RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Not Monsters After All: How Political Deliberation Can Build Moral Communities Amidst Deep Difference

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Political deliberation typically aims to improve the legitimacy of collective decisions. This article proposes a different function for deliberation, which is both more modest but nevertheless critical in public life: the legitimation not of decisions, but of fellow citizens. This outcome is especially important in polarized societies, where what divides citizens is not only differences in conceptions of the good, but also the perception that the other side is not motivated by any good at all. Drawing on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Charles Taylor as well as on an empirical study of political dialogue between university students after the 2016 election in the United States, I show how a particular form of political dialogue can help interlocutors recognize the conceptions of the good that motivate others' views. Such learning can help create what Taylor suggests is necessary for diverse democracies: a shared understanding that does not obscure and in fact brings to the fore principled and significant divisions. Such recognition has the potential to diminish support for violence and the disenfranchisement of political opponents.

Shortly after the 2016 US presidential election, voters who supported Donald J. Trump and Hillary Clinton, respectively, met for sessions of structured political dialogue. They were all university students but had little else in common. Some attended conservative Christian colleges, others secular universities. Some studied business, others social work or counseling. Least shared of all was their vision of a good society.

The students left their dialogue sessions with their views mostly unchanged. Few had learned any facts or heard any arguments that shifted their perspectives on key issues. Abortion, marriage equality, immigration, and the Movement for Black Lives had been discussed at the different tables. For the most part, neither other students' opinions nor their political decisions gained legitimacy, least of all the decision that had inspired the organizers to create these dialogues: the newly elected president remained illegitimate to the students who opposed him. Likewise, students who had voted for Trump left that day with the beliefs that had motivated their choice mostly untouched.

Did the dialogue hold any significance? According to a large body of political theory on deliberation, apparently not. Deliberative polling researchers look for ways that voters' views become better informed and more reflective (Fishkin & Luskin 2005). But interviews in the weeks

following these sessions suggested that few students were persuaded to think differently about key political issues, at least in the short term. Jürgen Habermas inspired a tradition of deliberative theorists who looked to dialogue not to change views per se but to legitimize decision-making (Habermas 2015). This can occur when judgments are reached through consensus rather than majoritarian politics. But no consensus was reached in this case, and anyhow no decision followed the sessions. More recent deliberative theorists have shifted away from consensus about what should be done as an aim of deliberation, with some focusing instead on 'metaconsensus,' which entails recognizing the legitimacy of the values, beliefs, and preferences that animate others. While not necessarily leading to agreement about what should be done, metaconsensus makes possible 'intersubjective rationality,' wherein interlocutors are willing to consider others' reasons in the process of arriving at a judgment (Niemeyer & Dryzek 2007). These scholars retain the focus on decision-making as the outcome of deliberation but recognize the importance of understanding the values and beliefs that shape decisions. Through recognizing the legitimacy of other's values, beliefs, and preferences, these scholars suggest, we might be more willing to take others' reasons into account and therefore think more democratically.

This capacity to see others' concerns as legitimate and take them into consideration is indeed crucial to democratic societies; yet it is precisely this capacity that is undermined by contemporary polarization. In particular,

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normative metaconsensus – the capacity to recognize others' values as legitimate – is challenged by the currently widespread assumption that people on the other side act in bad faith. A prior process is needed wherein the ideals that motivate others are revealed as being forms of the good.

And this, I argue, is what the conversations between the university students achieved. Particularly in volatile and polarized settings, discussions may not legitimize or directly improve democratic decisions as many theorists of deliberative democracy hope. But what increased understanding may be best equipped to do in such contexts is reveal the conceptions of the good that motivate views with which one disagrees. In antagonistic contexts such as the contemporary United States in which many people doubt that others' opinions are premised on any sense of the good, this recognition can provide the groundwork for intersubjective rationality, by cultivating acknowledgement of those with whom we deeply disagree as legitimate co-creators of democratic society.

The article proceeds in three stages. First, I draw on the work of Charles Taylor and Hans-Georg Gadamer to describe the nature of the understanding that could support this kind of mutual recognition. Second, I examine how and why this form of recognition matters for democratic politics. I suggest that the conceptual resources that Taylor applies to historically and geographically distant cultural groups and that Gadamer applies to the social sciences and historical texts can help illuminate the role of dialogue between citizens who share a democracy. Third, I show how this form of recognition can be enacted through dialogue by drawing on ethnographic observations and interviews I conducted on deliberative dialogue between secular liberal and conservative Christian university students in the United States in the months after the 2017 inauguration of Donald Trump. These dialogues involved students who share a democracy but nonetheless hold vastly different conceptions of what is good and the moral sources that support it. I draw on this empirical work to illustrate the potential, stakes, and uncertainties of a Taylorian-Gadamerian approach to deliberative dialogue within a democratic society.

