Towards An Ethical Framework for Inter-cultural Dialogue

By

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Abstract

In this paper I attempt to provide an ethical framework for inter-cultural dialogue, which I argue can contribute to efforts at facilitating multicultural understanding. Such an ethical framework for inter-cultural dialogue which finds its roots in postmodernism, I will argue, provides the impetus for the creation of critical civil societies which demonstrate a culture of tolerance, public debate and accommodation of differences and competing interests. The construction of such an ethical framework for inter-cultural dialogue seeks to promote and support a critical inter-cultural discourse engendered by a sense of plurality, fallibilism, pragmatism and judiciousness. The ideal of such an inter-cultural discourse is directed at epistemologically rich societies embedded in multiple sets of conceptual schemes, each giving us an entry into reality and maximising a many sided multicultural understanding of whatever issues are at question in such societies, and in this way contribute to the establishment of a democratic ethos and a culture of human rights by means of dialogical encounters conducive to critical discourse and experimental thinking, cultural tolerance, and a common commitment to a humane social order.

Introduction: Rationality and Plural Rationalities

The Enlightenment tradition, represented by thinkers such as Hobbes, Descartes, Rousseau, Locke and Kant, maintained that reason is a natural human endowment, which when directed by proper education can discover certain universal truths. It was further argued that these truths were embedded in our sense experiences and revealed in intersubjective agreement among like-thinking rational minds. Traditionally, rational thought was supposed to lead to enlightened action, to the development of rational citizens who would establish a perfect world. Reason was to bring light into darkness, to disabuse people of superstition and tradition, to liberate them from irrationality.

This Enlightenment project which represents the dominant philosophical tradition in the West, certainly since Descartes, generally regarded a particular type of rationality as the only method for investigation into truth. The procedure adopted by Cartesian rationality is based upon logical deduction, strict rules of evidence, and an avoidance of the distorting tendencies of affect, a method of investigation in which correct answers were thought to be rationally determined, that is, true. Cartesian rationality, therefore, regards itself as the only avenue toward
reliable knowledge, and also sees itself as certain of success in yielding correct, final answers, if its methods are properly followed.

This faith in the inherent power of reason to determine truth has, however, been severely challenged, and can be regarded today only with scepticism. The work of Kuhn (1970) and other historians and philosophers of science such as, Popper (1968, 1972), Lakatos (1983), Feyerabend (1978), Lynch and Woolgar (1990) has deeply undermined the belief that even scientists proceed in a purely rational way. Rorty (1982:45) has also pointed out that this overemphasis on the epistemic functions of reason, and within that a privileging of a particular scientistic approach to inquiry devoid of personal will and affect, has led scientific enquiry away from moral and political considerations that are actually at the heart of decisions about what we believe and how we act. In the light of this scepticism and criticism, postmodernism seeks to deconstruct the language of Cartesian rationality by abandoning the idea of rationality as a neutral arbiter of the rules of clear thinking; a disimpassioned means for reaching indubitable, final conclusions and, a universal guide to human thought and conduct.

However, instead of abandoning altogether the Cartesian method of rationality, I would adopt a more inclusive and flexible understanding of reason, which does not deny or reject the specific achievements of that method within certain areas of human thought and practice. In arguing this point, I would argue that reason is neither necessary nor universal, but arises as a practice growing out of what, I refer to as, plural rationalities, in which human thought, feeling and motivation operate in practical everyday experiences. Such a position recognises the limits of our ability to arrive at final or absolute truth by rational means only, for truth is seen as being rooted in inter-subjective biographies that are constantly in the process of evolving. What this means, is that we will be critical of all forms of absolutism, universality and moral smugness in the sense that one has an unquestionable hold on what is really true and right. At the same time we will also, be much more modest in the claims we make and not necessarily regard these claims as binding on persons or groups who might have evolved different ways of answering questions and solving problems.

