the ideal speech situation, surely they are better bets than the public forum? If we do not think we are morally required to talk in one or another of these more private places, why should the search for moral truth require us to take talk seriously in politics?

The Athenians killed Socrates after all; and the modern state has hardly been more hospitable to the spirit of moral philosophy.

## II.

Such reflections naturally lead me to question the asymmetry thesis from the other side. If practical political life seems such an unlikely forum for the dialogic search for moral truth, why insist that dialogue is especially central to politics?

Because there are other important things to talk about than the moral truth: in particular, how people who disagree about the moral truth might nonetheless reasonably solve their ongoing problem of living together. This is, at any rate, how liberals characteristically formulate the problem of political order;<sup>2</sup> and it is from this vantage point that I wish to vindicate the asymmetry thesis. That is, I do not propose to base my case for public dialogue on some assertedly general feature of the moral life, but upon the distinctive way liberals conceive of the problem of public order. This means, of course, that my argument will not convince people who reject the underlying liberal problematic. The most I can do here is to set up the problem in a way that makes rejection difficult.

<sup>2</sup> Compare T. M. Scanlon, "Contractarianism and Utilitarianism," in Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams, eds., *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (New York: Cambridge, 1982), pp. 103–128, esp. pp. 110–119; Thomas Nagel, "Moral Conflict and Political Legitimacy," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, xvi, 3 (Summer 1987): 215–240.

Consider then a simple model of a liberal polity, consisting of  $N$  primary groups. Each primary group consists of one or more people who have combined faith and reason in an effort to search out the moral truth. Members of the same primary group have come up with the same answer to Socrates's question; members of different groups, different answers. Despite their ongoing disagreements, all groups find themselves on the same planet, in potential conflict over the planet's scarce resources. Hence the problem of liberal politics: How are the different groups to resolve their problem of mutual coexistence in a reasonable way?

Assume the position of  $P$ , a morally reflective member of one or another primary group, and you can begin to see why dialogue seems especially important for the successful solution of *this* problem. After all, if  $P$  could be confident that people outside her group, the not- $P$ s, had reached the same conclusions as she did in their search for moral truth, then talking to them about the problem of coexistence might not be so important. Instead, each individual group could unilaterally declare its moral truths "to be self-evident" and authorize governmental officials to resolve all conflicts by consulting these self-evident truths. Since, on this hypothesis, each group's truths are identical to the others, there would be no need for the groups to talk *to one another* in order to come to terms about the aims of legitimate government. It is, however, precisely because  $P$  has reason to know that the not- $P$ s have not reached the same moral conclusions that talk seems especially exigent. Whereas there may only be one moral truth, there are surely an infinite number of paths to moral error. Precisely because  $P$  believes that she has got closest to the truth, all she knows about the not- $P$ s is that each has taken one of an infinite number of wrong turns on the path to truth. But which wrong turn?

The answer will be critical in the solution of the liberal problem of coexistence. Perhaps the moral "errors" of the not- $P$ s will prove so serious to  $P$  that she will be unable to work out reasonable terms of coexistence with her fellow earthlings; but perhaps not. It all depends upon the particular moral mistakes made by the not- $P$ s and how these "errors" relate to the disputes that  $P$  and the not- $P$ s must resolve before they can live together on the same planet. There is, moreover, only one way for  $P$  to find out how matters stand. And that is *to talk* to the not- $P$ s about it.

In undertaking this exercise in liberal conversation,  $P$  is not to try to convince the not- $P$ s to change their minds and see, at long last, the compelling truth of  $P$ . Instead, the conversation has a more

pragmatic intention. It recognizes that, for the moment at least, neither  $P$  nor not- $P$  is going to win the moral argument to the other's satisfaction, and proceeds to consider the way they might live together despite this ongoing disagreement.  $P$ 's refusal to talk to the not- $P$ s about this pragmatic question simply disqualifies her from the liberal project. She cannot think of herself as a participant in a *liberal* state unless she is willing to participate (in one way or another) in this ongoing conversation with the not- $P$ s. In contrast,  $P$  *can* think of herself as a participant in the search for moral truth without ever talking about this subject to the not- $P$ s (or to her fellow  $P$ s for that matter).