## Political Dialogue

Deliberation, Taylor proposes, serves a crucial role in democracy by legitimizing the sense that *a people* are deciding together, even if the outcome is against the interests of some members (2011, 129). This bears similarity to but is distinct from how Habermas understands these conversations as legitimizing democratic governance (e.g. Habermas 1997; see also Cohen 1997). Habermas was particularly concerned with how norms established through discourse can lend legitimacy to the process of making democratic decisions. While scholars have moved away from consensus as an ideal, much scholarship on deliberation has nonetheless focused on the aspects of Habermas' work that are concerned with the legitimation of decisions, rather than the cohesion of a democratic body as a whole (e.g. Dryzek 2002; Chambers 2003; Cohen 1989). Hence, political deliberation is usually defined as discourse that concerns political decisions, to the

exclusion of political conversation that does not prepare citizens for a decision (McCoy & Scully 2002). Taylor in contrast focuses on how deliberation can not only bolster the legitimacy of decisions, but also help create 'cohesion around a political identity' (Taylor 2011, 138).

Yet just as Habermas (1979) argued that trust must precede deliberation, Taylor too notes that the prior cohesion required by such conversations tends to exclude people who are already marginalized. Taylor warns, 'there is a standing temptation to exclusion, which arises from the fact that democracies work well when people know each other, trust each other, and feel a sense of commitment toward each other' (2011, 133). Those who are not already trusted are likely to be excluded from the mechanisms that enhance trust, such as deliberation. This places democracies 'in a standing dilemma,' according to Taylor, because:

> [Democracies] need strong cohesion around a political identity, and precisely this provides a strong temptation to exclude those who can't or won't fit easily into the identity which the majority feels comfortable with or believes alone can hold them together. And yet exclusion, besides being profoundly morally objectionable, also goes against the legitimacy idea of popular sovereignty, which is to realize the government of *all* the people (138).

A solution to this dilemma, Taylor argues, is the creation of a 'shared identity space'. He explains that this means, 'negotiating a commonly acceptable, even compromised political identity between the different personal or group identities which want to/have to live in the same polity' (144). Conversations between citizens may be a way that a shared identity space can be created and maintained, given that 'political identities have to be worked out, negotiated, creatively compromised between peoples who have to or want to live together under the same political roof' and that 'these solutions are never meant to last forever, but have to be discovered/invented anew by succeeding generations' (140). It is not only the rationality of deliberators that is normative, though, as some things will [...] have to be nonnegotiable'. In this Taylor includes the 'basic principles of republican constitutions – democracy itself and human rights, among them'. A shared identity is possible within this framework, as 'this firmness has to be accompanied by a recognition that these principles can be realized in a number of different ways'. This will require conversations that engage and confront 'the substantive religious – ethnic – cultural differences in societies' (144).

However, in a deeply polarized society, recognition of convergence across traditions that could support a shared political identity may be too ambitious. For instance, many agree that our traditions converge but view the ways in which people draw from their traditions as directly opposed to our own interpretation. What is needed then is a more accessible form of recognition, which stops short of convergence in a shared political identity but nonetheless recognizes the legitimacy of the people who hold competing beliefs. This can come about even in the absence of affirming the other's moral sources as aligned

with our own. It can be drawn from the more modest aim of recognizing that the other's motivating concerns, however much we disagree with them, are rooted in something we can understand as moral.

The kind of dialogue that could create the conditions for such recognition is described not in Taylor's political writings but in his ethical theory, wherein he draws on Gadamer to examine the nature of dialogue, ethics, and personhood. This, I argue, is no coincidence, as it demonstrates the significance of ethical dialogue for politics.