All this leads to a very different notion of reason, one modest about its claims to universality and sensitive to intellectual and cultural differences, namely, a view of reason located in plural rationalities which have their origin in practical activities such as speaking, listening and reflecting, rather than in objective and dispassionate observation, logical deduction or a scientistic search for facts. Evidence and analysis are undoubtedly important to careful reasoning, but these methods must take their place in a larger context of choices directed at multiple sources of information, appreciating the merits of other perspectives, and in that light critically reflecting on the potential limits of one’s own methods and theoretical assumptions. Such critically reflective persons want to make sense of
their existence, they want to understand and be fair to alternative perspectives, and are willing to admit when they have made a mistake in judgment. These qualities do not find their origin in certain formal rules of reasoning inherent in the human condition. They are far more complex than that, and find their origin in what Rorty (1987:40) refers to as, “… the set of moral virtues which distinguish reason, and which members of a civilised society must possess if the society is to endure.” He identifies these virtues as, tolerance, respect for the opinions of those around one, a willingness to listen, and a reliance on persuasion rather than force. These virtues are revealed in the enactment of plural conversations, that is, in practical everyday experiences that witness to the ways in which people speak with, listen to, and act towards, one another. What is important in these instances is not the exercise of an impersonal, disimpassioned dominating reason governed by the application of mechanical rules of inquiry, but rather, what is of the moment, is the emergence of what I call, a consensual or social rationality.

A postmodern re-vision of Cartesian rationality would similarly view reason as a social process, arguing that reason is a human invention and achievement. This means that reason is neither necessary nor universal, but nor is it arbitrary, for it emerges in plural rationalities, in which people together inquire, disagree, explain, or argue their views in the pursuit of a consensual outcome. Such an outcome is one that the participants, after careful deliberation of different opinions and alternative perspectives, are satisfied with for that moment in time. In fact, Habermas (1992) emphasises that claims about truth or moral rightness can be supported only through actual conversational engagements among people with different points of view, that is, with what I refer to as, different or plural rationalities.

Many, however, consider any attempt to discuss different or plural rationalities as tantamount to creeping relativism. This is rather an unfortunate conclusion as it is not necessarily the case that outcomes based on plural rationalities will of necessity lapse into relativism. This is because, the process of reason in plural rationalities is revealed in a movement towards an agreed upon consensus, arising from careful deliberation and the exercise of choice, in reaching a conclusion. If at a later stage, the conclusion is found to be incorrect, which it may well be, then it can be recognised as such and rectified through an extension of the same process. In arguing that plural rationalities are necessary for the inter-subjective negotiation of knowledge, we would, therefore, assert that the alternative to relativism is not a single uncompromising vision or standpoint. The alternative to relativism is a consensual or social rationality that reflects a sense of solidarity in the experience of shared plural rationalities. Moreover, the exercise of such plural rationalities are also directed, as Mouw (1993:74-75) points out, “… towards a conception of a common good, that is, the fulfilling of those interests that work toward the actual well-being of the larger community.” A recognition of the common good should, therefore, at all times be part of any set of plural rationalities, which would be directed at the realisation of a truly democratic dispensation in all
spheres of society.

The exercise of reason in the postmodern moment, pauses, therefore, to reflect on the limits of our understanding, while at the same time respecting diversity and unassimilated otherness in the experience of finding the space to listen, converse and act. All this is manifested in an age that Lyotard (in Van Reijen and Veerman 1988:278) claims can no longer talk about a totalising idea of reason, for: “... there is no reason, only reasons.” Such a discourse on rationality does not limit itself to the following of formal rules and procedures of thought in making sense of the world, but reveals itself in the inter-subjective engagement of what I call a postmodern dis-position.

