

Inclusion, Power, and Democratic Deliberation

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Anne Newman's well-written essay challenges Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson's ideas on the deliberative process.¹ Newman's concern is that an education for deliberative character and the emphasis on deliberation itself will exclude deeply religious persons. It is the *process* of democratic deliberation, at least as Gutmann and Thompson conceptualize it, that serves to exclude individuals who do not — or cannot — conform to the practices and frames of mind necessary for effective deliberation. Newman argues that theorists need to solve the problem of inclusion before focusing on mitigating persistent disagreements through deliberative processes.

Newman has hit upon a vexing problem with theories of democratic deliberation. Successful deliberation needs to include diverse views, yet just who has access to — and is included meaningfully in — such deliberation is difficult to handle in an egalitarian way in an unequal society such as that of the United States. Yet, it is unclear why she singles out religious individuals for particular concern. In this response, I raise two primary points for discussion. First, I argue that issues of power need to be considered in the examination of deliberative democratic theories. The problem of inclusion is more importantly related to power than it is to persons' ability (or willingness) to conform to the rules of democratic deliberation. Second, I urge caution: perhaps we need to be cautious in our criticisms of the process of democratic deliberation. We may not have a better alternative in building the kind of democratic society for which I — and Newman — hope.

INCLUSION AND POWER

Inclusion is actually a larger, or perhaps different, problem than Newman allows. Newman is troubled that to participate in democratic deliberative processes, religious persons would need to conform to the requirements of using public reason and having moral autonomy. That is, they would need to communicate their beliefs in an understandable and accessible way and be open-minded to other beliefs and values. This would entail balancing their private beliefs with public morality. I am not sure why Newman is so worried about this. Individuals do this all the time in order to communicate with others in a civil way. People of color in particular have needed to do this in order to negotiate social and cultural diversity, similar to Du Bois's idea of double-consciousness.² Why is it too much to ask of religious individuals? It is part of life in a diverse democratic society and necessary for democratic participation. Persons cannot participate in reasoned, public discourse unless they are willing to subject their source of moral authority to discussion and criticism (rather than justifying an argument with "just because," or "because I (or God) said so").³

I am more troubled by other exclusions — of less powerful groups than the deeply religious — for example, gay people and people of color, as well as religious

minorities with little power in the political sense. Inequalities of *power* serve to shape the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of dialogue and deliberation. Often the deeply religious are in the majority or the dominant group and thus do not feel the need to engage in public deliberation because they are sure of the superiority of their views. In addition — and perhaps more significantly — they are sure their views will win the day. Take, for example, the controversy over gay marriage and the recent presidential election. Political strategists sought to mobilize voters who opposed gay marriage — many of whom were deeply religious — and influence the outcome of the presidential election, which is what occurred in the states that had the issue on the ballot. What was missing, however, was any sort of reasonable public deliberation over the issue of gay marriage, and it is not because religious persons were excluded from the deliberation, but because they were part of the powerful group; that is, their values on this issue dominated and there was no need for them to engage in democratic deliberation. This type of outcome — that certain groups will refuse to engage in public deliberation, not because they feel excluded, but because they feel powerful enough not to have to deliberate about their values — is a more significant problem with democratic deliberation than whether or not the deliberative process itself serves to exclude religious individuals.

Gutmann and Thompson point out that a healthy democratic society is sustained by deliberation even when widespread agreement is not attained. They aim to show “how a deliberative perspective, without claiming to be able to be comprehensive, can provide better guidance in dealing with the substance of moral disagreement in politics.”⁷⁴ The principle of reciprocity and the requirements for public reason and moral autonomy imply that individuals need to develop deliberative character, that is, be willing and open to sharing and explaining their views in order to deliberate with others and reach understanding. I acknowledge that these demands are difficult to meet for persons whose views, as Newman notes, “are rooted in adherence to religious doctrine that they take to be authoritative and beyond rational reflection.” But what do we do about this difficulty? Shouldn’t those “authoritative” doctrines and views that are “beyond rational reflection” be subject to deliberation and scrutiny regarding educational disagreements?

The requirements of democratic deliberation seem entirely reasonable. As Newman quotes them, Gutmann and Thompson say: “An appeal to divine authority per se is...not what creates the problem for a deliberative perspective. The problem lies in the appeal to *any* authority whose conclusions are impervious...to the standards of logical consistency or to reliable methods of inquiry.”⁷⁵ Perhaps the most significant problem then, is not that some religious individuals may feel excluded from deliberation, but that religious individuals in the dominant group feel no need to bring their views out for public scrutiny through deliberative processes.

CAUTION

Newman’s questions about how deliberative democratic theories handle the concerns of religious individuals lead her to question the appropriateness of educating for autonomy and deliberative character. She observes, “By enabling individuals to reflect critically about their beliefs and the course of their lives — an

evaluative perspective that is difficult to lose once it is gained — autonomy permanently impacts individuals' lives by precluding them from living heteronomously." Yet, current efforts at education for autonomy and deliberative character create at least some individuals who can critically reflect on their own beliefs and those of others, all the while still living heteronomously as Christians, Jews, or even simply as law-abiding American citizens. Is Newman arguing against a civic education for deliberative character? Should families with views rooted in authority that are "beyond rational reflection" be encouraged to opt out of public schooling? Perhaps the significant increase in home schooling shows that this is already happening. But this is a shame, a wasted opportunity. Newman and I are in partial agreement. A meaningful participatory democracy cannot be sustained if some people feel that they cannot engage in public deliberation. However, instead of degrading the rules for deliberative engagement to accommodate religious individuals, I think that religious individuals, particularly those in the dominant social group, need to be more willing to come to the table and listen as well as talk. As good democratic citizens we should want to provide reasons for our beliefs that are acceptable, or at least understandable, to others. Part of living and participating meaningfully in a democratic society is accepting the worth of public deliberation and all it requires.

It would be an improvement over deliberative processes if the deeply religious who operate within the dominant social group, some of those who Newman describes as being excluded, could adhere to Gutmann and Thompson's requirements of public reason and moral autonomy. To restate my first point, it is those with less social, political, and cultural power that are vulnerable, not those protected by powerful groups such as the Republican Party, Focus on the Family, and the Christian Coalition.

Democratic deliberation has been enjoying a resurgence in popularity in recent years, at least in theory. But to have any hope of fostering genuine democratic deliberation, we need to allow discussion that may conflict from the dominant view and we need to educate children so that they develop deliberative character. I thank Anne Newman for raising an important issue. In an era in which education policy disputes increasingly are being brought up for popular vote, we need to foster inclusive and meaningful public deliberation more than ever.

1. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement: Why Moral Conflict Cannot Be Avoided in Politics, and What Should Be Done About It* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1996).

2. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1989).

3. I owe this point to Kate Paxton.

4. Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*, 8.

5. *Ibid.*, 56.