## Understanding Across Distance

What might it entail to understand another person's moral orientation, and is it possible through dialogue? Taylor draws on Hans-Georg Gadamer's approach to the social sciences and historical texts, arguing that the same conceptual resources can be applied to historically and geographically distant peoples whose languages and horizons of understanding are thoroughly distinct (2011b, 24). There are several elements to Gadamer's approach that Taylor sees as especially relevant. First is the distinction between 'knowing an object and coming to an understanding with an interlocutor' (25). This entails an admission that unfettered understanding of another is never possible. In contrast to knowledge of an object, understanding between people is bilateral: it involves listening as well as talking, and such listening may lead one to revise one's own aims for the conversation. Moreover, understanding of this type is subject to shifts in each person or group's self-understanding. Both sides are dynamic: I cannot gain mastery in my knowledge of you because who you are is changing and who I am is changing in response to our conversation. Finally, our attempts at understanding distant others are always subject to the constraints of language and culture (25). Whether encountering another through a text, a research study, or a conversation, one attempts to understand another in terms that are at least initially one's own. This frame of reference will inevitably give new shape to whatever phenomenon in another's life the other is attempting to describe (24).

Given these conditions, what we aim for in communication across cultural and geographical distances, Gadamer suggests, is not mastery of knowledge but a 'fusing of horizons' (2011, 30). Horizons fuse when one's own framework of meaning shifts in response to the other. This creates new possibilities for understanding that are not identical to those that either interlocutor held before the conversation (or for Gadamer, before reading the text or conducting the research). This is because attempting to understand another's meaning entails calling into question or at least seeing the lack of inevitability of one's own framework. In the fusion of horizons, then, there can be 'no understanding the other without a changed understanding of self' (2011b, 36).

This changed understanding of self is central to the Gadamerian approach that Taylor applies to dialogue across distances. What Gadamer refers to as the 'openness' which allows for the fusing of horizons, Taylor relays, is:

The crucial moment….where we allow ourselves to be interpellated by the other; where the difference escapes from its categorization as an error, a fault, or a lesser, undeveloped version of what we are, and challenges us to see it as a viable human alternative. This unavoidably calls our own self-understanding into question (2011b, 36).

Taylor insists that this interpellation holds epistemic and what he calls 'human' value. But why would it hold such value, and why might it additionally carry political significance?

While Taylor does not explore these questions in his work on Gadamer, conceptual resources are available in his earlier work on the ontology of personhood. Taylor argues in *Sources of the Self* that articulation of the good as we currently understand it and have in other times and places understood it can rescue our own moral lives from obscurity. Uncovering the intuitions that make sense of how we live can turn these tacit perceptions into explicit commitments that we can affirm, modify, or reject (1989; see also 2011c). Conversation with other people as well as with texts helps us do this, Taylor suggests, because 'articulation can bring us closer to the good as a moral source, can give it power' (1989, 92). In particular, conversations through texts and dialogue can help us identify our own and others' 'moral sources' and 'constitutive goods,' (1989, 93) or that on which our sense of the good is premised. Making these background beliefs explicit can illuminate the goods that we affirm above all others and which make our life purposes worthwhile (1989, 64).

This understanding of the role of communication in our moral development clarifies why Taylor sees Gadamer's approach as relevant to dialogue across peoples. It illuminates why he concludes that such dialogue can have an epistemic benefit: just as Taylor's intellectual history of varying sources of the self can help us to expand our awareness of and clarify our own moral sources, so too could dialogue across distant cultural groups. Taylor argues that such dialogue also has a 'human' benefit, in that it helps us to understand the moral sources by which others live, thereby humanizing people to each other.

I suggest that the articulation of what Taylor calls 'moral sources' can also have an additional benefit that is political. To see our fellow citizens as legitimate co-creators of our democracy, we need not enter fully into others' moral language. We need most to recognize their moral sources as moral sources, their goods as goods. The direct attempt to articulate these sources and goods can aid in this process.

This recognition matters because a central source of tension in contemporary democracies is not merely a conflict of conceptions of the good. This tension is also rooted in a sense that the 'other side' does not affirm any recognizable good. There is a widespread perception that one's political opponents act in bad faith, either from ignorance, cruelty, or irrationality. This is not to suggest that people always act from their highest principles; ignorance, cruelty, and irrationality surely play a role in the political landscape. It may be possible however

to recognize the self-understanding from which others operate, which may include conceptions of the good that are different enough from one's own that they are hard to recognize as goods at all. This is partly because the rifts within democracies can be as deep, if not as obvious, as those across distant epochs or geographical distances.