A postmodern Dis-position and Inter-cultural Dialogue

Underlying much of the debate in philosophical discourse at the end of the twentieth century is an emphasis on a change or dis-position, namely, that from the modern to the postmodern. This debate has spurned little consensus and a great deal of confusion and animosity. The themes are, by now, well known: master narratives and traditions of knowledge grounded in first principles are spurned; philosophical principles of canonicity and the notion of the sacred have become suspect; epistemic certainty and the fixed boundaries of academic knowledge have been challenged by a “war on totality” and a disavowal of all-encompassing, single world views; the rigid distinctions between high and low culture have been rejected by the insistence that the products of the so-called mass culture, popular, and folk art forms are proper objects of study; the Enlightenment correspondence between history and progress and the modernist faith in rationality, science, and freedom have incurred a deep-rooted scepticism; the fixed and unified identity of the humanist subject has been replaced by a call for narrative space that is pluralised and fluid; and, finally, though far from complete, history is spurned as a uni-linear process that moves the West progressively toward a final realisation of freedom.

A change or dis-position at the personal level means that fundamental re-orientation that we adopt in assuming a “postmodern dis-position” in relation to our inter-subjective engagement with the world. Here we have to do with a deep personal transformation which impacts on the way we engage with others in our practical everyday experiences in thinking and acting.

In developing my argument, I propose that, such a personal transformation, which is taken up in a “postmodern dis-position”, is marked by certain moments which are manifestations of something much more fundamental about us as individual persons. Here I draw on a contribution by Burbules(1995:82-102), in identifying such moments as being constituted by a sense of plurality, fallibilism, pragmatism, and judiciousness.
A sense of plurality is fostered, partly by having been exposed to a range of different perspectives, but also by engaging them in a way that enables one to consider seriously the merits of each. This means that we reveal a capacity to regard alternative positions without a “rush to judgment” in that we can withhold our own opinions in an engagement with other points of view. This capacity is fostered, not primarily by the exercise of certain intellectual skills, but by the exercise of a disposition and capacity for restraint. Such a capacity for restraint reveals that we are able to recognise what our own prejudices might be, acknowledging the limits of our own capacity to appreciate fully the viewpoints of others, and caring enough about others to exert the effort necessary to hear and comprehend what they are saying. A sense of plurality, therefore, has to do with commitment, caring and feeling. It is clearly not a purely rational, in the sense of cognitive, endeavour.

Burbules (1995:93) maintains that such a sense of plurality is supported, not by a position of holding no view, but by the position of having regarded other views thoughtfully and sympathetically enough to realise that each has something to be said for it, so that one is distanced somewhat from the attitude that there is or can be one best way of all. We would, therefore, acknowledge the fact of difference, perhaps irreconcilable difference, as a condition of the social world and take our direction not from an ethnocentric presumption of superiority, or the erasure of difference in the name of presumed consensus around a unified truth, but in a thoughtful and sensitive engagement across differences, while even at times leaving some of those differences in place.

What this line of argument suggests is that our thoughts and actions will be richer, more balanced, and more fair in that we will able to hear and consider a variety of alternatives. Being able to do so requires not only some intellectual capacities, but also aspects of character, personal relations, and social contexts that encourage and support the development of such a sense of plurality. Taking all this into account, a sense of plurality is not a result of an uncaring neutrality or of ostensibly holding no position. Nor does a tolerance and appreciation for many alternative points of view imply a relativistic embrace of simply any view. Rather, it involves an awareness of, and reflection on, positions one does hold, and what their consequences are for other people.

One of the great insights of modern philosophy of science is Popper’s (1968) reminder not to be afraid of making mistakes, because it is only through the discovery of error, through some process of falsification, that we are driven to change. Indeed, Popper’s recommendation seems to extend far beyond the confines of scientific hypothesis testing (where it is typically applied) to a broader vision and attitude to life. In a variety of contexts both personal and professional, intellectual and emotional, we all have experienced failure, error, frustration, and disappointment. If we can live with this, as we must, it is usually with the
understanding that these experiences have formed us, taught us something, and strengthened our capacity to endure change. In this broader sense, what Burbules (1995:94) refers to as a sense of fallibilism, is also distinctive of a postmodern dis-position.

