CONVERSING WITH THOSE WITH WHOM WE DISAGREE: A RESPONSE TO AIKIN AND TALISSE'S 'ARGUMENT IN MIXED COMPANY: MOM'S MAXIM VS. MILL'S PRINCIPLE' (*THINK* 27)

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'Mom's Maxim' states that it is impolite to discuss religion or politics in mixed company. Instead, Aikin and Talisse want us to heed Mill's Principle: 'He who knows only his own side of a case knows little of that.' They want us actively to engage in debate with those who may disagree with us. To fail to do so may lead to irresponsible judgements, implied if not actually stated, of all those who hold positions different from our own. This points to a 'dark side' of Mom's Maxim.

Mom's Maxim applies particularly to social conversation where reasons for restraint in arguments about religious or political positions may appear obvious. Conversation can become monopolised by strident talkers; people can feel hurt and worried if their beliefs are openly lampooned. It can all seem to be a waste of time, for is anyone ever prepared to change their mind over such matters? Moreover, sociologists make a powerful point about 'cognitive contamination'. Berger and Zijderveld discuss how this is rooted in a basic fact: '... as social beings, we are continuously influenced by those we converse with. Conversation will, more or else inevitably, change our view of reality. It's a given, then, that if we want to avoid such change, we'd better be very careful as to the people we talk with.'[1] Much the easiest thing to do is to keep to safe topics such as the weather, sport or just gossip.

Searching for truth

Yet in over-turning Mom's Maxim more is at stake. As well as causing difficulties in interpersonal communication, much

is wrong with public, especially political, dialogue. Ought not discussion in depth of controversial issues be a feature of all debate including in-school work? However, politicians hardly give an example to follow. Ronald Dworkin began his book *Is Democracy Possible?* by referring to the conduct of American politics as 'in an appalling state. We disagree, fiercely, about almost everything . . . . each side has no respect for the other . . . our politics are rather a form of war.'[2] In an earlier article, Talisse himself noted an equally damaging point: 'The quality of political discourse presented in the popular media is offensively juvenile.' (*Think* 18, p. 15)

Aikin and Talisse argue that a fundamental concern for truth should drive willingness to engage with controversial issues: 'We should take seriously those who disagree precisely because we care about the truth of our own beliefs' (p. 34). They wisely see this as: 'Like caring for a child, caring about the truth is an ongoing process of attending to our beliefs and looking after the grounds upon which they rest.' (p.43) Yet here a further hurdle presents itself. Is it not easy for such concern for truth to slip into a dogmatism and intolerance which are inappropriate in a liberal democracy? A kind of intellectual paralysis can easily set in whereby, in order to avoid any hint of an 'I am right and you are wrong' attitude, we move to the opposite extreme of assuming that all positions are equally valid as simply expressions of subjective points of view, excepting of course on purely empirical matters. The tug between cognitive relativism and dogmatism is real and a major reason for failure to engage in public or private with questions of 'truth'.

The need to avoid dogmatism

The danger of becoming dogmatic is real. In his earlier article defending scepticism Talisse intended to be open: he states as non-controversial that 'None of us is infallible' (p. 12). However, concerning claims such as 'There are no psychics, there are no spiritual beings, holistic medicine is a sham' he comments: 'Of course, sceptics are committed

to these claims' (p. 16). Whether Talisse is right or wrong here, the definiteness of his 'Of course' does come across as dogmatic. He goes on to argue that sceptics avoid dogmatism because they 'insist that claims be backed up with sufficient support' (p. 17). But is this adequate?

The crucial question is the quality of the evidence, what constitutes 'sufficient support'? The dictum of W.K. Clifford: 'It is wrong always, everywhere and for everyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence' can mask a form of dogmatism. Basil Mitchell has noted: 'A policy like Clifford's, which is designed to avoid error, is not well suited to discovering truth. There is need for an experimental faith.'[3] Is that experimental faith, for Clifford as for Talisse, a naturalist interpretation of reality? Such a faith is evidenced by assuming that evidence must be empirical. It implies that there is no room for appeal to a transcendent aspect to reality of which humans can become aware by means other than empirical/scientific reasoning.