Indeed, the 'culture wars' have become a standard part of how Americans understand their political culture. The 'war' within American culture, James Hunter has argued, is 'not just an expression of different "opinions" or "attitudes" on this or that issue' (Hunter 1992, 48). Rather the culture war that characterizes American politics 'emerges over fundamentally different conceptions of moral authority, over different ideas and beliefs about truth, the good, obligation to one another, the nature of community, and so on' (48). In other words, Americans do not simply have different views on the same moral questions. Their identification of the questions themselves – of what is a moral issue and hence what is a moral stance – differ dramatically.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues make a similar argument. Their empirical research has shown for example that political liberals often do not recognize conservative values related to loyalty and purity as moral in nature. An argument based on loyalty may then seem to liberals like a thinly veiled play for self-interest rather than an affirmation of a genuinely held moral good (Graham, Haidt & Nosek 2009). This can lead to the sense that our adversaries act in bad faith. It can deepen the perception that our politics are not a shared space of moral reasoning but a fight against unethical or even evil forces.

There are of course differences between divides across historical and geographic distances, on one hand, and intra-societal culture wars on the other. Within intra-societal divides, what Gadamer calls 'horizons' have formed partly in response to longstanding perceptions of other citizens' horizons and in fact solidified partly through the so-called wars with others' horizons. Therefore, fusing horizons within a democracy may be more demanding. It means not only apprehending meanings outside of one's own, but also reaching beyond one's scripted sense of what others' meanings are. Liberals and conservatives in the United States do not only function within different moral horizons. Those horizons are defined partly in opposition to stereotyped perceptions of the other. This can also be true across civilizations as well, though, as when a colonizing society defines itself against the colonized, or within a society's own history when as Taylor says, we 'define ourselves against certain features of the past' (2011b, 37). However, this dimension of difference may be more pronounced within a shared and contemporaneous political body.

Below, I draw on examples of dialogue across differences within the deeply divided democracy of the United States. These deliberative dialogues were held at a particularly divisive moment: in 2017, in the months following the presidential inauguration of Donald Trump. University students from universities in the Philadelphia area were invited to participate in a series of dialogues organized by faculty from the University of Pennsylvania and an evangelical Christian school, Cairn University. The first dialogue was entitled, 'Can we talk? Political dialogue in Trump's America' and was advertised as a chance to 'talk across our differences' and even 'learn from each other'. Students who registered to attend a dialogue session submitted information on their political views in advance so that they could be sorted into politically diverse tables of 4–10 people each. At the dialogue sessions, they were urged by facilitators to orient themselves to listening rather than engaging in 'fact wars'. Discussion included questions about how politics were discussed in the homes in which students were raised, what issue in the presidential election was most significant to them and why, whether they could ever vote for a candidate who did not agree with them on the issue they named as most significant, what aspects of each other's positions make sense to them, and what questions about their own positions trouble them. I observed these dialogue sessions and conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 38 students in the weeks following the dialogue sessions. I then coded full transcripts of interviews using the software Dedoose to understand the meaning that students derive from their experience.

The students on whom I focus in this article exemplify two possibilities for what may occur during dialogue – missing or recognizing another's moral understanding. The students whose words I present here were typical of my interviews, both in what they desired and what in some cases they attained: a way to make moral sense of the people who make what appear to be incomprehensible political choices. While as my first example shows this was not universally achieved, as my second example reveals it was possible, and in fact was the most readily available good derived from these conversations. The students on whom I focus are especially illustrative because in their cases I was able to interview both halves of pairs that spoke to each other during the dialogue session. Many other interviews revealed how students developed insights into others' moral sources but not always with the added benefit of showing reflections of different people involved in the same interaction.

## Political Dialogue in Trump's America

The first example demonstrates how unrecognized differences in conceptions of the good can not only obstruct understanding of another's moral orientation but can also undermine the perception of the legitimacy of the other as a fellow citizen. It also shows how in a conversation focused on moral sources, alternative conceptions of the good can indeed be revealed. I then focus on two students who did feel that they came to a new understanding of politically opposed peers, and explore the political implications of their conversation.

I begin with the experience of two students who shared a small-group discussion, seated at a table of four students in total. Alice[1] is a socially liberal gay woman, and Andrew is a conservative, evangelical Christian student.

Alice admits that the conversation was painful for her, recalling:

We were talking about same-sex marriage and I'm a gay woman. I had two people flat out say, 'that's not okay.' I never had an encounter where someone just looked at me in the face and said, 'I don't want you to get married....' And they kind of respect me while they're saying it....I mean, they don't respect me, they don't want me to get married. That was really hard for me to swallow […] I've never had someone calmly sitting down say, 'I really don't want you to be happy' […] At the end, we all hugged, and I thought it was interesting that I was hugging people who […] don't want me to be happy and live my life.