What is involved in a sense of fallibilism? Burbules (1995:95) suggests that it first requires certain commitments, or certain risks, that run the possibility of error. Purposely hiding behind obscurantism, withholding commitment, or playing it safe by only conforming to the conventional and obvious, are all ways of avoiding mistakes, and hence, ultimately of avoiding learning and change. Second it requires a capacity to recognise that one is wrong, which is fundamentally linked with the capacity to admit, to oneself and to others, that one was wrong. This includes our capacity to hear and respond thoughtfully to the criticisms of others. Thirdly it involves a capacity for reflection, as we ponder not only that we have made a mistake, but also why it happened and how we can change to avoid repeating it in the future.

A sense of fallibilism, therefore, speaks of a capacity for change, change prompted by one’s own recognition and acknowledgment of error, but also supported by a social environment in which the process is regarded with favour and not disdain. Fallibilism also implies a particular view of learning, namely, that we gain new understandings not only by the accumulation of novel information, but by the active reconstruction of our frameworks of understanding. This sort of change requires that we encounter and interact with radically different points of view from our own. This, of course, means that we must exist in contexts that support and encourage difference, but also that we must have the capacity and willingness to engage others in plural conversations that makes the meaningful juxtaposition of different views possible.

Then there is what Burbules (1995:96) refers to as, a pragmatic sense, which I believe, also distinguishes a postmodern dis-position. Here reference is not being made to a specific school of thought such as that found in Dewey, James or Pierce. Rather, what is being referred to is a deeper underlying attitude which underlies a general world view, namely, a belief in the importance of practical problems in driving the process of intellectual, moral, and political development. Such an outlook is sensitive to the particulars of given contexts and the variety of human needs and purposes.

Most important, a sense of pragmatism reflects a tolerance for uncertainty, imperfection, and incompleteness as the existential conditions of human thought and action. Yet it also recognises the need for persistence in confronting such difficulties with intelligence, care, and flexibility. The central lesson of fallibilism in philosophy, from Socrates to Popper, is that we proceed, not towards truth, but away from error. It is much easier to know when we are wrong than when we are right. The philosophical consequence of this insight is distrust in obtaining sought
after results. Certain approaches to inquiry are relied upon, including “conversational” ones, not because they will yield a convergence around truth or agreement, but because experience has shown them to be reliable ways of avoiding certain egregious kinds of mistakes. There is no guarantee built into them to produce what we seek. We merely expect that whatever they yield is more likely to be dependable than what we might have received from other approaches. Such a commitment to a process of inquiry or negotiation, without certainty of results, is what describes a pragmatic sense, which is also a primary feature of a postmodern disposition.

Supportive of such a pragmatic sense are social contexts, including educational contexts, in which an emphasis on success is not exaggerated, and in which failure or frustration are accepted as inevitable conditions of growth. In such a social context, the offering of co-operative assistance and constructive suggestions, or asking for them, are socially and personally acceptable options.

But we also, need to recognise our own limitations. This would mean that we know when not to try to work out certain things in a particular rational way, while at the same time regarding the skills of rationality and the assessment of reasons as simply heuristics in the much more complex process of trying to decide what to believe and what to do. In recognising that it is not reasonable to try to apply the analysis of logic, or the strict rules of evidence, or the critique of informal fallacies, to each and every situation, we reveal what Burbules (1995:97) calls, a sense of judiciousness. A sense of judiciousness has to do with a capacity for prudence and moderation, even in the exercise of reason itself. We are not always reasonable. We occasionally fail to act upon our own best inclinations. We frequently fall short of our aspirations. Acknowledging and accepting this in ourselves and in those around us, and asking others to accept it in us, are related to the acceptance of a sense of fallibilism and the willingness to embrace imperfection and incompleteness that is a part of the pragmatic sense in a postmodern disposition.

