Out Beyond Wide Reflective Equilibrium

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Reflecting upon Martin Benjamin's arguments in favor of what he envisions as ships of morality, always at sea, being rebuilt while under sail in order to attain or maintain wide reflective equilibrium (WRE), I am reminded of Gertrude Stein. In *Everybody's Autobiography*, Stein describes her first visit to the University of Chicago as a guest lecturer in a seminar taught by Robert Hutchins. Stein recounts this conversation with Hutchins, that occurred following her visit to his class: "we all came out and they liked it and I liked it and Hutchins said to me as he and I were walking, you did make them all talk more than we can make them and a number of them talked who never talked before." What Stein replied to Hutchins expresses the spirit of this brief response. She said, "you see why they talk to me is that I am like them. I do not know the answer…I really do not know, I really do not, I do not even know whether there is a question let alone having an answer for a question."[1] Like Stein I am not only uncertain about the answers, I am also a bit uncertain about the best questions to pursue.

With these caveats in mind, I do have a few questions that reflect my hesitation to climb aboard and join Benjamin's fleet of perpetually sailing ships of morality. My first question asks about different possible interpretations of WRE. What is the status of the beliefs that are "on board" structuring our ships of morality? At first glance, Benjamin's initial diagram seems to set forth a *descriptive* account of the dynamic interplay among the three corners of his triangle: (a) particular moral judgments, (b) general rules or principles, and (c) background beliefs and theories. But later on his account seems to become a *prescriptive* one. When, for example, he says that "we must…incorporate this fact…of moral pluralism as a provisional fixed point among our background beliefs and theories in WRE." Who is this "we" and "our" here? What about the ships where moral pluralism is not an acknowledged fact? Indeed, what about all those theorists who reject "reasonable moral pluralism," whose worldviews oppose allowing such a belief anywhere on board their ships of morality? Benjamin himself acknowledges that his views constitute a "minority position even among philosophers."

Other questions include, for example, my wondering about what happens aboard WRE ships in contrast to what occurs between ships? Are compromise, accommodation, reconciliation, and tolerance part of the process of WRE? Or are they what we resort to when different WRE ships encounter conflicts not resolvable by reason? The locations and relevant "maneuvers" among ships or aboard ships do not seem clear. But rather than speculating further on metaphorical details, let me turn to another question that I consider central for ethical inquiry: How do we meet the other, or each other?

What if one were to take a primary question of ethics to be *How do we meet the other?* Then, when we focus on, or foreground, Benjamin's metaphor of rebuilding

our ships of morality along the lines of WRE, what implications might follow? Given the limits of time and space, let us acknowledge and leap over the many positive, useful directives already contained in, or deducible from, Benjamin's well-honed propositions. Let us turn instead to a couple of perspectives that may reveal unclear dimensions, expose problematic aspects, and raise unanswered questions.

In January of 2001, the *Boston Globe* had an article entitled "Talking with the Enemy."[2] It reported that private meetings among six women, three pro-life and three pro-choice, had been held for the past six years. Precipitated by the murderous attacks on two Boston clinics, the women had begun to meet in order "to communicate openly with opponents" and "to build relationships of mutual respect and understanding," as well as to "help de-escalate the rhetoric" and "reduce the risk of future shootings." The ground rules included that the women speak for themselves, not for their organizations, and that they seek to use terms agreeable or at least tolerable to all of them. The search for acceptable terminology became a focus of many meetings.

The women also agreed to shift their focus away from arguing for their own cause. They said, "knowing that our ideas would be challenged, but not attacked, we have been able to listen openly and speak candidly." As they talked and listened to each other, the women found their differences did reflect irreconcilable worldviews. For instance, they noted that "while learning to treat each other with dignity and respect, we all have become firmer in our views about abortion." But they kept on meeting. Among the reasons they gave for continuing was this: "when we face our opponent, we see her dignity and goodness. Embracing this apparent contradiction stretches us spiritually…."[3]

According to the women's own account: "while we struggled over profound issues, we also kept track of personal events in one another's lives, celebrating good times and sharing sorrows…understanding increased, our respect and affection for one another grew." The article reports one significant public outcome. The increased mutual respect and understanding "affected how we spoke as leaders of our respective movements. The news media, unaware that we were meeting, began noting differences in our public statements."[4]

As I read this report from the six women, their experience seems neither a clear confirming instance nor a clear counterexample to Benjamin's framework. For example, the women did not alter their positions on abortion. Indeed, they apparently reinforced the supporting beams for their opposing views. Yet, these six women did make significant moral changes in the way they met each other, talked to each other, and talked about each other, based on increased respect and understanding.