But the difficulty of the encounter was not only regarding conflicting conceptions of how to live. And it was not only because this conflict cut to the heart of Alice's identity. The difficulty for Alice was compounded by her interlocutors' seeming lack of any deep moral sense. After admitting that she is not sure that she would want to enter another conversation with those students because she is not sure whether it would be 'productive,' Alice explains:

Because they didn't have an answer to why they believed what they believed […] it's 'well this is what the Bible says.' […] They're like, 'that's just wrong. It's not marriage' […] And they couldn't explain it […] I think that's why I was unsatisfied, because I don't think they provided enough of a reason to justify what they believed in.

Alice did not want just any reason for the opposing view. A reference to biblical authority is after all a reason. The problem seems to be that it was not a reason that Alice could recognize as revealing a genuine moral ground. There was a reason behind her interlocutor's view, in other words, but no recognizable good. If she had been hoping to gain insight into another way of understanding the world, she was left with only a superficial gloss.

In Gadamerian terms, it seemed to Alice that there was no competing moral horizon to stretch toward, just an unreflective nod to authority. Perhaps, it seemed to Alice, the other side is not in fact motivated by a contrasting conception of the good that is worth understanding. What is more, Alice lamented, while this conversation would stay with her for years, she anticipated that it meant little to her tablemates. Hence her interlocutors seemed to hold only a superficial opinion that bore no significance even in their own lives.

This dialogic exchange failed from a Gadamerian perspective because it did not reveal to Alice a new and different conception of the good that might challenge her own understanding. Had it offered such a challenge, this too would have been painful, but in Alice's reckoning, it would have nonetheless felt worthwhile.

Where then was the failure? Is Alice right that there is perhaps no good behind Andrew's reasons, no alternative conception worth stretching to understand?

I suggest instead that Gadamer's and Taylor's intuitions about dialogue and personhood are borne out in this case. Alice's interlocutor, Andrew, is motivated by a deeply different moral source and the good that emerges from it. An in-depth interview with Andrew oriented precisely to exploring his sense of the good reveals what Alice says she was looking for: a deeply considered and vastly different conception of human life that makes sense of what Alice could not: why Andrew 'would not want her to be happy'.

First, Andrew reveals that far from the insignificance this issue seemed to hold for him, it is in fact of the highest order of importance in his life:

So something I didn't go into […] I struggled with same-sex attraction growing up, and I would say it's a present struggle. But it's something that I've chosen not to follow, something I don't foster or cultivate.

Moreover, he understands his relationship to this issue as based on a hard-won process of personal inquiry, rather than on the deference to authority that Alice suspects:

I think the impetus for my struggle was that I remember being in a political debate class and just being like, 'I'm just tired of being told what's right. I want to know why it's right,' and then from there make the evaluation of what I'm going to do with my life, especially pertaining to [sexuality]. […] If I was going to turn away at all, it wouldn't be until I had really explored why, not just what was right or wrong but why it was so....I think initially my turning point is and continues to be that there's a way that I can live with the presence of this struggle in a way that honors God […] That's been profound […] It's a personal hunger that led me […] I ended up studying philosophy and specifically ethics in college, and I think it was really bound up with that personal approach that I needed to know that if I wasn't going to walk away from my faith and that if I was going to take God at his word, I needed to know why.

Finally, and most importantly to a Gadamerian-Taylorian dialogue, what motivates his decision is not a rejection of others' well-being, as it seems to Alice, but a radically different conception of what constitutes well-being:

It's funny because Alice, the girl who identifies as lesbian, she said 'I can't vote for someone who isn't for gay marriage'. […] I feel reverse of that, but I would argue in the same sort of personal way […] I find those moments of advances for the LGBT community really frustrating to me […] If I really believe that I'm made to flourish in a certain way and that there is an objective element in my being that constitutes my flourishing as an individual, then anything that […] makes that pursuit harder is something I disparage.