It is this simple difference which motivates the asymmetry thesis: the liberal citizen must recognize a dialogic obligation of a categorically different, and more imperative, kind than he does in his personal pursuit of the moral truth. To put my point paradoxically, it is precisely because the liberal state does *not* aim for moral truth that its citizens must recognize themselves under such preemptory dialogic obligations. Let us call this the *supreme pragmatic imperative*: If you and I disagree about the moral truth, the only way we stand half a chance of solving our problems in coexistence in a way both of us find reasonable is by talking to one another about them.

### III.

But is the pragmatic imperative really supreme? Granted, dialogue may be one way of reasonably solving the liberal's problem of coexistence; but is it the only way? If not, why should we prefer dialogue over its competitors?

These questions motivate the centuries-long liberal fascination with the marketplace as an alternative to more dialogic forms of dispute resolution. Here I am, needing some bricks to complete my cathedral; there you are, needing some beer to complete a wonderful Sunday afternoon at the football game. Do we really have to talk to one another to resolve our problem in mutual coexistence? Why do I not just trade some of my beer for some of your bricks at a mutually satisfactory rate of exchange? Why is trading not a perfectly reasonable way of side-stepping our moral disagreement over the relative merits of our Sunday activities? What does dialogue have to do with it?

My answer is that dialogue has a lot to do with it, and it is question-begging to pretend otherwise. The point is hardly novel, but bears repeating, given the ease with which modern philosophical marketeers manage to evade it. It is the old question of *meum* and *tuum*. Of course, once I agree that those bricks over there are rightfully called "yours," and you agree that this beer over here is right-

fully “mine,” we may then side-step our moral disagreements by trading away to our hearts’ content.<sup>3</sup> But why does the marketeer suppose that both of us are so ready to indulge his complacent assumptions? After all, the question of distributive justice has not just arisen in the history of Western civilization.

Moreover, something special happens to the marketeer’s pretensions to sweet reasonableness once I respond to his eager offer to sell me some bricks for my cathedral by denying that the bricks are rightfully his to sell in the first place. As I move toward the bricks with appropriative intent, our marketeer has but two choices. One is to use brute force to repel my assertion of superior right; the other is to engage me in a conversation that seeks to persuade me that, despite our disagreement over the ultimate value of cathedrals and football stadiums, it is reasonable for me to recognize the legitimacy of his superior claim to the bricks. In making this claim, the “brick-owner” may try to link up his assertion of right to the liberal virtues of a market system. Moreover, depending on the existing distribution of property rights, he might well convince me.

But this in no way defeats my point. We are not now trying to locate the place of the market within a discursive theory of political justification. We are considering whether market forms of coordination can plausibly allow liberals to deny dialogue the fundamental place accorded it by the supreme pragmatic imperative. The answer is “no” so long as the marketeer is prepared to concede that we may appropriately question each others’ entitlements to the bargaining chips we bring to the bargaining table.

This seems worth emphasizing at a time when some of the best known free-market tracts ostentatiously fail to satisfy the pragmatic imperative’s demand for dialogic legitimation. Robert Nozick, for example, does not deny that a satisfactory defense of market relations requires a theory of justice which defines the conditions under which one person might rightfully appropriate something his competitors also desire. Remarkably enough, he does not even try to come up with such a theory in his well-known *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*,<sup>4</sup> charmingly suggesting that it would be a mistake to hold off publication until perfection were reached (*ibid.*, pp. xiii–xiv).

Perhaps this was good enough for a young man writing in the early 1970s; fifteen years later, I begin to grow suspicious about his continuing silence: Does Nozick simply suppose the question of distributive justice will go away because he refuses to answer it? Why

<sup>3</sup> So long, at least, as our trades do not adversely affect others (a big proviso).

<sup>4</sup> New York: Basic Books, 1974, cf. p. 150.

should others take his defense of markets seriously when he does not even try to answer the most obvious question about them?<sup>5</sup>

IV.

