

Learning from Our Enemies: Human Nature, Democratic Conflict, and the Risks of Dialogue

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INTRODUCTION

Watching the presidential debates in 2017, you may have sighed wearily – or gasped in agitation – over the inability of our political candidates to hold a substantive and respectful conversation. You may have reflected, moreover, that this absence of reasoned exchange is not limited to those who speak with Donald Trump. From online news outlets that cater to the converted, to university campuses where students protest offensive speech, the need to reinvigorate substantive discussion seems to loom large.

The willingness to learn from those with whom we disagree seems to be what is most noticeably absent. Substantive exchange is meaningful not only when people put forth their best arguments, but also when they are open to the possibility that the very best arguments will be made by someone else. According to the seminal theorist of deliberation Jürgen Habermas, the rationality to which deliberators should conform “remains accidental if it is not coupled with the ability to learn from mistakes, from the refutation of hypotheses and from the failure of interventions.”¹ Without such learning, differences can create chasms that can make it seem impossible to attain the vision that theorists such as John Dewey had of a good democracy: that of a common project to create a more just society.² With no sense of shared aims or concern for those with whom we differ, there is only competition that is unequal from the start.

Given this, it would seem that the capacity to learn from those whose views we oppose may be the most crucial skill a democracy could teach its young citizens. Learning to learn from others, and attendant virtues such as the ability to listen well and tolerate diversity, seem like a fairly uncontroversial remedy for a divided society.

But who should learn from whom, when, and how? And what are the costs of asking people to learn rather than resist? Can people do both at the same time? It is these questions that I take up through a case study of what should be the most challenging circumstances for learning: dialogues between the police and communities of color during a period of nationwide attention to police killings of unarmed African Americans.

I argue that in settings of inequality and conflict, asking people to learn from one another carries significant risks and trade-offs. While both political theorists and the general public attempt to combine learning with other means of exerting influence, such as protests and lawsuits, these activities are difficult to combine and can undermine each other. In order for people to be receptive enough to learn from each other, it may be necessary to forego temporarily agonistic forms of resistance. This makes learning a risky endeavor and raises questions about whether and when citizens of democracies should be asked to learn from one another rather than fight.

LEARNING UNDER DURESS

Imagine for a moment that your university has chosen to dramatically reduce funding to departments in the humanities. The philosophy program in the School of Education will likely be eliminated. This is the result of a concerted effort by certain administrators and senior faculty in the Engineering School and the School of Arts and Sciences, who have argued persuasively to the university's President that the funds should be reinvested in STEM departments.

Although the decision has been made, you have been invited to “dialogue” with those who advocated this defunding of your program. It has not been made clear whether the conversation will affect the decision. You have been told only that the dialogue is meant to give you a “voice” and encourage better relationships between schools. You are asked to keep an open mind while you deliberate with these colleagues about the value of the humanities. The university president has specified that he hopes that all faculty in the dialogue will be able to learn from each other.

You might imagine having several responses to this request. You may be incredulous that you have been asked to calmly deliberate over the value of that to which you have devoted your life with the very people who are unraveling it. How can you explain why philosophy matters or articulate the good served by a philosophy of education program to the people who have already voted to defund it? Why should you, moreover, without any guarantee that your efforts will have any effect? Furthermore, how could you be receptive to the ideas of your interlocutors? Their idea, after all, is that your life's work is not as valuable as theirs. Their work is not in danger of being defunded and there is no agenda item questioning its importance. What's more, their power in the situation is obvious. They have the ear of the President. You may feel that you cannot afford to open yourself to their views and learn from them. This, you may feel, is the time not for learning but for organized resistance.

This analogy is in no way intended to suggest equivalence between work in jeopardy and life at risk. It is meant rather to provide a sense of being embattled and unheard, and of the effect this has on our outlook even when the stakes are lower. You may now have some inkling of how people of color and, less obviously, how police might feel when they walk into a dialogue at the local community center. Each side feels that the deck is stacked against them. Community members have no idea whether or how anything they say about this painful subject will affect police policies or practice. Police do not know whether their efforts will matter to communities. In this case, their lives are literally at stake. They are asked nonetheless to sit in small circles, explain themselves, and learn from one another.

These police-community forums have two aims. They are intended to engage the community in generating solutions for how to improve relationships with the police. They are also meant to improve those relationships directly by bringing officers and community members together. This dual purpose places these forums at the intersection of what is termed "deliberation" and what is often referred to as intergroup "dialogue."³ Using the term "deliberative dialogue" to encompass both aims, I focus on an expectation that characterizes each: that participants will learn from one another. I explore whether such

mutual learning is an ethical, politically sound, and practical expectation of groups whose relations are highly unequal and fraught with fear and animosity.