This interview bears out Gadamer's and Taylor's suggestion that what may seem initially to be a lack of any good could

in fact be a good so different from our own that we do not recognize it. Indeed, there is much that would make it difficult for Alice to recognize Andrew's view as rooted in a moral source. For one, the modern moral order, particularly its expression in a secular liberal ethos, is premised in part on the idea that human happiness is paramount – one can think most obviously of the American Declaration of Independence – and that the fulfillment of individual desires and passions is a central part of attaining happiness. In a secular, capitalist, liberal democracy, the 'pursuit of happiness' is tied to an individual's freedom to choose how to live. Romantic love has been especially important to modern notions of individual freedom and happiness. Our cultural narratives abound with the story of traditional parents who stand in the way of their offspring's chosen romance, wrongly believing there is something more important than romantic love. If *Hamlet* is the seminal narrative of modern notions of interiority, then *Romeo and Juliet* serves this purpose to champion the fundamental importance of romantic love.

It is not surprising then that Alice would interpret Andrew's opposition to marriage equality as an opposition to her happiness and experience his seeming opposition to her happiness as unfathomable and certainly not rooted in a sense of the good. This points to the similarity between the attempt to fuse horizons with historically and geographically distant others and those who occupy different poles within one society.

The second obstacle to Alice recognizing and understanding Andrew's idea of the good is not its total unfamiliarity, but the way in which it seems familiar. Just as Taylor notes that we may 'define ourselves against certain features of the past' (2011b, 37), we may also define ourselves against perceived features of contemporaneous members of opposing groups, such as liberals and conservatives in the United States. The relationship to our past and to contemporary opponents may coincide, furthermore, such as when conservatives align themselves with an ideal of the past while progressives emphasize their affiliation with progress. Hence the challenge is not in reaching for a totally new horizon but in the willingness to move beyond preconceived notions of others' horizons, particularly given that individuals will always be more dynamic, conflicted, and nuanced than static notions of group ideology allow. As Taylor writes:

> One can talk about the 'language of modern liberalism' or the 'language of nationalism,' and point out the things they cannot comprehend. But these are abstractions, freeze frames of a continuing film. If we talk about the language of Americans or Frenchmen, we can no longer draw their limits *a priori*, for the language is identified by the agents who can evolve (2011b, 33).

Just as a category as vast as 'Americans' can have no static ethos, the same is true about groups within American society. In this case, Alice seems to pick up on Andrew's reference to biblical authority and associate it with a preconception of conservative Christians. In a sense, she is right that he ultimately defers to biblical authority. But the

connotation of doing so for Alice is that of an unthinking and even uncaring superficiality, a giving over of one's conscience to the letter of the law. This is a longstanding association within contemporary society, in which 'critical' thinking is often positioned against traditional authority structures. The self-understanding of this orientation roots itself in an Enlightenment that broke free from religious authority (Taylor 2011d); one might think for example of the broad salience of the story of Galileo insisting on empirical truth against superstitious doctrine.

This history and contemporary opposition make it hard for Alice to see the way Andrew's deference to biblical authority is the product of what he experiences as deep, searching inquiry. Contrary to her perception, this inquiry calls on his discernment, tests his faith, and challenges his intellectual and ethical capacities.

There is a sense in which Andrew's self-understanding as a person who cares about human flourishing (but interprets it differently than secular society) and thinks independently (but chooses biblical authority rather than resistance) suggests the way contemporary liberal notions have penetrated even those groups that may define themselves against liberal ideas. Yet his self-understanding may also point to the ways in which conceptions of human flourishing and of free will have played an important role in many strands of Christian thought, the recognition of which is obstructed by popular depictions of contemporary Christian culture. It is such popular conceptions that make intra-society 'fusing of horizons' difficult.

There is moreover another reason why understanding across divides within democracies is challenging: interlocutors inhabit the same political structure and hence their differences have implications for the laws and culture they must share. Andrew's conception of the good cannot remain a distant and therefore safely fascinating, albeit challenging, alternative. His views may in fact mean that Alice cannot pursue happiness as she defines it. The political implications of intra-society dialogue are therefore inescapable. Moreover, it is precisely the consequences for people like Alice, who are fighting for the rights of non-dominant groups, that concern both advocates and critics of talk-based approaches to political disagreement.

## Political Dialogue and Inequality

People who are marginalized due to historic and current conditions of oppression are likely to also be excluded from or disadvantaged within deliberation. Even when oppressed groups are included in deliberative fora, dominant groups may hold subtle advantages such as due to their command of status-asserting language and because their experiences are often the basis for 'commonsense' and even perceived rationality (Mansbridge et al. 2010; Sanders 1997; Allen 2004; Young 2002). Therefore, the creation of a 'shared' identity could mean that oppressed groups experience more pressure to accept the norms and beliefs of dominant groups. Not only does this violate the democratic commitment to equality, but also as Taylor points out, 'for it to function legitimately, a people must thus be so constituted that its members are capable of

listening to one another' with the assurance that they 'shall continue to listen to each other in the future' (2011, 129). Taylor concludes that this willingness to listen 'demands a certain reciprocal commitment' (129).