But how to discharge the dialogic burden of liberalism? How to talk to people who disagree with you about the moral truth? One thing is clear. Somehow or other, citizens of a liberal state must learn to talk to one another in a way that enables each of them to avoid condemning their own personal morality as evil or false. Otherwise, the conversation's pragmatic point becomes pointless.

This has hardly been lost upon the great spokesmen for the liberal tradition from Hobbes to the present. Indeed, the history of liberal thought can be read as a series of efforts to provide conversational models that would enable political participants to talk to one another in an appropriately neutral way. Rather than sustain self-confident liberal dialogue, however, these efforts have helped generate widespread skepticism about the conceptual possibility of neutrality. This skepticism poses an even greater threat to the pragmatic imperative

<sup>5</sup> Among modern free marketeers, only Friedrich Hayek has sought to challenge the supreme pragmatic imperative outright. Unlike Nozick, Hayek does not merely fail to answer the question of initial entitlements; he tries to cure us of the Enlightenment disease that leads us to think the question is worth asking. Against the Enlightenment, Hayek emphasizes the pathetically limited capacity of individuals to understand their environment. On his view, men and women simply are not built to make the kinds of global judgments about social conditions of the kind propounded by theorists of distributive justice, liberal or otherwise. Instead of such blundering efforts "to correct" the market, the thoughtful person should stand in awed appreciation of the way markets allow imperfect humans to exchange far more information than any one of them could possibly process on his own. Rather than destroy this delicate evolutionary organism, we should root out the Enlightenment fantasy that men and women could, through public dialogue, improve upon the invisible hand of the market. This hubristic conversation about social justice will only empower remote bureaucrats to aggrandize themselves at everybody's expense. So let us just stop asking the question of justice, and limit ourselves to bargaining with whatever bargaining chips the market is gracious enough to give us. See Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty: The Mirage of Social Justice* (Chicago: University Press, 1976), esp. pp. 62–101.

I am thoroughly unconvinced by Hayek's critique. Not that I wish to minimize the importance of markets. They are a key tool by which people with radically different ideals may coordinate their activities to mutual advantage. It is only Hayek's effort to treat the market as some quasi-divine adaptation to the human condition that I find mystifying. Rather than an organic development, the modern market system is the product of an unending series of highly self-conscious decisions by politicians, lawyers, policemen. Despite their mental limitations, most people are perfectly aware of this, and are quite capable of considering whether the market might operate more fairly if the relevant politicians, lawyers, policemen were given rather different operating instructions. The point of this footnote, however, is hardly to deal with Hayek's arguments with the care they deserve, but to point out that they proceed on a level that is more fundamental than most.

than does a question-begging faith in the market. Whatever reasons Kant may have had for his great maxim, surely liberal pragmatists will not question the wisdom of "Ought implies can." If we cannot find a way to talk to one another neutrally, we do not seem to have much choice but to give up on the pragmatic imperative and return to the age-old effort to base political life on the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about the moral life.

To make matters grimmer, I can hardly deny that the history of liberal thought gives substance to this skeptical suggestion. Although many have sought to blaze a path to neutrality, the goal has proven disturbingly elusive. Given centuries of failure, perhaps I am naively optimistic to suppose that we should continue the quest. Naive or not, this is what I do suppose. Simple prudence, however, suggests the wisdom of studying the mistakes of the past before trying to formulate a more defensible conception of a worthwhile neutrality. Although I can hardly present a comprehensive catalog of liberal error, it will be useful to isolate three recurring false moves before trying to break out of the impasse.

The first false move tries to isolate a single value that all people consider most important despite their transparent disagreements over other values. By focusing upon the political implications of this supreme value, perhaps all of us may talk our way to a solution to our problems of coexistence in a way that we all find reasonable?

