

Editorial: Pluralism as Process: A Dialogical Framework

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My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others.

(Charles Taylor, The Ethics of Authenticity)

Pluralism is a process and not a product.

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In a world of shadows and of complex moral choices, there is often an underlying tension between principle and pragmatism. Some of the great masterpieces of literature have explored this landscape of creative tension. This is the territory of Hamlet's vacillation, of Antigone's dilemma, and of Polyeucte's religious conscience. It is also the landscape of some of the great scriptural dramas, from Arjuna's reticence at Kurukshetra, to Job's test of faith on the dung heap, to Christ's temptations in the wilderness. This wilderness, like the "dark forest" of Dante's 'Inferno', is in fact an interior world we each inhabit, whose predatory denizens prowl within our own consciences, and where we are lighted by an inner "guide" that can lead us on a steep ascent from a dark valley to a place of eternal light. Our guide is the Intellect, the lamp of the Spirit that shines like a sun upon the outer world.

In the practical outer world, however, for many, the approach to moral dilemmas is not influenced so much by principles as by pragmatics. In life, one is often faced with complex moral choices, albeit rarely in so stark and dramatic a manner as in the cases of the literary and religious protagonists just cited. They can range from relatively small dilemmas

such as whether to engage in a minor act of civil disobedience against an unfair law, to relatively large dilemmas such as whether to have an abortion or whether to exercise the ‘right to die’. In some cases, the correct choices are far from clear and in other instances there are practical obstacles to acting conscientiously, such as societal pressures or personal costs. The decisions one makes can often be influenced at least as much by practical considerations as by principles.

An important reason for the decline of principled persuasion in society is the relativistic ethos of our times. This is partly a function of society’s growing individualism, itself an aspect of reductive materialism, and of the hurtling rate of change. In our own lifetimes, we have witnessed changes in moral norms of a magnitude rarely experienced at any other time in recorded history, ranging from the extension of reality into the domain of virtuality, to new technologically-driven patterns of lifestyle, socialization and entertainment, and the redefinition of age-old notions of gender and marriage. As freedoms become rights, so seemingly responsibilities become wrongs, and there is a marked tendency in societies towards diminished principled accountability. As the world gets deconstructed, so it increasingly lacks an objective foundation for moral behavior. The loss of principle yields in the end to pragmatic norms such as those of privatized morality, the vagaries of changing fashions, or the statistical morality of utilitarianism. In each case, morality is not tethered to the Intellect, to any supra-rational criterion of objectivity.

In this shadowland of moral relativism the only permitted norm is a parody of Truth: morality becomes what one says it is. This is reminiscent of Humpty Dumpty’s exchange with Alice in Lewis Carroll’s *Through The Looking Glass*, when he is challenged by her about his peculiar use of words:

When *I* use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master — that’s all.’

In a relativistic world, where morality can mean different things to different people, the contest between principle and pragmatism is more

often than not reduced to Humpty Dumpty’s practical question: ‘which is to be master — that’s all.’

More often than not, it is secular morality that asserts its claim to be master of the resulting moral vacuum. Two notable examples of this are Peter Singer’s “applied ethics”, a restated version of utilitarianism, and Sam Harris’s claims of science-based morality, a flawed rejection of the claim that values cannot be derived from facts (the very premise of his argument that “human well-being entirely depends on events in the world and on states of the human brain” embeds hidden value-based assumptions about “well-being”). However, morality is more than merely a statistical science or a contest of opposing wills or of skillfully reasoned sophistry. Its claim to authenticity has ontological roots.

From the perspective of perennial wisdom, there is no right greater than that of Truth, which is to say, than that of the objective Norm inscribed in the Heart of man. Truth and Goodness are metaphysically and ontologically identical, and are expressed in the Norm of Virtue. This primordial Norm (or *fitrah*, see Qur’an 30:30) participates in the Divine Principle from which all creation has emerged, and with which it therefore intrinsically identifies. It is the Divine Principle which substantiates the Logotic principle which, as Intellect, is the transcendent criterion of cognitive and moral truth in humanity. As the Divine Principle manifests Itself through the cloak of creation, so the Intellect participates in the spiritual substance of creation (as the *nafs wabidah* or “one soul” of humanity, see Qur’an, 31:28) while simultaneously perceiving creation as a series of veils over Reality. It is only by penetrating to the core of things, as they are in their metaphysically translucency, as Primordially Good (the Edenic state of goodness witnessed by God, see Genesis 1:31; and in the pre-eternal Shahadah of the Islamic Covenant of Alast, see Qur’an, 7:172) that the Intellect can identify with their being, and through this participatory empathy, perceive a morally just path and engage the faith to govern the recalcitrant will to surrender to it. This is the essence of doing one’s *dharmā*, as Krishna teaches Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita.

