

Reasoning Democratically with Who We Are

Mark Redhead

Thanks to all the commentators for providing a series of well-reasoned and challenging comments. Many of these concerns are at once a product of stuff left on the cutting room floor, while others have been indirectly addressed in some recent publications. What I want to briefly do is highlight some of the criticisms that I agree with and engage a few salient points of contention.

Nancy Luxon's excellent critique is right to pick up on my use of Taylor's early 1980s critique of Foucault. I did this for two reasons: First, as a means of engaging Taylor with Foucault in a manner that could set up an eventual engagement with MacIntyre and Foucault. Second, it is a fairly straightforward and well-known critique of Foucault. However, in the latter half of this chapter I tried to distance myself from it. Indeed Taylor has distanced himself from it. This is evidenced by his view that his current historical research is genealogical in nature. I am not so much concerned with the performative self-contradictions in Foucault's work as with the ethical tensions that parrhesia presents for public deliberation today. Luxon is clearly correct when she notes that part of a good Foucaultian response to individuals residing "on the margins who often refuse affirmation by dominant norms and hierarchies altogether" is to try to develop "a wholesale critique of the order these norms sustain."

I diverge from Luxon in our larger orientations towards Foucault. Luxon glorifies an aesthetic of existence that disconnects "knowledge, ethics, and truth telling from institutionalized hierarchies that organize what a polis takes to be morally or politically valuable." Her observation that such an aesthetic has the potential to take seriously "the democratic promise of rooting the good life in ordinary *lives*," is well stated. However, many citizens do not have time for such a politics, as they are often at the effect of a multiplicity of pernicious forms of power. For them, the fight must be to directly change these oppressive sources of power. Such a fight is more democratic than liberal.

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I read parrhesia as a truth-telling vehicle that focuses on building relations of trust through deliberation. Trust is built through serious engagements with what ultimately are incommensurable perspectives. It is only through problematical and uncomfortable discourses that individuals who feel marginalized can come to realize that others, perhaps immersed within subtly dominant racialist, classist, or sexist discourses, can at least be open to understanding their concerns. Moreover, as successful democratic politics sometimes makes us aware, moments of mis-understandings can at least be partly ameliorated (witness the multiracial response to police killing African and Hispanic Americans recently) in the pursuit of larger social-justice claims.

Parrhesia introduces all sorts of risks involving power, reciprocity, incommensurability, and misunderstandings. There are lots of risks such as the persistent loss of trust as well as the rise of risk management exercises designed to mitigate problems associated with moral and political incommensurability today that Luxon highlights. These problems afflicting many citizens of distinctly neoliberal assemblages like the United States must be seen as risks that need to be successfully negotiated if effective practices of pluralistic yet solidarity-building discourses are to transpire. Democratic solidarity is always fragile and in constant need of recommitments. It is only through attempts at learning from incommensurable perspectives in a pluralist setting that forms of solidarity have a chance to emerge so that coalitions (fragile as they are) capable of articulating and promoting alternative understandings of common goods can emerge.

Talk of common goods allows me to engage MacIntyre's well-written critique. MacIntyre is certainly correct that my reading of him was rather limited. This was primarily due to the fact that he became, throughout the course of the book, the most challenging of the thinkers to address. What I tried to do was think through how to situate him in conversation with the other authors. This strategy was a bit reductionist. Given the need to save space, it was probably more reductionist than should have been allowed. However, my recent publications on theistically informed solidarity-building have drawn me closer to the positions he outlines here.¹

MacIntyre is correct that common goods, since they include forms of justice, are necessary to promote solidarity on the ground today. Indeed, as Jeffrey Stout, Saul Alinsky, and others attest to,² part of the job of solidarity-building democratic practices is to promote common goods built around

¹Mark Redhead, "Reasoning between Athens and Jerusalem," *Polity* 47, no.1 (2015): 84–113, and "Complementing Rivals: Foucault, Rawls and the Problem of Public Reasoning," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (available online and forthcoming).

²Jeffrey Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971); Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

shared orientations towards justice. These are understandings the promotion of which a variety of individuals from, at some level, incommensurable perspectives can see as integral to developing communities fit for human living.