In the spirit of pluralistic worldviews, let us also consider a radically different perspective, that of Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, a Kagyu Lama and the Abbot at Nalanda Institute for Higher Buddhist Studies at Rumtek, Sikkim. In his writings, Khenchen Thrangu observes that "sentient beings are prevented from recognizing the true nature by two forms of obscuration. These are (1) the obscuration of defilements, such as desire, ignorance, and aggression, and (2) the obscuration of

cognitions, the artificial discrimination of subject and object."[5] While Khenchen Thrangu's first form of obscuration matches similar lists in Benjamin's text, his second form diverges from Benjamin and leaves it open for us to infer the possibility of finding "the obscuration of cognitions" exacerbated by the approach taken aboard Benjamin's ships.

For instance, a possible obscuration might follow from the WRE insistence on certain "provisionally fixed points" where "all reasonable moral frameworks will prohibit murder, rape, genocide, and the like." So far, so good, particularly as applied to constraints on my own actions as well as explicit public prohibitions against harmful "illegal" behaviors. But what happens when we meet a person who, we believe, has violated our "provisionally fixed" prohibitions? Are they automatically one of the "bad guys" (to use the words that Benjamin places in quotation marks, presumably to imply a light-hearted humorous usage)? Can we still be open to inquiry right now, in the very immediate moment of meeting? Or do we reduce this person to no more than a rapist, a pedophile, or a terrorist? If someone stays aboard and becomes identified with their WRE ship of morality, how does a ship of morality meet an individual person, particularly a person who is believed to have committed one of this ship's forbidden acts?

Let us consider what may be a contrasting no-ships account, from the Buddhist Zen teacher and poet, Thich Nhat Hanh.[6] He writes about his own responses to learning about a twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat, who after being raped by a sea pirate jumped into the ocean and drowned herself. Nhat Hanh says that at first he naturally felt anger toward the pirate. But then later on a shift occurred for him. He describes it this way: "in my meditation, I saw that if I had been born in the village of the pirate and raised in the same conditions, I could become a pirate, like these babies born along the Gulf of Siam."[7] These meditative reflections led Nhat Hanh to write the poem entitled "Please Call Me By My True Names," in which he sees himself both as the twelve-year-old girl and also as the pirate, as well as the author who asks all of us: "Can we look at each other and recognize ourselves in each other?"[8] Here are the relevant stanzas:

> I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat,
> who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate
> and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving
> . . . .
> Please call me by my true names,
> so I can hear all my cries and laughs at once,
> so I can see that my joy and pain are one.[9]

Could this mutual hearing and seeing be partly what happened among the Boston-area women as they kept meeting, not only discussing their opposing views on abortion but also "celebrating good times and sharing sorrows?"

In closing, I find myself wondering whether, within Martin Benjamin's framework, one can ever steer his or her ship of morality into a safe harbor and drop anchor? Could one ever go ashore? Take a walk on dry land? Perhaps even join Rumi, the Sufi poet, in that field he writes about in his poem "A Great Wagon":

> Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
> there is a field. I'll meet you there.
> When the soul lies down in that grass,
> the world is too full to talk about.
> Ideas, language, even the phrase *each other*
> doesn't make any sense.[10]

Notice that Rumi says *"beyond* ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing"; he does not say *before* ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing. I am reminded of the contemporary Tibetan Rinpoche Tarthang Tulku, who acknowledges the inestimable value of "texts…teachings, and the philosophical systems…[as] external forms," but then goes on to observe: "There is always the danger, however, that the external forms will become ends in themselves."[11] A final question here might be: How can Martin Benjamin's sailors safeguard against turning their WRE ships of morality (with all the fascinating, potentially interminable renovations and reconstructions) into ends in themselves?

1. Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1971), 213.

2. Anne Fowler, Nicki Nichols Gamble, Frances X. Hogan, Melissa Kogut, Madeline McCommish, and Barbara Thorp, "Talking with the Enemy," *Boston Globe*, January 28, 2001. I want to thank Martha Ritter for this example, which she cites in *Can I Get a Witness? The Significance of Finding a Witness for Liberatory Education* (PhD diss., University of New Hampshire, 2005), chap. 6.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Reginald A. Ray, ed., *The Pocket Tibetan Buddhism Reader* (Boston: Shambala, 2004), 144.

6. Someone might justifiably protest that while it is valid to eliminate big ships here, we could not proceed without some enduring Buddhist "vehicle," such as a "raft," particularly the raft as a metaphor for meditation.

7. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*, ed. Arnold Kotler (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 122.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., 124.

10. Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 35–37.

11. Tarthang Tulku, *Openness Mind* (Berkeley, Calif.: Dharma Publishing, 1990), 111–112.