For this conversational maneuver to succeed, all groups must identify the same value as supreme. The most promising candidate, as Hobbes saw early on, is the fear of death. What is equally clear, to me at least, is that neither the fear of death nor anything else has the moral resolving power Hobbes hoped for it. As a sometime resident of New York City, I have cultivated a healthy appreciation of life's evanescent quality. Yet I am happy to report that I have not promoted self-preservation to the supreme place in my moral scheme. Indeed, I would despise a person who was not willing to sacrifice his life for more important things on suitable occasions. Thus, I would refuse to participate in a political conversation that began: "However much you and I disagree on other matters, we both accept the supreme importance of self-preservation." Rather than provide me with a neutral starting point, a Hobbesian political conversation would constantly oblige me to say things I found morally demeaning, despicable, false. If the point of liberal conversation is to enable me to talk to you without affirming moral propositions I think are false, the Hobbesian line goes nowhere.

So does a second well-worn path to neutrality. Here I am not

called upon to affirm the existence of a single supreme value that trumps all our lesser moral disagreements. Instead, I am invited to translate my disagreements into a specially sanitized evaluative framework that promises to purge them of their non-neutral aspect. The classic example is Jeremy Bentham's felicific calculus, based on the neutral-seeming principle that "pushpin is as good as poetry." Once citizens of a Benthamite polity learn to translate their disputes into the common denominator of utility, they are promised a discourse that will enable them to discuss their conflicts in a technocratic way that requires none of them to say anything inconsistent with their primary moral beliefs.

The trouble comes, however, when we inquire about the manual that assesses the value of each human activity in terms of its "utility." My point is not the "standard" epistemological objection—whatever it may be—to interpersonal comparisons of utility. Of course, if it proves impossible to make interpersonal comparisons, the utilitarian can hardly make good on his promised translation manual, and we have reached a dead end very quickly. Since I believe that this objection is overblown,<sup>6</sup> I do not want to rest my case against the translation strategy on epistemological grounds. Instead, I shall suppose that my utilitarian has emerged triumphant over his epistemological critics, producing a manual that plausibly compares the "utility" produced by pushpin, poetry, and much more besides.

It is at this stage that I want to enter my neutrality objection. However much one might admire the manual as a work in technocratic translation, it is quite another thing for the utilitarian to insist that his sanitized language must be used by the rest of us in talking about our political problems. Instead, his demand that all of us use his manual will provoke the very kind of un-neutral dialogue that he wished to avoid in the first place: Why does my desire for pushpin merit two utility points while your desire for poetry merits four? If *this* is what utility means, I refuse to speak a political language that obliges me to falsify my primary moral beliefs in such a systematic fashion!

So much, then, for two wrong turns down the path toward neutrality. Let us consolidate our ground by calling one the *trumping strategy*: here the liberal seeks to trump primary moral disagreement by positing a supreme moral value we all putatively share as the basis for

<sup>6</sup> For some of the reasons suggested by Donald Davidson in "Judging Interpersonal Interests," in Jon Elster and Aanund Hylland, eds., *Foundations of Social Choice Theory* (New York: Cambridge, 1986), pp. 195–211.

neutral political dialogue. Call the second the *translation strategy*: here we are invited to translate our moral categories into some allegedly uncontroversial framework of political assessment. Since neither strategy looks at all promising, we can now give the skeptic's question about neutrality a sharper edge: Is there a liberal way of responding to primary moral disagreement without trying to trump it or to translate it?

## V.

Well, I suppose we can try to transcend it. Thus Rawls, especially in his Kantian phase, seemed<sup>7</sup> to be inviting us to gain perspective on our primary moral disagreements by trying to strip away all the particular life experiences that make them seem so important to us. If we might only think our way to the astonishing ignorance of the inhabitants of the "Original Position," perhaps we could solve our problems in political coexistence by talking to one another in a neutral way?