Stephen Bostock in *Think* 29 Autumn 2010, under the title 'Evidence for the Impossible', describes an example of such possibly non-empirical evidence. Instead of greeting this with outright scepticism in a positivist manner Bostock notes: 'I don't think there is any justification for just denying the evidence because we can't explain it.' For, as he had earlier said: 'We are in no position to state that there just could not be a disembodied mind'. (p. 36.30) Is not this a more reasonable approach than frank denial?

Many disagreements result from assumptions which vary between people. So the real debate needs to take place at that level – what assumptions are you making, and why do you make them? Dialogue should not simply import as taken for granted what amounts to a naturalist conception of the world. As Wittgenstein argued: 'The game of doubting presupposes certainty.' (*On Certainty*, para. 115) The properly sceptical question to be put to both believer and interlocutor is 'What do you count as evidence, and why?'

Assumptions and experience

Assumptions we make concerning the nature of reality often emerge out of our experience of the real world. Experience varies since, even as there is much in common, our personal viewpoints differ. For example, most people who become convinced of psychic realities may be just as concerned for truth as sceptics but, because of their personal experiences, they see the 'evidence' differently. Should not sceptical challenge be based on a widening of the understanding of 'evidence' so as to include, instead of trying to exclude, such personal experience? The problem is that this seems to open the door to subjectivity of all kinds.

But what is the alternative? To ignore another person's experience can be a sign of insensitivity. Is this conducive to that comprehensive understanding which should be the ideal goal of an educated person? As the anthropologist Fernandez-Armesto has noted: 'Every time we take notice of each other we get a little closer to truth.'[4] In order to do this, some suspension of disbelief and willingness to try to stand where others stand is necessary.

Determination not to accept an experience as 'true', even provisionally, may encourage its 'explanation' in alternative terms. This may seem rational but it is also hazardous, for how do we know that we are correctly interpreting what was actually experienced? 'Non-experience' can hardly count as evidence, for many other reasons may be adduced for such non-experience other than the non-existence of what is claimed. Wittgenstein's would seem a particularly appropriate warning to those who light-heartedly explain away other people's experience: 'Is my understanding only blindness to my lack of understanding? It often seems so to me.' (*On Certainty*, para. 418) Furthermore, unless excellent evidence can be produced to the contrary such as insanity, is it not sheer presumption to imagine that we understand better than the subject of the experience?

The effectiveness of debate

Engagement with those with whom we disagree also requires us to question the effectiveness of discussion. How can it be meaningful, enabling the participants to understand better and even, if appropriate, to change or modify what they believe? We need to ask why people so easily assume intransigent positions and effectively shut themselves off from any real dialogue and thinking through fear of venturing outside the bubble. Two considerations here are important:

(i) The need for self-esteem

Unfriendly, unsympathetic interrogation does not encourage people to leave behind familiar but inadequate notions in which they have hitherto put their trust. To get people to have the kind of radical openness to fresh discussion of what they have long assumed to be fact, it is necessary to affirm them as people, otherwise they will tend to allow their psychological need for reassurance to resist a possibly dangerous intrusion into their hitherto tidy world.

Peter Elbow in *Writing With Power* notes that, if the people to whom a writer addresses his words have a stake in what the writer aims to refute: '... the more you try to persuade them, the more their stake in the view causes them to dig in their heels. For you to win they must define themselves as losers. You can't argue without making your readers into your enemy, and enemies can't be persuaded, only beaten.'[5] Sobering words for any who seek to communicate, but they underline a real problem in modifying or discarding cherished beliefs. They point to the limitations of rational dialogue in resolving fundamental differences in world-views.

Where there is serious personal insecurity, people try to cover their intellectual nudity with a rag of belief which they hang on to despite exposure to the blindingly obvious. This applies equally to the presentation of irrefutable evidence of error in their prior beliefs, particularly of evidence that

they have been misled. The door-to-door salesman relies upon selling shoddy goods of limited utility because householders want to believe that they are too bright to have fallen for a con job. They will try to persuade themselves that they have spent wisely even after the wheels have fallen off.

(ii) The cruciality of empathy

Effective change in other people is hardly likely without a very considerable degree of empathy between debaters. This is where an initial non-judgmentalism may be required. Just as anthropology has progressed through willingness to try to stand where those being studied stand, so, regarding understanding of any beliefs, some suspension of disbelief is needed. Otherwise, it is hard to achieve the empathy without which proper judgement cannot be made. An impressive example of such empathetic engagement was Desmond Tutu's *Truth and Reconciliation* project which succeeded in bringing together both victims and oppressors in the post-apartheid South Africa.

