Three Pictures of Reasoning

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Rachel Wahl's discussion of reasoning in political dialogues on college campuses offers an abundance of riches. While there is much of what she says that warrants attention and invites engagement, I focus here on a single issue: the contrast she draws between two conceptions of reason and reasoning and their role in our understanding of the value of political dialogue.

We agree that a certain common conception of reasoning distorts our vision of what happens and can happen in political dialogue. I am, however, less sure about the alternative she offers in its place, in large part because I am not entirely sure what that alternative is. So I am going to lay out three pictures of reasoning—the common one and two alternatives—and try to show what they might disclose about the point and promise of political dialogue. My hope is that this greater articulation of the fields of reasoning can improve our research and thinking about and participation in political dialogue.

Let's start, then, with the position Wahl clearly sets aside. According to this common picture, reasoning is an investigative activity. Its point is to work out the truth: what we should think or do. Our investigations count as reasoning if they follow a set of guidelines and norms that link premises, evidence and perhaps values with conclusions in a compelling fashion. This activity need not be a social one. I can reason with other people and I can reason alone. Sometimes other people improve my reasoning. Sometimes they just get in the way. If political dialogues are activities of reason in this sense, then they serve one of two purposes. Sometimes, they help participants figure things out. At other times, and especially in the sorts of dialogues Wahl studies, they offer an opportunity for people to try to persuade each other rationally. If we expect dialogues to serve these functions, then we

evaluate them based on whether they contain reasoned arguments (chains of premises, inferences, and conclusions) issued in declarative sentences linked together so as to be compelling. This picture of reasoning supports the thought that better political dialogue and training in such dialogue will both reduce polarization and increase commitments to forms of social justice. I think Wahl is right to reject that thought, and to suggest that this picture does not helpfully illuminate what actually happens in the sort of political dialogues she studies.

Rejecting this picture, however, still leaves us at least two options. The next one, which seems to be Wahl's official position, pictures reasoning as a hermeneutical or interpretational activity. Here, we picture the activity of reasoning as a process of working out what we and others value. The goal of reasoning is thus to understand ourselves and others better. On this picture, reasoning has a more fully social quality. Although I might reason myself into a clearer articulation of my own positions and their bases, the main point of the activity is to understand what others think and to help them grasp what I think. According to this picture, reasons are expressive. The force of reasons comes from their capacity to link a position on an issue with a person's broader outlook. Understanding someone's reasons is a matter of understanding why they are reasons for her.

If political dialogues are a site of reasoning in this sense, then they aim at greater mutual understanding. Achieving such understanding leads participants to acknowledge that those who disagree with them politically are nevertheless legitimate. They come to see their opponents as legitimate because they come to understand each other's reasons, and this involves seeing their opponents as motivated by ethical outlooks and not merely acting in bad faith or out of ignorance or irrationality. Wahl describes the main achievement of the dialogues she studies in these terms. She suggests that though these dialogues need not yield agreement on justice or even a reduction of polarization, they can play an important role in lowering the political temperature.

I am not sure whether she wants to adopt this picture in its entirety, however, and I do worry that it has some shortcomings she may be overlooking. So, to motivate the third picture I want to outline, let me start with those worries. A lot here depends on what counts as understanding another's position, and in particular what is involved in seeing someone's position as rooted in an ethical perspective. To see the problem, consider the sense in which Servetus could understand why Calvin wanted to burn him at the stake.[1] Servetus understood how Calvin's position grew out of his moral and religious values. He presumably did not think that Calvin was acting in bad faith or motivated by non-ethical considerations, and he did not think that Calvin thought that about him. So they understood each other. But each also thought the other's position was evil. Their mutual understanding did nothing to lower the temperature. We can even imagine them as young college students engaged in a political dialogue in which they express their views and come to understand each other in this sense. ("I used to think people who denied the Trinity were just ignorant or stupid, but now I appreciate that they are genuinely evil," says Calvin to the graduate researcher writing about the effects of dialogue).