Yet it is precisely the ethics of reciprocity that recent theorists call into question. Danielle Allen has argued persuasively that dominant groups should sacrifice their interests for the sake of groups who have been oppressed: an act that dominant groups may not view as reciprocal (Allen 2004). This work points to the ways in which traditional expectations of deliberation leading to consensus or even the reciprocal acknowledgement of competing claims could deepen inequality within democracies. It also calls into question whose identities would be privileged in the attempt to create one that is shared.

Partly for these reasons, theorists such as Chantal Mouffe (1999) argue that more important to democracies are adversarial methods that deliberation can displace. Mouffe insists that no matter how well deliberators strive for equity, deliberation obscures unavoidable conflicts of interests and structural inequities. And since the expectation that deliberators will find common ground can make it more likely that dominant groups' interests are presented as 'common,' deliberation could lend legitimacy to decisions that are bad for minoritized groups. Therefore, disagreements would better be channeled into nonviolent resistance rather than discourse.

Given critics' concerns about how dominant logics and interests can undermine the possibility of an equitable conversation, are such conversations still worthwhile and if so, why? What difference might it have made if the interaction had illuminated for Alice the conceptions of the good that characterize Andrew's self-understanding? Furthermore, considering the argument that inequality limits the extent to which decisions that spring from deliberation reflect the interests of marginalized people, is there a benefit to political dialogue that does not relate to the legitimization of decisions?

I argue that there is a more modest good that conversations across political divides can offer. A Gadamerian-Taylorian approach to dialogue can provide a setting and an orientation in which people might recognize the goods that others value *as goods.* While it is highly unlikely that Alice would have been persuaded by Andrew's beliefs had he articulated them, her comments suggest that she would have been relieved that this fellow citizen voted according to his conscience rather than unthinking obedience. This may not make his *view* legitimate to her, but it may help to make *him* legitimate to her as a fellow political actor.

This differs slightly from what Taylor seems to propose in his argument that deliberation could create a shared but internally diverse political identity. Taylor seems to hope for the formation of a political allegiance that could encompass great differences in views and backgrounds. This might be premised for example on a strong and binding sense that 'we are all Americans'. In what I propose, the recognition is instead that the other is an ethical agent, that she acts on a sense of the good although it is different from my own. This stops short of

binding me to her politically, such that I might cooperate with her on shared political projects. But by revealing her as acting from a conception of the good, it may serve the purpose of legitimizing her participation in our political community so that I do not wish her to be expelled, harmed, or stopped at any cost.[2]

It is such understanding that many students who attended the dialogues said they seek and that seems most available to people who engage in dialogue. Take for instance two liberal students who had voted for Clinton in the 2016 presidential election, who shared a table with three conservative Christian students who had voted for Trump. One of the liberal students recognized that the conservative students' votes had been premised on their sense of the good. This enabled the liberal student to understand his own plight as in common with these peers. The liberal student reflected of the Trump-voting students:

> They morally could not vote for Hillary because of her stance on abortion [...] As they said, they're picking the lesser of two evils. For them, based upon their faith, that was Trump, and [...] I connected with them because they were fully informed based upon all the policies, but they voted based upon what was most important to them, so their faith [...] For me, someone who's very socially liberal, that's what I did [previously] with Obama [...] I was happy to see that they were struggling with it too. That it wasn't just me personally, but Christians as well did not vote for Trump easily [...] *Their battle was the same as my battle.*

The other liberal student at the same table was also moved to feel a bond with people whom previously, he admits, he 'kind of hated'. This sense was similarly motivated by the recognition that these other students had voted based upon a moral orientation, though he had a slightly different response than his fellow liberal tablemate:

> Do you know that famous story of World War One, where everybody took a break on Christmas and played soccer together? It's this idea that these people you kind of hated, when you see them, they're okay. They're kind of sweet people, and you don't want bad stuff to happen to them [...] I think for the most part when the Democrats have a big win, I feel vindictively happy about it [...] but [...] I felt a little bit sad knowing that little by little, these kids are going to feel, or they already feel like a lot of their values are being taken from them. I don't know what to do with that. It's not enough for me to stop supporting a woman's right to choose or stop supporting transgender people in the bathroom or whatever, but it was enough for me to take pause and think it's kind of shitty.