Pascal considered the question as follows: 'If we would reprove with advantage, and show another his fault we must see from what side he looks at the matter, for usually the thing is true from that point of view, and we must admit this truth, but show him the side on which it is not true. That satisfies him, for he sees that he was not "wrong" but merely failed to see all sides of the question. Now people are not vexed at failure to see everything. But they do not like to be mistaken...'[6]

The possibility of a non-confrontational approach

Many argue that the practice of Socratic dialogue is the way forward, but by itself it can be confrontational. In a chapter devoted to the importance of Socratic pedagogy for a healthy democracy, Martha Nussbaum polarises it with deferring to tradition and authority. That however implies a

negative view of all tradition and authority which is clearly not helpful. Furthermore, when discussing how education should be empowered through Socratic dialogue she notes that Pestalozzi, Froebel and Alcott found it necessary to add concern for the emotional development of the child.[7] Unless practised sympathetically, Socratic dialogue can turn into an unacceptable posture of superiority taken up by the sceptic who weighs in on the unsatisfactoriness of the other's beliefs. It needs to be interpreted within a wider perspective.

Buber offered a way forward capable of incorporating Socratic dialogue without these potential disadvantages. He developed the important distinction between an 'I-It' form of dialogue and an 'I-I'. 'Encounter' (*Begugnung*) is what happens when, that is when a subject encounters an object as in empirical/scientific investigation. But to seek a more holistic view of life, 'subject to subject' encounters characterized by reciprocity and mutuality are essential, since: All real life is meeting.

Buber reflects the Kantian view that persons should be treated as ends and not as means. He saw the ideal relationship between people as an engagement of persons, by contrast with what so often happens when one person treats the other as a 'thing'. What he says is of fundamental importance. Much official education, for example, operates at an I-It level. It ceases to be any meeting of minds and hearts and becomes just something mechanical and hence an insult to the student treated as a thing.

While avoiding confrontation, this approach does not rule out controversy. To pretend that we are all in agreement is not only bland but dishonest and be-calming. A person mindful of the I-I mode of dialogue, as Buber noted, '... is no fanatic. He serves the truth, which though higher than reason, does not repudiate it.' Reason must seek to untie the intellectual knots that so often influence beliefs, yet within an approach which enables people 'to converse with one another and not "at" or "past" one another'.[8]

Three essential ingredients for a non-confrontational approach

a) Acknowledging the partiality and provisionality of claims to knowledge

As Pascal noted, people do not like to be mistaken. We all do have to trust what we think we know in order to live with any kind of intentionality. Constant states of uncertainty promote indecisiveness. Yet it is crucial to continuously moderate this sense of certainty and commitment arising out of our experience with openness to fresh insights. In few spheres of life can we have absolute certainty beyond the possibility of successful challenging.

'Certainty' therefore needs to wear a provisional character. Our certainties should indeed not be too easily displaced, as Mitchell points out regarding what he terms the 'principle of tenacity'. (*Ibid.* p. 137f.) Having staying power to be thoroughly tested is important to avoid premature dismissal. But our certainties must be capable of revision and we should be prepared to abandon them altogether in the interests of truth if it becomes clear that further insights refute them. As Bishop Butler famously noted: 'Probability is the guide to life', not only because of limitations in our experience, but because of our capacity for misinterpretation.

Recognizing insight is not a straightforward, rule-of-thumb matter. It is possible to mistake a post for a man; it is possible to mistake insight for illusion. Leontes in *A Winter's Tale* believed he had insight concerning his wife's behaviour when in fact his whole vision had become warped by a demonic frenzy of jealousy. The Delphic oracle was able to convey to him insight regarding his real condition, and this insight saved him. Certainty needs to be an on-going, cumulative process in which subsequent insights take precedence.