WHAT ARE WE? RATIONALITY AND POWER IN DISCOURSE

The question of whether deliberative dialogue is a desirable way to address political problems is often discussed in terms of two issues: rationality and power. The first concerns an inquiry into human nature or potential. The second, closely related, considers the implications of our nature for what constrains and what expands freedom.

The issue of rationality hinges on a question: Do people have the potential for rationality sufficient to make reasoned arguments possible and productive? Jürgen Habermas thought so. Eschewing the possibility of any substantive rationality that could lead to definitive conclusions about the good, he believed that a procedural rationality is accessible to us. We cannot know once and for all that a particular ethical system is the most rational, Habermas suggests, but we can abide by a “discourse ethics” in which we remain willing to examine our own assumptions and learn from the arguments of others. By providing us with the opportunity to identify and question the foundations on which our views and those of others are based, reflective rationality makes freedom possible.⁴

This presumes that people are rational enough to discern the “better argument” when they hear it, that rationality is universal enough for there to be an argument that will be persuasive to enough people to generate consensus, and that at least some people, some of the time, care more about the pursuit of justice than their private interests.

It is these premises that Habermas’s critics contest. Among the most notable is Foucault’s critique of claims to universal rationality as well as his arguments regarding its relationship to power. Claims to universal rationality, Foucault alleged, are produced by and sustain the operation of power. People learn to suppress and produce aspects of themselves according to dominant assumptions of what is reasonable. Rather than setting us free, conceptions of

rationality can discipline.⁵

These two concerns – the elusiveness of a universal rationality and the operation of power in dominant constructions of it – have motivated critics who argue that what can appear to deliberators like the most “reasonable” conclusion can be harmful to marginalized people.⁶ One reason for this is that marginalized people’s modes of expression are less likely to be accorded status.⁷ Conceptions of rationality can moreover be culturally specific.⁸ Hence, discerning the most reasonable argument may disadvantage those who are already marginalized.

Yet there are reasons to encourage deliberative dialogue in spite of these limits. As Dewey insisted, learning through conversation across social divides can prevent the balkanization of society, as people come to see the complexity of each other’s lives and are moved to find aims in common.⁹ More recently, Danielle Allen has drawn on Aristotle’s concept of “political friendship” to explain this function of deliberation. In an unequal and diverse democracy, Allen avers, people must be willing to sacrifice for those who differ from themselves. Deliberation can acquaint citizens with different people and perspectives that make them more willing to do so.¹⁰ Most fundamentally, substantive conversations across difference could prevent the dehumanization that has paved the way for atrocities throughout history.

As such, critics of reason-based models have attempted to improve deliberation in three ways. The first is by unsettling assumptions about rationality through the inclusion of diverse forms of expression such as greeting, narrative, and rhetoric. According to some theorists, understanding these as legitimate modes of speech “remedies exclusionary tendencies within deliberative practices.”¹¹ Furthermore, some theorists argue that rhetoric can move deliberators to make sacrifices for each other in spite of conflicting interests. In a world of inevitably conflicting claims, rhetoric can inspire the “political friendships” Allen desires.¹²

Second, some political theorists suggest that if the emphasis on deliberation – and the education that prepares people for it – shifts from the persuasiveness of one’s speech to the depth of one’s listening, discussion could

become more inclusive.¹³ Similarly, philosophers of education have elaborated the quality of listening that might shift understanding in any context. Theorists disagree over whether listening is intrinsically rooted in questioning¹⁴ or whether it can spring from a mind free of preformed categories.¹⁵ But in both views, listening involves the loosening of attachment to what one thought before.

Yet scholars of critical pedagogy as well as some political theorists suggest that asking all learners to listen to each other can deepen inequality. Such an approach, they insist, fails to compensate for the fact that marginalized people have been learning from dominant groups all their lives. These scholars argue that a monologue may be more just than a dialogue: those who are privileged should remain silent and listen to their less privileged peers.¹⁶ In both approaches, though, the emphasis shifts from the robustness of argumentation to the depth of listening.

The third way in which theorists have attempted to avoid the disciplining effects of discourse is to encourage the articulation of counter-narratives within it. When deliberation aims for consensus, dominant interests can be portrayed as representing the common good. Deliberators should instead acknowledge that their interests conflict and address the conflicts between them.¹⁷ Most deliberative theorists stress, moreover, that if the state's response to deliberation does not address activists' concerns, they are justified in increasing the confrontational nature of their approach.¹⁸

Are these three revisions sufficient to make deliberative dialogue more just? I begin to answer this question by drawing on the case study of dialogues between the police and communities of color, a setting fraught with a high degree of inequality and animosity.