While the metaphor of a break in a war rather than a shared struggle persists for this student, he, like his other liberal tablemate, begins to view these peers not as opponents to be conquered but as people whom he might

wish the best for even as their votes conflict with his own. Such recognition that those who oppose one politically are motivated by a conception of the good can legitimize their part as citizens of a country, without reconciling the deep conflicts in beliefs these conversations reveal.

## The Political Significance of Ethical Experience

Although a Gadamerian-Taylorian approach to dialogue reveals great differences in interlocutors' conceptions of the good, such dialogue can at the same time legitimize members of a political community to each other. In fact, this form of dialogue is valuable precisely because dialogue reveals these differences. Of significance is that interlocutors see that differences are at least sometimes ethical in nature. This matters due to the nature of the rifts in many contemporary societies such as the United States. Enmity across political lines is often rooted in the sense that one's political adversaries are not motivated by any recognizable ethics and instead act out of ignorance or malice. Recognition that others' views are at least sometimes premised on conceptions of the good may facilitate what Taylor suggests is crucial for democracy: cultivating an understanding of others as legitimate members of one's political community.

While Taylor envisions a shared political identity, however, it is what Taylor describes in his work on ethical understanding that may be more readily available through deliberative dialogue and that may yet have important implications for political society. Indeed, recognizing one's fellow citizens as moral actors can support the sense that they have a right to democratic participation. It can also expand the circle of people included in one's concern; others move from enemies to sympathetic opponents.

The cultivation of such an identity stops short of the aims that many democratic theorists articulate for deliberation. The legitimation of others as citizens does not legitimate their choices – one might see a fellow citizen as an ethical person who made an understandable choice, but a choice that nonetheless resulted in the election of a president whose actions and views make him unqualified for leadership. Likewise, one might come to see another as a complex human being motivated by recognizable principles, who nonetheless votes for policies that do tremendous harm and therefore must be passionately opposed. This more modest outcome may alleviate the concerns of some critics. If people in dialogue are deepening their understanding of each other as ethical and political actors rather than legitimizing decisions, then the risks of deliberation bolstering dominant interests may be lower.

It is important to note that there will not always be a recognizable good motivating one's interlocutors. This is also a strong suit of dialogue: it is not a technology that inevitably legitimizes people to each other. While dialogue opens the possibility that the other may be inspired by something good, it can also reveal that one's interlocutor is motivated by something deemed unacceptable, such as greed or racial resentment. The potential revelation of unworthy motives sets dialogue apart from forms of communication in which speakers are better able to control and amplify their messages, such as through social media. In addition, some actions are too grievous for dialogue to rightly approach from this perspective. As I have discussed elsewhere, not everyone should engage in dialogue all the time (Wahl 2018), when to so engage is both a personal decision and the subject of research and theory (Fung 2005 & 2020; see also Dacombe 2021). But it is important that when people do choose to engage dialogically, a good may arise that is ethical in nature but holds significance for politics.

These claims do not intend to undermine the significance of other forms of deliberative communication. Many deliberations focus on the assessment of facts and arguments. Deliberation in schools is often centered on training students in skills such as the ability to recognize the kinds of evidence that provide legitimate warrants for arguments (Hanson & Howe 2011). Deliberative minipublics, particularly those structured by deliberative polling researchers and nonprofit organizations, often direct participants' attention to expert knowledge, which participants are then expected to reflect upon and discuss as means to improve their thinking (Luskin, Fishkin & Jowell 2002). These capacities to weigh evidence and construct reasonable arguments remain important.

But what Taylor and Gadamer describe and my research suggests is that dialogue can also be beneficial when the focus is on why reasons make moral sense to a particular person. While anyone may offer an array of facts and arguments to support their views, what is often missing from such discussion is the moral understanding of why it all matters in the first place to the person one confronts. Questions during deliberation could be directed toward what goods a person hopes to achieve through the policies she supports, what fears and concerns haunt her view of the alternatives, and what personal experiences have shaped these hopes, fears, and desires. Attention to why a reason is a *good to a person*, rather than right universally, may reveal how a person who voted for another candidate, in the words of one student who attended a dialogue, is 'not a monster' after all. In an era of political violence and popular politicians who stoke it, this is no small accomplishment.

## Notes

[1] All names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of respondents.
[2] I am grateful to Stephen White for this observation.

## Competing Interests
The author has no competing interests to declare.

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