Rawls's proposal is only the last in a long line of liberal exercises in transcendence. Many a utilitarian, for example, has urged us onward and upward to a perspective that, when compared to Rawls's, seems downright attractive. At least we are not obliged to think of ourselves as ignorant ciphers whose principal slogan is "more-for-me"; we are instead to talk to one another as if we were knowledgeable and benevolent ideal observers<sup>8</sup> of the ongoing political struggle, concerned only to maximize the group's welfare. The formidable differences between ignorant contractor and benevolent observer should not, however, blind us to a basic flaw they have in common. Partisans of both modes of transcendence seek to charge us an admission ticket, as it were, before we may participate in political conversation. We can only join the dialogue if we can manage to speak in the accents of the approved transcendent being without falsifying our primary moral commitments. If this is the price of admission, it is perfectly reasonable to refuse to pay it: "You so-called liberals say you'll only allow me to participate in political dialogue if I address our mutual problems from the vantage point of your favorite tran-

<sup>7</sup> Despite Rawls's subsequent disavowal of this interpretation, ["Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, XIV, 3 (Summer 1985): 223–51], I do not believe that critics were simply engaged in tea-leaf reading in finding this theme (uneasily coexisting with many others) in Rawls's major works. See Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge, 1982).

<sup>8</sup> See Roderick Firth, "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, XII, 3 (March 1952): 317–345.

scendent being. But it is precisely this affirmation of your recipe for transcendence that I find morally objectionable.”

Since Rawls’s construction now dominates liberal thought, this complaint currently takes the form of eloquent attacks on the deracinating conception of the self presupposed by his thought experiment. A generation ago, when liberals took ideal observing more seriously, the complaint had to do with the extraordinary kind of self-immolation required in thinking myself into a position where the personal involvements of Bruce Ackerman counted no more (if no less) than those of Joe Shmoe.<sup>9</sup> Although I am sympathetic to these particular complaints, it is more important to generalize them. The root of the problem is the wrongfulness involved in requiring citizens to affirm the value of *any* particular exercise in transcendence as a necessary condition for discursive participation. Any such demand will predictably require some citizens to talk about themselves in morally demeaning and falsifying ways; and it is precisely this demand that makes the pragmatic imperative pointless. Trying to transcend our moral disagreements seems, in short, no more promising than translating or trumping them. Once again, we have reached an impasse: Is there a way out?

#### VI.

Yes, I think there is. It is the path of conversational restraint. The basic idea is very simple. When you and I learn that we disagree about one or another dimension of the moral truth, we should not search for some common value that will trump this disagreement; nor should we try to translate it into some putatively neutral framework; nor should we seek to transcend it by talking about how some unearthly creature might resolve it. We should simply say *nothing at all* about this disagreement and put the moral ideals that divide us off the conversational agenda of the liberal state. In restraining ourselves in this way, we need not lose the chance to talk to one another about our deepest moral disagreements in countless other, more private, contexts. We simply recognize that, while these ongoing debates continue, we will gain nothing of value by falsely asserting that the political community is of one mind on deeply contested matters. Doubtless the exercise of conversational restraint will prove extremely frustrating—for it will prevent each of us from

<sup>9</sup> The development of this line of criticism over the last generation can be usefully approached through the work of Bernard Williams. Compare his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1985) with J. J. C. Smart & Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (New York: Cambridge, 1973), pp. 77–155.

justifying our political actions by appealing to many of the things we hold to be among the deepest and most revealing truths known to humanity. Nonetheless, our mutual act of conversational restraint allows all of us to win a priceless advantage: none of us will be obliged to say something in liberal conversation that seems *affirmatively false*. Having constrained the conversation in this way, we may instead use dialogue for pragmatically productive purposes: to identify normative premises all political participants find reasonable (or, at least, not unreasonable).

To refine this simple idea, begin by clarifying its intended domain of application. In calling for conversational constraint, I am not trying to stifle the voices of those who wish to challenge one or another aspect of their ongoing power relationship with others. To the contrary, a liberal polity must allow any person to raise any question she wants to if its dialogic project is to succeed: If the point of liberal politics is to come up with solutions that all participants find reasonable, how could this possibly be accomplished if citizens are not even allowed to place all their questions on the discursive agenda?