A CASE STUDY

The case I consider is a series of deliberative dialogues between the above parties in a mid-sized city in the American South. They occur at a time when tensions between these groups have erupted, when police killings of unarmed people of color have sparked massive protests nationwide. The dia-

logues took place in May and September 2015 and February 2016. Many but not all community participants were African American and Latino. I draw on my observations of the dialogues and my in-depth interviews with eight police officers and 24 community members who participated.

The participants are schooled neither in the classic theories of Habermas nor of his critics. Yet they are sensitive to the demands of both. They critique arguments based on their perceptions of others' reasonableness. Rational argumentation is not what they primarily sought, though, or at least not as it might be initially recognized. Their desire is for something akin to what Habermas considered the evaluative criteria for expressive claims about the self: sincerity.¹⁹ Participants want to know who people are and why they act as they do.

As recent theorists hope, both police and community members were open to forms of speech that move beyond reasoned argument, such as greeting, narrative, and rhetoric.²⁰ They also understood the importance of listening and attempted to do it. The third intervention that recent theorists recommend was more elusive. While participants, like theorists, acknowledged that contestation is an important part of dialogue, this proved harder to practice. In spite of these efforts, moreover, not all police and community members learned from each other or were satisfied with the discussion.

This is in part because both Habermasian expectations for deliberation and their revision by critics cause problems within the dialogue. For one, the will to consensus for some participants delegitimized critique. This is especially the case among the police and those who seek their partnership. While officers demonstrate a genuine desire to learn from community members whom they perceive as open to police perspectives and supportive of police goals, they reject with palpable antipathy participants who consistently challenge them.

By focusing on consensus at the expense of contestation, police clearly do not meet the standards of Habermas's critics. But it is also unclear whether they disappoint within the framework of Habermasian deliberative theory. On one hand, Habermas stresses the equal right not just to make but also to critique claims. Recent theorists have stressed this aspect of his work,

drawing attention to the validity of “no-saying in Habermas.”²¹ On the other hand, Habermas suggests that we differentiate between critique based on an evaluation of a claim, and a preformed desire to prove another wrong. He emphasized that communicative action requires a mutual willingness to learn from one’s interlocutors,²² and the police may be right that their fiercest critics are not invested in learning from officers.

This raises the question of whether these community members *should* attempt to learn from the police and whether they should seek consensus with them. Critics of reason-based models would caution us here: it is such expectations that enable dominant narratives to go uncontested. Asking all participants to learn from each other may worsen rather than ameliorate inequality. But this case also reveals the difficulty of expecting more privileged participants to listen and learn while those who are more marginalized teach and contest.

First, the recommendation of one-way learning depends upon it being straightforwardly clear who is in a position of relative power. The attention in many fields to “intersectionality” highlights how people are defined by matrixes of different forms of privilege and oppression, making it hard to compare any two people on a scale of either – and that is assuming that power could be predicted by such markers of identities. Second, this approach is contingent upon the person who is more privileged recognizing this and willingly forgoing his claim to what Habermas described as the foundation of deliberation: the equal right to make arguments and critique those of others as well as the premising of judgment on the perceived reasonableness of the argument.

Moreover, the problems of such an approach are evident in officers’ responses to previous forums in which police were primarily expected to listen while community members spoke. They admit that they shut down and became defensive in the face of consistent criticism. A white male officer for example reflected on such earlier meetings:

It’s human nature that when someone blames someone for something, they get defensive ... It’s the way we’re made. When people start blaming one group or another ... the

walls come up ... And when those walls come up, it stops the flow of communication or hinders it.

It was not only white men who did not listen receptively to criticism. A female African American officer admitted that she “tunes out” in listening sessions that focus on critiquing the police, and that, furthermore, the police as an organization will be less transparent if they are afraid of public outrage:

I don't think it was helpful recently when they released [statistics] on the stops they made and there was disproportionality and now there is a lawsuit. That isn't helpful. People scream for transparency and now there is a lawsuit ... If we are going to look at stats, for topics like disproportionate minority contact, then we need to be able to talk about it openly without people being sued. Sometimes there are underlying factors that contribute to the stats. We need to be able to talk as a community about why the stats look like that.

In fact, these forums were motivated largely by the perceived need to have an interchange in which police could explain themselves and where consensus regarding next steps would be prioritized over criticism. The Police Chief identified the value of the meetings precisely in contrast to previous sessions where the police were asked to listen to critiques. “Frankly,” he told me, “we've had, in the recent past, several public forums on this very issue. We're no further along today than we were when we had the first forums.” And such exercises may actually have caused harm, he hints, alleging, “I think those forums are counterproductive. I say that because almost every one of them that you participate in these days are the same issues over and over and over and over again with very [few] solutions that come out of it.”

In this forum, in contrast: “Our goal was to have it be solution oriented as opposed to just an opportunity to be heard.” He hoped that people would not constrain their speech, but that the overall goal would be collaboration rather than critique. This police chief is thoughtful about the need for dialogue and improving relations with the community. But like his officers, he is wary

(and weary) of one-sided listening to marginalized members of the community.