That clearly is not the kind of understanding Wahl is after. How can she avoid it? One route packs more into the idea of understanding another's position *as ethical*. We could say that to understand a position as ethical is not just to understand that it is rooted in values other than self-interest, but to see those values as genuinely moral or ethical from our point of view. On an account like this, understanding someone else's position as evil would not count as seeing it as ethical. But the cost of taking this route is that talk of reasoning generating mutual understanding loses some of what made it attractive. Understanding our political opponents in this sense now requires that we see them as already agreeing with us, at least at some level, and so it is less clear that the dialogues themselves are doing much work.

It's easy to miss this implication, because we live in a world where pretty much everyone accepts a set of broadly democratic values and assumes a form of value pluralism. Very few of us think those who disagree

with us are heretics, and even fewer think heresy is grounds for any sort of civil penalty or sanction.   If we are all value pluralists to this extent, then our commitment to different sets of values within an acceptable range does not imply that one of us is evil. Once we recognize the work agreement on value pluralism does, however, we see that the activity of reasoning itself is doing much less. Expressive reasoning can still serve to make it more apparent that we agree at a deep level, but it isn't actually helping to reconcile our differences, and it will only work when we do in fact agree at the right level.

A different route past the Calvin/Servetus problem involves adopting a different picture of reasoning. On this third view, which I have tried to develop more fully elsewhere, reasons are invitational rather than expressive.[2] Reasoning is an essentially social activity in which we invite others to take what we say as speaking for them as well. It is a form of conversation, and like a casual conversation, its purpose and value lies in the interaction itself. We reason with one another because it is a particularly respectful and responsive means of being and acting together. On this picture, reasoning is fully social. Other people are not optional.

This third picture differs from the first, because it regards reasons as invitations rather than attempted commands. Invitations leave open the possibility of being accepted or rejected. In offering invitations, I treat them as attractive, not compelling. Nevertheless, and unlike in the second picture, something is not a reason merely because I can sincerely express it. Reasons are not only what I can say on my behalf, but what I can offer as an honest invitation to you. Reasons are thus intersubjective: they aspire to be ours, not merely mine. That means that they cannot just be rooted in my idiosyncratic personal beliefs or values, or values I know you abhor. I have to think of what I offer as a position you could reasonably adopt, and present it that way to you, even if I do not expect you to accept my invitation. You have to be able to see my offer as laying out a position someone could take who is committed to sharing a world with you.

Political dialogues that involve reasoning in this sense allow people to work out where they each stand and where they might be able to stand

together. So viewed, political dialogues can generate not only mutual under-standing, but a shared recognition of a shared commitment to find ways to continue living together. Political dialogues can thus help us to share a world, even when we deeply disagree about matters of value. They can only do this, however, if participants go beyond listening honestly and respectfully to each other (as in the prompt given to the participants in Wahl's dialogues). Honest and respectful listening helps people have genuine conversations with one another. But someone can respectfully hear what another says without taking it seriously as an invitation. It is only when participants take this further step that they are reasoning according to this third picture.

The third picture avoids the Calvin/Servetus problem without assuming already existing shared background values. It does so by denying that Calvin and Servetus reasoned with one another. Calvin and Servetus exchanged arguments for their own positions and against each other's po-sition. They tried to persuade one another. They reached a form of mutual understanding. But they did not treat their own reasons or the reasons of the other as invitations, merely propositions to defend against. This third picture thus gives us a way to diagnose the failure of Servetus and Calvin to share their world as a failure of reasoning, and not merely a result of their diver-gent values. It thus offers a guide for thinking about how political dialogue across deep value differences might avoid a similar failure. It suggests that as important as respectful listening and mutual understanding are, democratic citizenship demands further steps.

As educators, researchers and citizens, we can ask which of these alternative pictures of reasoning captures what is happening in our political dialogues, and what might prompt us and our fellow citizens to engage in something more closely resembling this third kind of reasoning. My hope is that distinguishing the two alternatives as I have helps us do so. Though ask-ing and answering these questions will not lead us to a world where polariza-tion vanishes and there is a widespread commitment to social justice, it might help us all find reasons to keep our conversations going. And maybe that is what our democracies need the most.

1 The example comes from John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xlix. Servetus denied the Trinity, rejected pre-destination and believed infant baptism was an abomination, all positions that made him a heretic in the eyes of Calvin and the Church.

2 Anthony Simon Laden, *Reasoning: A Social Picture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).