The identification of one’s *dharmā*, or moral duty, involves two levels of dialogue: the first is between oneself and God, and the second is between oneself and one’s neighbor. The key point is that authentic moral engagement requires inner and outer dialogue, and it is through

dialogue and self-mastery that the moral path of virtue emerges, not through a flight from the complexities of life (represented, in the example of the Bhagavad Gita, by the battleground of Kurukshetra, which Arjuna initially wished to flee) nor through the outward mastery and subjugation of those who oppose one's wishes (the Humpty Dumpty approach of being 'master').

The first moral imperative, reflected in the first of the two Supreme Commandments of Christianity (the love of God, see Matthew 22:37-38), is therefore to find one's spiritual Centre. This involves both grace and effort. The grace manifests, in part, through the ever-present gift of the primordial Nature or Norm that is inscribed by God into the human Heart, and in part by God's willingness to remember those who remember Him (see Qur'an, 2:152). Inasmuch as "the Kingdom of God is within" (Luke 17:21), it is thereby incumbent on us to exercise the requisite effort to remember God and identify with our intrinsic Nature by turning our cardinal gaze from the outer world to the inner world in order to reconnect sacramentally with creation. This entails our willingness to dialogue with God, to rediscover the principial ground of our Reality, the Norm of its sacred Centre within us and in all things as theophany. The dialogue that occurs in this regard is an inner engagement between the human and the divine. Its locutor in us is our prayerful and self-emptied soul, stripped of its presumptive ego, engaged in a dialogue of the heart, and surrendering to the all-encompassing embrace of the divine. It is through this humility and submission that one can regain the vantage of the integral Centre through which the divine order can be known in its essential 'wholeness', as 'holy'.

The second moral imperative, reflected in the second of the two Supreme Commandments (the love of neighbor, see Matthew 22:39), is to regain a just balance or Equilibrium in one's life. This occurs, by God's grace, through an attitude of openness to dialogue with one's neighbor. This entails our willingness to be open to the Other, to stand in the place of the Other, "to walk in their shoes". This takes both understanding and empathy. It involves a pluralistic engagement with diversity and alterity. Proceeding on the premise that unity undergirds diversity, and that we each participate intrinsically in the wholeness that includes us, the aim of such engagement is to accommodate our differences through an affirmation of our inherent human dignity, and

of our accountability to respect, preserve and care for the sacred web of life. It also involves a dialogue for solutions that extend beyond the narrow and ungenerous motives of self-interest to those of an inclusive harmony that accommodates the interests of others as part of the general good. This process is characterized by a balancing and reciprocity of interests, mindful of one's entrusted responsibilities toward the larger community, and of one's stewardship for the created world.

These two dialogical endeavors recapitulate the cosmogonic process. The first (as quest for the Centre) mirrors the principle of verticality through which all things descend from their Origin and by which they must ascend to their End. The second (as the search for Equilibrium) mirrors the principle of complementarity through which harmony is maintained within the polarization of formal qualities in the act of creation in its descent from Oneness to multiplicity, from Essence to form.

Just as creation itself is a continual process, so too is the dialogue of engagement with God and with the ever-replenishing theophany. We will never be free of the Other. We can only transcend our limitations and thereby embrace the Wholeness that includes the Other as it does our self. We cannot hope to achieve peace and harmony by either ignoring or opposing the Other but only by seeking to nurture the sacred dimension of our relationships from an inclusive vantage based on an openness to engagement and dialogue. It is only through such openness that we can hope to find our spiritual Centre and moral Equilibrium in the world, and thereby to creatively resolve the tension between principle and pragmatism. An openness to dialogue is not mere procedural pragmatism. It is substantive and principial pragmatism because it is founded both on the inherent dignity of human beings and on the recognition of civic virtue. A process of dialogue, if embraced, avoids both the reductive tyranny of principles and their relativistic capitulation to merely outward norms. Life, though we each live it individually, is a field of engagement, dialogue, and creative encounter with the Other, who, in the end, is, like our self, but a veil of God.