Conviction arising out of personal experience is probably a stronger candidate for truth than conviction dependent upon the experience of others which may have

been misunderstood. But conviction based upon personal experience should not extend beyond these insights, otherwise such a person operates under the same possible charge of blindness as those who deny his/her affirmations.

b) Avoiding false either/ors

Berger & Zijderveldin in their book *In Praise of Doubt* strongly advocate a middle position which takes seriously the claims on both sides of arguments and commitments. This will enable that passionate commitment to a powerful centralist position which seeks to affirm the insights of extreme right and left in politics, in culture, in the arts, in religion, in economics etc. wherever decisions have to be made. Such an approach assumes the basic goodwill and intelligence of those who take different views on issues unless there is good reason to suppose ill-will and ineptitude. It acknowledges that 'a core certainty' can exist alongside 'awareness of many possibilities of action', none of which has the quality of certainty. (*Ibid.* p. 158, 150)

Conversation which avoids false 'either/ors' will tend to have at least these characteristics:

  (i) A strong presumption that we do have something in common

    Identifying the insights which we share allows us to be mutually affirming of each other's positions. To note clearly what we can both agree on is crucial to fostering rapport and permitting the confidence necessary to embark on the intellectual and emotional risk of dialogue in depth.

  (ii) Listening to try to perceive the insights specific to the other person's experience

    This attempt is made on the assumption that they are unlikely to be wholly wrong in those things where they differ from us if they

genuinely arise out of their personal experience and if they can live by them.

(iii) Seeking to relate those insights to our own

This calls for real creativity and openness in the pursuit of truth. Insights which really are insights do not conflict, for only oversights can do that. We should, therefore, seek to embrace the other person's insights as well as our own, sensing that a more comprehensive position carries greater intellectual satisfaction.

c) Awareness of problems in articulating insights

Misinterpretation is closely intertwined with what Wittgenstein termed 'the bewitchment of language'. It is often too easy to set up a one-to-one relationship between experience and expression in words which may, for a variety of reasons, prove to be quite inadequate, even misleading. We need to respect the difference between insights and their articulation for at least the following reasons:

(i) Dependence on cultural thought-forms and particular language

We cannot express things in words we do not know nor conjure up concepts alien to our cultural background. We have to use what is available to us. If I do not speak Swahili, I cannot express my thoughts within that language. People whose upbringing has denied them access to particular concepts cannot understand or use such concepts. Dependence on a known vocabulary exercises a highly constraining influence on the way people try to understand or express an insight. Such vocabulary may enshrine the accumulated experience of centuries of human endeavour but it can become mere jargon and

clichés through constant repetition of such phrases heard by the individual in the learning process without being properly understood.

(ii) Imprisonment within our pre-conditioning

No-one escapes such conditioning for we are all profoundly affected by what is currently being put across by so many agencies such as the home, the media, peer-group pressure, education etc. This applies with especial force to the very young but it continues throughout life. The whole system of institutionalised education, from primary school to university, teaches, often surreptitiously, certain values and beliefs which are hardly ever questioned. Simplification, through constant repetition of certain ideas and not others and through frequent over-statement, can inculcate damaging generalisations.

(iii) Communication which fails to communicate

The above two considerations may cause us to express our personal experience in a limited and inadequate way. But there is a further problem affecting our communication with others. The overtones acquired by words can constitute a barrier to communication. The word *discipline*, for example, may be innocuous to one person but incense another. Words like *democracy* or *religion* are similarly 'loaded' words. The cultural context in which words are spoken or heard gives meaning to statements. Abstract the statement from that context and it it is likely not only to be misunderstood but to alter its meaning. An especial problem relates to taking literally what was intended to be metaphorical. Words like *cool*, *wicked* and *gay* are contemporary examples.

Life is hugely bigger than what we can put into words. Concepts are essential, but they should always come with a health warning, that they can easily pretend to a definiteness and communicability which they cannot have. As T.S. Eliot's famous passage expresses it: 'Words after speech, reach / Into the silence...' (*The Four Quartets: Burnt Norton* V)

The principle of critical affirmation

Aikin and Talisse argue that Mill's Principle should replace Mom's Maxim because it promotes engagement in an on-going search for truth. I suggest however that Mill's Principle itself needs complementing by an approach which takes as much care of the integrity of others and their views as of oneself and one's own views. The word *affirmation* is a useful way of conveying this idea because of its positive and generous overtones.