The key issue with MacIntyre is the openness to difference between traditions. Thomistic Aristotelianism has much going for it. However, there is always the issue of engaging those from different traditions who may or may not be celebrate the virtues of tradition-constituted enquiry and may not be so aware of the nature of the disagreements they have with others. How do we constructively engage these actors when they become more substantively aware of such disagreements? The answer, on some level, involves reasoning through deeper levels of belief structures so that individuals can become more aware of what common goods they value and why, be it choice, a certain iteration of justice, or some larger understanding of a collective good. At this level, some form of learning through what Gadamer called putting one's horizon at risk seems essential, if only for other individuals to feel like such a discourse was sufficiently open-ended that their unique concerns could be given fair play.³ How to do so in practice? Given, as MacIntyre reminds us, the integrative function of philosophy within the Catholic tradition,⁴ this should not be hard to address. Some creative and receptive openness to others along with MacIntyre's insightful readings of Mill and Kant would help to engage ordinary citizens here.

Here a number of the micropolitics and techniques of deep pluralism William E. Connolly talks about become important. Connolly is undoubtedly correct when he remarks in his response that deep pluralism and nontheistic forms of faith can be quite deep. Moreover, Connolly does a valiant job engaging with committed theists like Asad and others in his scholarship and teaching. I also agree that we are all potentially pernicious participants in deep pluralism as we often attribute, as Connolly points out, more standing to our deepest convictions while discounting those of others prior to critical investigation. The task at hand is to mediate this in ways that, following Connolly, allow many creeds and spiritual positions to thrive while thinking through manners of tackling structural political problematics like inequality.

I also agree that we need to think through how parallel spiritual affinities from divergent moral sources appear in the world, as well as how people of the same faith express their faith quite differently. I try to think through how to address the cleavages in this spiritual diversity. Spirituality is on some level always mysterious. When the mystery fades, it becomes something other than spirituality. This only makes the problem more entrenched. For how can one engage those who, for various reasons, have much more

³Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. (New York: Crossroads, 1988), 269–71.

⁴Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 179.

militant and intolerant views yet on an individual level might exhibit profound forms of agape in their daily lives? The recent religious-freedom law controversy in Indiana might bring this out. Not all who support such a law are passionately intolerant of homosexuals. Many might simply have never been in a situation where they have had to deal intimately with them. The task for many of us today is to help such people think beyond conservative knee-jerk forms of intolerance so that they can achieve a richer sense of spirituality in their daily lives.

More importantly, and this is a point I probably should have emphasized in the book, what makes Connolly's work interesting is the ways he is— to partly borrow from Taylor—a nontheistic yet cross-pressured soul who, as Taylor describes, feels the pull of various spiritual proclivities and makes them central to his work. Unlike Taylor, Connolly can locate these in a distinctly nontheistic assemblage. This is what gives his work the power it has today.

Thanks to Mary G. Dietz for her excellent critique of my Arendt chapter. The points about common sense are well taken as are her points on the importance of plurality as the driving force of exposing identities. I think these are fair criticisms of a chapter that probably needed more text.

I agree that Arendt is an unusual choice to be included in this book as well. However, I think she does have much to contribute here. First, because her work in texts such as *The Human Condition*, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, and *On Revolution* have many important lessons for approaching politics today. Her discussions of concepts like freedom, world-alienation, the triumph of the *animal laborans* (something which I have to deal with on a daily basis where I teach) have many prescient insights. I also find the notion of banisterless thinking appealing.

I use Arendt not only because her works have much insight into the actual workings of politics today but also a means of thinking through how these insights are comprehended by the many politicized identities drawn to her work. I think identities are both concrete and fluid. They are concrete in that they exist somewhere and are informed by the webs of plurality that we inhabit. Yet they are also fluid and often change because of moments of mis- (or non-) recognition. In fact most humanoids seem to have many voices going on inside their head. Some are charged by certain moments of mis-recognition, others become latent through such acts. The human self is constantly evolving in this sense. I think that identities, interests, desires, are informed by a multiplicity of perspectives. Some we are aware of, others we are not. Indeed, theorists like Axel Honneth⁵ and to a lesser extent Charles Taylor have made much of this point.

⁵See Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

On my reading, Arendt herself lived in both the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*. What makes her work prescient at times is not only the lessons for living within the plurality of political life but *also* how her perspectives inform others immersed within political life. Politics is not only agonal but it is *also* about cultivating forms of solidarity and common sense (so that a Schmittian world view does not become hegemonic). The latter involves a number of issues. In fact, the common sense Dietz talks about is probably what we might implicitly find underlying the forms of politics in, say, Arendt's pyramid of authority in the final chapter of *On Revolution*. Here subjects are agonal but also learning from each other.