In part, this might be explained by the difficulty of determining privilege. A forum between armed agents of the state and people of color may seem like the clearest example of inequality. And it is. But police perceive themselves to be under attack by a public that has little regard for their experience – and they are. Hence when police are asked to silently listen to their critics, their resentment deepens and they learn little.

Yet there are good reasons for members of the public to behave in ways that are not conciliatory. Citizens should not need to rely on the good will of state officials to ensure the protection of basic rights, especially regarding the lethal use of force against unarmed minorities. A democracy is defined by the ability of citizens to claim rights, not ask for favors.

Even the demand that the public express themselves respectfully is problematic. The trouble with this, as well as the aforementioned distinction between hoping for a privilege and demanding a right, is illustrated by critiques of what is termed “respectability politics.”²³ For critics of respectability politics, anger is justifiable and should not be suppressed for the sake of making dominant groups comfortable.

There are also strategic reasons to insist on assertive critique rather than conciliatory dialogue. Without pressure, state officials who prefer measures that expand rather than constrain their authority could sideline demands for accountability. Community activists who critique police in dialogue and pressure them through protests and lawsuits maintain public focus on concrete accountability measures.

This illuminates a paradox: in order for learning to be transformative, a deep listening borne of radical openness is needed. Equal listening may deepen inequality, critics allege, but such openness is difficult to engender when it is not reciprocal. When the police do not feel that they are being listened to, they learn little. Yet few theorists or activists would see it as worthwhile to suppress political action and critique for the sake of the learning of those in power.

CONCLUSION

Many lament the absence of substantive dialogue between those on opposing sides in the myriad confrontations in our society. We regret that people seem unable to learn from one another. What is rarely recognized, however, is how much we ask of people when we ask them to learn. Asking someone to learn is political, in that it asks people to set aside political means of garnering influence. This is because for learning to take place, pressure must be dissipated. A person who is being sued or shamed is unlikely to learn from his challenger the next day.

Political theorists hope to combine the insights of Habermas and Foucault by envisioning deliberation in which multiple forms of communication and contestation of dominant narratives are encouraged. This move beyond what might be considered reasoned argumentation and consensus should, theorists hope, diminish the extent to which discourse disciplines. Many community members share the concern of critics that dialogue could undermine their cause rather than enhance it. Some participants approached the dialogues warily, ready to criticize police. This stance was difficult to combine with a willingness to learn, and the police sensed this and in response were likewise unwilling to learn.

Many of us would like to live in a society in which we learn from each other but in which those who have less power have recourse to the means democracy offers to increase it. We would like to teach young adults that they should learn from their fellow citizens, but also that they should “speak truth to power” and take to the street in protest when they do not agree with them. But the difficulty of combining the receptivity that facilitates learning with confrontation suggests that difficult choices may need to be made about whether one is willing to disempower oneself politically, however temporarily.

Although there is likely not a clear solution to this tension, there may be ways to constructively address it. Dialogue facilitators – including classroom teachers – may begin by devoting sessions to what it means to learn from one another. Participants could be invited to discuss what may be at stake for them and their concerns about becoming receptive to each other. This may involve

a discussion of how openness to learning from others can be combined with rigorous argument. While such a discussion may alleviate concerns and encourage greater openness to learning, it may also draw attention to the risks of doing so. Teachers and others who facilitate dialogue can respect the decisions of participants.

Such a stance may seem unsatisfying. Is it not our job as teachers or facilitators to encourage learning? Perhaps it is helpful then to return to an example that is relatable, in order to consider why we might pause in the rush to encourage receptivity. What would you do in regard to your university president's invitation? Perhaps, you had hoped, you could join your students protesting the decision, sign onto a collective lawsuit arguing that it is a violation of the university's contractual obligations, and also – why not – attend these dialogues. This may be the best approach, as in settings of inequality, letting go of the tools at one's disposal may be too great a sacrifice. So much is at stake and you are already in a weaker position. But by pressuring the university, you may decrease the likelihood that learning can occur between the people in the room that day. Everyone will feel that they are under siege, and it is difficult to learn from one's enemies in the trenches.

Yet it may be that your university president would not have asked for this dialogue had students and faculty not already walked out of classes and consulted a lawyer. This is likely the case for the police-community dialogues: without massive protests across the country, the police may not have requested that people from distressed neighborhoods spend their Saturday talking with them about how to improve police practices.

Hence, although the two strategies undermine each other, it is likely not possible or desirable to pursue either exclusively. What is needed, though, is more discernment in evaluations of whether it should be a priority to learn from those with whom we disagree, when the stakes are high and the conditions unequal, and how much we are willing to risk for learning to occur.

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- 4 Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*.
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