There is often more than one thing to believe, to say, or do; and it is part of the fallacy of Cartesian conceptions of rationality that they seek a determinative calculus that will converge on the one best or right answer. A sense of judiciousness will reveal that we are discerning about when and how to follow the dictates of argument in the strict sense of the term, and are receptive to the influence of other kinds of persuasion as well. In the actual practice of communicative interaction, strict and conclusive arguments are very rare. Alongside this form of argumentation is a vast range of interlocutory styles, including questions, allusions, unsubstantiated suggestions, metaphors and other tropes, as well as an even broader range of expressions, gestures, touches, tonal utterances, and other kinds of communication. To participate in plural conversations, therefore, entails a sense of judiciousness regarding the influences of other avenues of mutual exploration, negotiation, and the pursuit of
understanding.

A sense of judiciousness, as is the case with a sense of plurality, fallibilism and pragmatism, speaks, therefore, of a certain disposition that governs the ways in which we engage with others in our practical everyday experiences in thought and action, and also, how we perceive the world in relation to ourselves. The nature of our inter-subjective engagements lies at the heart, therefore, of how we think and act, even in those moments when we engage in inter-cultural dialogue.

Towards an Ethical Framework for Inter-cultural Dialogue

Taking my argument into account thus far, I would claim that a “postmodern dis-position” provides us with moments that could constitute an ethical framework for inter-cultural dialogue. Such an ethical framework would instil a spirit of tolerance and willingness to accommodate divergent perspectives and points of view. In short, it would encourage, facilitate and promote processes of inter-cultural dialogue. Such inter-cultural dialogue would be seen to be a distinctively human(e) experience and, would be directed at supporting a democratic ethos and a culture of human rights and practices conducive to critical discourse and experimental thinking, cultural tolerance, and a common commitment to a humane social order.

Some ethical discourses in the 21st century have been profoundly shaped by their modernist past. In its rejection of Cartesian rationality, postmodernism has argued for a re-vision of our understanding of reason. Such a re-vision of rationality, which has given way to a more inclusive and flexible notion of rationality, has far reaching consequences for inter-cultural dialogue. These consequences, argue against a narrow, static, instrumental view of reason that excludes other ways of thinking, or ways of being rational. These consequences also, challenge an exclusive notion of rationality that limits and delimits possibilities for creativity, democracy and freedom, while at the same time encouraging immense conformity by way of its authoritative presence, and regarding any attempt to cross borders, as being irrational and even reactionary.

Philosophical discourse at the end of the twentieth century, and especially the discourse of postmodernism carries with it, I believe, a notion of rationality that can provide an ethical framework for inter-cultural dialogue, an ethical framework with a new sense of direction, away from the debilitating effects of hegemonic discourses. The implications of this new direction are far reaching for inter-cultural dialogue insofar as reason is now seen to involve a process by which we develop a sense of rationality by means of plural rationalities in the context of multiple voices, each with their own legitimate discourse. In these plural rationalities, rationality reveals how inter-cultural dialogue should occur: by examining different perspectives; through encountering new, and often conflicting ideas; by making
mistakes and trying to learn from them; by persisting through levels of difficulty and discouragement to something new and worthwhile; and through learning to judge in practice, both the applicability and the limitations of the general principles and skills one acquires. Each of these, in turn, depends upon the involvement of those involved in inter-cultural dialogues in a range of plural rationalities that foster a spirit of enquiry, exploration, debate, experimentation, deliberation and consensus. Such an ethical framework for inter-cultural dialogue is marked by a “postmodern dis-position” in which a sense of plurality, fallibilism, pragmatism and judiciousness operate, compelling those involved in inter-cultural dialogue to recognise different perspectives, risk the possibility of error, address problems, and raise and deal with questions in every possible context.

Conclusion

An ethical framework for inter-cultural dialogue that is generated by a “postmodern disposition” seeks to promote and support such a dialogue which in turn is engendered by a sense of plurality, fallibilism, pragmatism and judiciousness. Such an ethical framework for inter-cultural dialogue recognises and acknowledges an epistemologically rich society of multiple sets of conceptual schemes, each giving us an entry into reality and maximising a many sided understanding of whatever issues are at question in such a society, while at the same time attempting to lay the foundations of a critical civil society with a culture of tolerance, public debate and accommodation of differences and competing interests.

References