At some point in time we, as humans, try to learn from each other and that can involve questioning apparent beliefs by deeper, more fundamental ones. This is a point many activists inspired by, say, Saul Alinsky are quite attuned to.⁶ Arendt, I maintain, has much to offer given the importance of works like *Origins* and *The Human Condition*. The key though is to not only make important points about the speechless horror of the present but to think through how individuals from different backgrounds with different assemblages of issues can incorporate and respond to these important points in manners that can enhance their forms of political citizenship.

As political theorists we often lecture to audiences not of our own choosing. What makes our work exciting is communicating with such groups in manners that nudge those in attendance to see things differently. This is *partly* done by showing how these insights can engage with the realities these audience members struggle with on a daily basis. This is what I was driving at in my critique of Arendt.

Thanks, too, to Ruth Abbey for pointing out some holes in my reading of Taylor. The conclusion drifted towards larger global issues because my thinking is increasingly becoming focused on the global and the local. My next book will focus on applying forms of reasoning through baggage to the task of rethinking political imagination in manners that are more progressive than the nationalist and often Schmittian forms on display today. In my defense, I dealt with the texts she mentions in my first book on Taylor as well as some publications that came out around the same time.⁷ Abbey is probably correct that I should have reworked some of this material for this book. She is also correct that Taylor has sympathetically endorsed Rawls's ideal of an overlapping consensus on several occasions. However, what interests me is not the fact that Rawls and Taylor agree on the ideal of an

⁶See Saul D. Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945).

⁷See Mark Redhead, *Charles Taylor: Thinking and Living Deep Diversity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002); Mark Redhead, "Making the Past Useful for a Pluralistic Present: Taylor, Arendt and a Problem for Historical Reasoning," *American Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 4 (2002): 803–18; Mark Redhead, "Alternative Secularisms," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 32, no. 5 (2006): 639–66.

overlapping consensus (a shared value) but the divergent paths by which they come to a similar conclusion. The Taylor works that I do discuss are mainly focused on the deep ontological issues involving how divergent groups can be accommodated today within solidarity-building democratic communities. How can cross-pressured souls with a bit less theistic commitment than Taylor, as well as subnationalist views, engage in such important processes?

In the case of Taylor what I found so interesting with *A Secular Age* is its combining of a rather interesting ontological depiction of the spiritual realities of Western civilization (what Taylor calls secularity 3) with a form of historical analysis that is much more genealogical than his more Hegelian work *Sources of the Self*.⁸ I found the former text immensely interesting because of this combination. I think most good, honest historical research from 2015 forward will follow a trajectory similar to the one Taylor sketches in *A Secular Age*. Obviously, I am quite sympathetic to Taylor's brand of historicism. He is also quite honest about the fact that we always come at such a reality from an interested perspective. My critique of Taylor clearly mirrors my approach to Connolly. In the former case I argue that not enough attention is paid to those not so cross-pressured (like most of my current students whose lives are simply about survival). In the latter instance, I argue that not enough attention is given to those who are, who still feel a theistic calling even behind the appeals of exclusive humanism.

How to reconcile these two critiques? I am not quite sure *but* I do think the Gadamerian ideal of a fusion of horizons, which Taylor often comes back to, is helpful. The ideal provides a nice means of evaluating how well we listen to others, while, as Taylor points out in "Comparison, History, Truth," realizing that we can never be sure that we have correctly understood them.⁹

Finally, I have always had a problem with the manner in which Taylor uses the term "we." "We" is indeed a fragile term. One insight that many organizers like Saul Alinsky in the United States and education writers such as Paulo Freire consistently articulate is that identifying with a "we" can take many forms.¹⁰ Good democratic political theory should be attentive to this and help citizens think through acceptable from nonacceptable manners of doing so. A number of the risks involved with reasoning through baggage manifest themselves here. The challenge, as I briefly discussed in the conclusion of *Charles Taylor: Thinking and Living Deep Diversity* as well as in the conclusion of *Reasoning with Who We Are* (see 350), is to provide individuals and

⁸See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁹Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

¹⁰See Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* and Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* [1970] (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

groups the means to allow them to live their identity in a nonthreatening manner while simultaneously fostering their own iterations of becoming part of a larger solidarity generating “we.” I think good, democratic political theory today has few more important tasks to articulate.

Thanks again to the work of these perceptive commentators. Though I undoubtedly have not addressed all their concerns, I hope, in the limited space here, to have at least shown what I was up to in *Reasoning with Who We Are*.