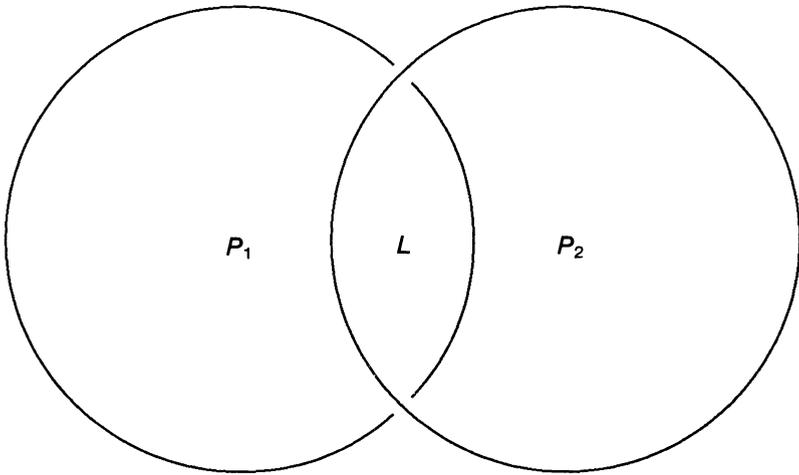
My principle of conversational restraint does not apply to the questions citizens may ask, but to the answers they may legitimately give to each others' questions:<sup>10</sup> whenever one citizen is confronted

<sup>10</sup> The simple distinction between questions and answers helps clarify a Rawlsian project with which I am very sympathetic. In his most recent work, Rawls is concerned to distinguish liberal political life from one that is based on a "mere modus vivendi." See John Rawls, "The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus," *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, VII, 1 (Spring 1987): 1–25, esp. pp. 10–15. For me, this dismissive label describes a regime that extends the principle of conversational restraint beyond its proper bounds to deny citizens the unrestricted right to insist on a liberal answer to any aspect of their power relationship which they wish to question by placing it on the political agenda. Consider, for example, a polity that threatens to punish anyone who tries to precipitate serious political debate about the existing distribution of property rights or gender roles. Although the political agenda is left open to questions on other matters, each person is told that she will simply have "to live with" the status quo so far as this particular dimension of power is concerned. Such a restriction on political freedom, to my mind, categorically deprives the regime of liberal legitimacy, and reduces it to the status of a "mere modus vivendi."

I cannot deny, however, that a "mere modus vivendi" may be the best liberals can realistically hope for under one or another extreme set of conditions—where allowing the serious political consideration of the power that comes from property or whatever will tear the place apart, and lead only to the destruction of a polity that might otherwise have generated productive political dialogue on other issues. Even as a temporary expedient, however, the use of such "gag rules" is fraught with danger. Nonetheless, the world being the place that it is, I cannot say that such a drastic step is absolutely unthinkable. See Steven Holmes, "Gag Rules or the Politics of Omission," in Jon Elster and Rune Slagstad, eds., *Constitutionalism and Democracy* (New York: Cambridge, 1988), pp. 19–58.

by another's question, he cannot suppress the questioner, nor can he respond by appealing to (his understanding of) the moral truth; he must instead be prepared, in principle,<sup>11</sup> to engage in a restrained dialogic effort to locate normative premises that both sides find reasonable.

The substantive outcome of this liberal dialogue will, of course, depend upon our primary moral commitments. Nonetheless, we can say something pretty general about the formal relationship between liberal political conversation and the talk going on in other places in liberal society. To make the formal points simple, suppose that there were only two primary groups in our liberal society and that their efforts at constrained conversation have succeeded in isolating some common evaluative ground. The over-all shape of normative conversation, then, will look something like this:



$P_1$  and  $P_2$  represent the set of moral propositions each primary group affirms in conversations between members of the same group. In intergroup conversation, however, participants only make use of the  $L$ -propositions for purposes of conflict resolution. For it is only these propositions which will not be condemned as false by members of either group (though the reasons  $P_1$  and  $P_2$  will give to justify any particular  $L$  proposition may, of course, be quite different).