The word *critical* needs to be added because, like Socratic dialogue, it seeks to show up what is meaningless or mistakenly construed. It remains *affirming* however because it seeks to criticise in a way that places the interlocutor potentially on the same level as the person interrogated, i.e. in a search for truth which assumes that the other person also has particular insights to share. The word *critical*, by being attached to 'affirmation' loses therefore the fault-finding, censorious, negative overtones which it so often acquires. The object of the dialogue is for both to emerge broader-minded and with a deeper sense of reality.

The two words taken together are important also because too much emphasis on criticism tends to be at the expense of what it is appropriate to believe. Criticism is, by its nature, a parasite dependent on that with which it engages. What people commit themselves to in valuing and believing provides the necessary starting-point for the use of criticism.

Critical affirmation moves beyond simply criticism because, instead of taking as its starting-point that beliefs

with which at the moment I disagree are unlikely, it assumes, rather, that people are likely to be right in what they have authentically come to from their own experience and wrong much more often when they deny the insights which other people have accumulated from their experience. Coleridge quotes a French saying: 'I have found that the majority of sects are mostly right in what they affirm but wrong in what they deny.' He saw the task of philosophy 'to explain and collect the fragments of truth scattered though systems apparently the most incongruous'.[9]

Yet the notion of critical affirmation may appear to be a logical non-starter in that to *affirm* implies to accept, and to *criticise* implies to question and not accept. The affirming and criticising however are not applied to the same thing. An approach to disagreements which seeks to find common ground and affirm insights first before weighing in to criticise is not affirming and criticising the same beliefs and ideas but rather promoting that disentangling of concepts and commitments which has caused the knot in the first place. Misunderstandings are constantly creeping into everything we think and say; when these become enshrined in generalisations, aggressive confrontation ensues. An approach of critical affirmation can help to un-do such intellectual knots.

To summarise, 'critical affirmation' combines:

1. Respect for others, satisfying the requirement of initial courtesy and non-judgementalism in order to establish contact. Here affirmation is at its most obvious.
2. Empathy for the experience and insights of others which goes beyond initial courtesy, helping to avoid attacking Aunt Sallys based on misunderstanding of the other's position. This is important because so much controversy attacks what is not being defended and is therefore intellectually pointless.
3. Genuineness of relationship through not hiding disagreement but allowing a situation to

develop in which controversy can be fearlessly thought through. Here criticism is at its most obvious, not as an end in itself but hopefully leading to amendment of positions, perhaps by both parties.

4. Personal integrity, affirming oneself as well as the other person, but also seeking to learn more and widen one's experience and understanding. This is to practise the openness most of us claim but often draw back from in practice.

Finally, it must also be noted that the notion of reciprocity is integral to an approach of critical affirmation. Criticism has to be sharp towards any failure by others to be positive towards others in the same way. It insists on treating others with the respect and fair-mindedness that avoids ridiculing, marginalising, ignoring or misrepresenting beliefs. As such, it is precisely what is needed to help avoid the poor quality of much debate which degenerates into slanging matches. It can thus afford a spectacular head-start in encouraging some change in mind and heart of erstwhile opponents. For its primary aim is not to find fault and destabilize the other, but to enable potentially mutual change through proper self-affirmation and considering together the probabilities of certain hypotheses, axioms and beliefs leading to a joint conclusion.

Brenda Watson is the author of several books including Education and Belief *(Blackwell 1987),* The Effective Teaching of Religious Education *(Longman 1993, 1999) and* Truth and Scripture: Challenging Underlying Assumptions *(Aureus 2004).*

Notes

[1] P. Berger & A. Zijderveld, *In praise of Doubt: How to have conviction without becoming a fanatic* (HarperOne, 2009), p. 31

[2] Ronald Dworkin, *Is Democracy Possible?* (Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 1.

[3] B. Mitchell, *How To Play Theological Ping-Pong and other essays on faith and reason* (Hodder & Stoughton 1990), p. 21.

[4] Felipe Fernadez-Armesto, *Truth: A History and a Guide for the Perplexed* (Transworld Publishers, 1997)

[5] P. Elbow, *Writing With Power* (OUP, 1998), p. 202

[6] Pascal…*Pensees* (Les Editions Brunschvig 1905), p. 684

[7] Martha Nussbaum, *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton University Press, 2010), Chapter IV.

[8] M. Buber, *Between Man and Man* 1947, translated Gregor Smith (Routledge, 2002), p. 40.

[9] Coleridge, *Bibliografia Literaria* (Dent, 1906), p. 134