While I hope you find this formalism clarifying, I should empha-

<sup>11</sup> Of course, practical steps must be taken to organize the agenda so as to make it manageable for real-world debate and decision. But this practical task cannot be made the pretext for the infinite deferral of a part of the agenda which some powerful participants do not wish to consider. See fn. 10.

size that it only describes the first, and more negative, stage of the liberal dialectic—the stage where liberal citizens, through the exercise of conversational restraint, identify *L*-propositions that might function as public value premises in a liberal political argument. Even if such a purging operation were completely carried out,<sup>12</sup> it remains for the liberal citizenry to fashion affirmative arguments out of the available public premises—arguments sufficiently incisive to resolve the citizenry's ongoing disputes. Obviously, this affirmative operation can be a creative business. Depending on the *L*-set, there may be a host of discursive possibilities available.

For present purposes, the important thing to notice is the distinctive character of these arguments. On the one hand, none of the participants condemns any of their normative premises as morally false; on the other hand, the argumentative aim is not to discover the ultimate moral truth. Instead, it is to provide each citizen with something different—a way of reasonably responding to their continuing moral disagreement. As a consequence, the ongoing political dialogue looks very different from the kinds of conversation idealized by critical theorists like Jürgen Habermas. Most importantly, liberal citizens do not feel free to introduce any and all moral arguments into the conversational field. Instead of looking to ultimate conversational victory in some far-distant ideal speech situation, their energies are focused on the formidable task of governing *this* world through a political dialogue that does not require participants to renounce publicly their deepest moral beliefs. However humble the liberal's dialogic ambitions may seem from the unreachable heights of the ideal speech situation, my principal aim has been to convince you that even such a limited dialogic objective is not necessarily an impossible dream; that you and I may strive to govern this world through dialogue, albeit dialogue of a special kind.

#### VII.

But, I hear you ask, is this fourth path toward neutrality really different from the first three? Does not it too demand something from people which they may not be morally prepared to give?

Yes, but the sacrifice is of a different kind. Rather than require people to say things they believe are false, I am asking them to make a special kind of emotional sacrifice. At least on those occasions when liberal citizens meet with one another to reason their way to legally authoritative resolutions of their disputes, each must try to repress their desire to say many things which they believe are true, but which

<sup>12</sup> In real life, there will usually be no practical need for a sharp separation of the two phases of the liberal dialectic described in this paragraph.

will divert the group's energy away from the elaboration of the pragmatic implications of the *L*-set.

This kind of selective repression is, I think, a familiar feature of social life. It is continually required by the ongoing exercise that sociologists call role playing. Each social role can be understood as a set of conventional constraints upon acceptable symbolic behavior. When acting as a lawyer, I operate under constraints different from those delimiting my conduct as a teacher, which are different, in turn, from those involved in working on a construction project. Some role definitions allow for a broader range of symbolic behavior than others; but all roles are constraining, placing vast domains of conversation off the agenda so long as the participants are acting within a particular role framework.<sup>13</sup>

Truth is not necessarily a defense for stepping out of role. Thus, when I go into a class on political philosophy, I must restrain any impulse I might have to talk about the calculus of variations—even though my remarks on the calculus may be truer than anything I have to offer about politics. To be a competent social actor, I must constantly engage in a process of selective repression—restraining the impulse to speak the truth on a vast number of role-irrelevant matters so as to get on with the particular form of life in which I am presently engaged. Just as you and I try to stick to the point when we are building a car or worshipping god, so too liberal citizens must exercise a similar kind of self-control when engaging in liberal politics—joining together neither to build a better Buick nor to save men's souls, but to solve the conflicts of social life on terms that all participants may find reasonable. Thus, in calling upon people to exercise conversational self-restraint in public life, I am asking them to exercise a fundamental competence that all socialized human beings possess (to one or another degree).

But, of course, this is hardly enough to make my demand morally uncontroversial: the idea of conversational constraint is, at best, a part of a satisfactory political philosophy, not the whole of it. Most obviously, my proposal will be opposed by the partisans of an ethic of radical spontaneity, who look upon all roles as if they were merely fetters on the human spirit, and call upon us to smash any role as soon as we begin to perform it competently.<sup>14</sup> On this level, the

<sup>13</sup> For a brilliant analysis of this aspect of role relations, see Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1974).

<sup>14</sup> Roberto Unger comes remarkably close to this position in his recent work. See his *Passion* (New York: Free Press, 1984); *Social Theory: Its Situation and Its Task* (New York: Cambridge, 1987); *False Necessity* (New York: Cambridge, 1987).

defense of the conversational restraints of liberal citizenship is simply a special case of a more general affirmation of the value of role playing in social life. Such a defense need not deny the reality of spiritual constraint which the romantic critic finds so confining, nor the importance of working with others to create new role relations that better express the different aspects of our being. (Indeed, my proposal to develop more fully the role of liberal citizen falls precisely under this second heading.) Instead, a defender of liberal role playing should argue that the romantic critic has chosen the wrong way to ease the sense of role constriction which threatens to strangle him. Rather than assault the very idea of role playing, it seems wiser to seek relief in the marvelous human capacity to shift role engagements over time. I can be a lawyer, teacher, construction worker, father, baseball coach—as well as a liberal citizen. Although each of these roles imposes its own constraints, the value of my life is hardly exhausted by the way I confront the challenges of any particular one; it depends as well on how I shift from role to role over time and build up a meaningful whole out of these temporally-limited parts. This seems a better response to the inadequacies of any individual role than a romantic effort to repudiate role playing entirely.

Even if so much were conceded, the defense of liberal restraint must proceed to a second stage. After all, I am not arguing for any system of roles, but a system that gives the role of liberal citizenship a central place. What is so good about trying to solve disputes through a neutrally constrained dialogue?

#### VIII.

There are many ways to answer this question. Some will seek to elaborate the intrinsic virtues of liberal citizenship—the distinctive value of the liberal's relentless effort to weave a web of intelligibility which can link parties together despite their many moral differences from one another, the moral value of allowing all of us to participate in politics without falsifying our deepest convictions. Others will pursue more consequentialist paths—emphasizing the value of the open society that it is the aim of liberal citizenship to produce.

My aim here, however, has not been to convince you of the ultimate value of liberal citizenship. It has been to suggest its distinctive character. I have tried to explain the liberal grounds for the dialogic imperative in politics, and defend this pragmatic imperative against two relatively obvious objections—one raised by the free-marketeer, the other by the neutrality skeptic. Although the question-begging character of the free-marketeer's objection is pretty obvious,<sup>15</sup> I have

<sup>15</sup> But recall my inadequate treatment of Hayek in fn. 5.

only begun to take the skeptic seriously. At best, I have suggested why the admitted failures of the past need not discourage us from blazing a new trail toward the liberal state—one through which, by the resolute exercise of conversational restraint, you and I may talk to one another in ways that neither of us condemns as morally unreasonable.

I have not even tried to establish affirmatively that the path of conversational restraint will not finally lead liberals to a fourth dead end. As you and I discover that we disagree about more and more things, perhaps we will find that the exercise of conversational restraint leaves us nothing to say to one another about our basic problems of coexistence. In terms of our simple Venn diagram, perhaps the *L*-set will turn out to be empty. This seems especially likely since the typical Western society contains many primary groups, whereas our simple picture only schematizes the *L*-set of a two-group society. As we increase the number of circles in our picture, the conversational space described by the intersecting *L*-set will get progressively smaller and smaller. Under modern conditions, does it shrink to zero?

This is the question I asked myself in *Social Justice in the Liberal State*.<sup>16</sup> Rather than rehearse my own answer, it has seemed more important to encourage you to think the question worth asking—by cautioning you against a superficial diagnosis of the liberal aspiration. Liberalism does not depend upon a question-begging faith in markets. Nor need it demand an alienating form of self-presentation which requires us to repudiate publicly our deepest moral convictions. Instead, it calls upon us to reflect upon the pragmatic imperative to talk to strangers as well as soul-mates; and to consider whether, despite the strangers' strangeness, we might still have something reasonable to say to one another about our efforts to coexist on this puzzling planet.

BRUCE ACKERMAN

Yale University

<sup>16</sup> New Haven: Yale, 1980.