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Chapter 13 Making a place for the practice of dissenting

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Dissent in the modern world

It's just not on

We don't think much of dissent in the modern world. Indeed, it has become increasingly apparent to me that some powerful elements in our society are actively seeking to silence dissent. As I was writing this chapter, two significant political events occurred that demonstrated quite markedly our current attitude to dissent—at least the attitudes of those in power in Australia.

First, the New South Wales state government removed the requirement for unanimous jury verdicts in criminal trials. Previously, in NSW, jurors in criminal trials were required to reach unanimous verdicts. But, on 10 November 2005, the NSW Attorney-General declared he would change this to accept a majority verdict of 11 to 1 in criminal trials. This flew in the face of the High Court arguments and a Law Reform Commission review. Learned legal opinion had it that unanimous verdicts

were justified on the grounds of historical legacies, legal principles and the rule of law.

But, despite the learned legal opinion, it was clear that unanimous verdicts were not justified administratively, especially in terms of so-called inefficiencies and failures. When the change was first proposed it was claimed that up to 10 per cent of criminal trials in NSW will fail because the jury is unable to reach a unanimous verdict. When I read that claim, it struck me that something was very odd and I pondered it for some time. Why is the trial a failure if the jury can't reach a unanimous verdict? What does such a view have to say about the notion of justice and reasonable doubt? What's wrong with one person saying they can't agree? Does this really determine the outcome? If so, in what way does it matter?

As I pondered the above questions, I read further arguments in favour of removing the requirement for a unanimous verdict. Many of these revolved around the demotic figure of the 'rogue' juror who gums up the system out of perversity. In these latter arguments, it is believed that the lone voice of dissent is always the loony voice, and usually that of the 'loony left'. But why should this be so? Why is the dissenting voice bad? Why can't it be the case that the single person who dissents may be right or has, at least, the right to express reasonable doubt?

What struck me most forcefully, however, was the consequence of this change to an 11 to 1 verdict requirement. With the change to majority verdicts, the role of the dissenter is further marginalised; indeed, you could almost say they have been disempowered. When you know you are the dissenting voice and it doesn't count, why dissent? Why bother to speak up with reasonable doubt if the other 11 can just override you?

The second, and even more disturbing, event that occurred as I was writing, was the proposal for a new set of anti-terrorism laws that raised the hackles of all who valued the notion of civil liberties and human rights. In newspaper reviews of the proposed legislation, it turned out that, unbeknownst to most of the citizenry of Australia, our Parliament had already passed legislation a few years ago that denied any human rights or due process to anyone even vaguely suspected of knowing anything about terrorism. In a speech given by Malcolm Fraser, Australian Prime Minister from 1975 to 1983, in October of 2005 he pointed out that Australia is the only democratic country that has legislated for the detention of people who the authorities do not necessarily suspect of wrong doing or even of wrong thought. In Australia, any of us can be detained merely because authorities believe we might know something that we don't even know we know. That's an extraordinary power for quelling any hint of

dissent, whether known, intended or otherwise. It also reflects, quite strongly, the current political attitude to dissent—it's just not on.

In the new proposals there is also a revival of the act of sedition and a broadening of its definition; most notably, intention is no longer part of the requirement for an act to be seditious. You are acting seditiously if you support insurgency—whether intended or not—in any country where Australian troops are deployed. Such support includes, for example, voicing opposition to the war in Iraq. Had the proposed new legislation been enacted earlier, all of us who protested against the war in Vietnam could have been jailed. Other seditious acts involve promoting ill will and hostility amongst various groups—again, whether intended or not. And, under this provision, it would seem that even acts of satire or legitimate expressions of protest could be found to be seditious.

In essence, the proposed anti-terrorism laws and the particular changes to the sedition laws are a real threat to the idea of free speech and, even more broadly, to the idea of democracy itself. If nothing else, democracy is about the right to participate in our society and, if we cannot freely talk, then how can we participate?

Why is this so?

Why is it that we in the West can ostensibly praise the virtue of free speech and democracy and at the same time place so little value on dissent or, even worse, legislate it out of existence? Whatever happened to the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, to which I know Australia is a signatory? That convention states that everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression and this right shall include the right to seek, receive and impart ideas of all kinds. I guess that's also just not on for now.

It's as if we have the right to speak but not to disagree when we do so. It's as if we can pay lip service to the importance of communicating in a democratic society but not take it seriously. But, if this is so, why bother speaking? What purpose can be served by speaking, if such a limited role is placed on it? Why bother speaking if all we do is agree?

These questions point to a fundamental set of contradictions or tensions in our modern world that arise because of some very basic beliefs about the nature of knowledge and certainty, and the nature and role of communication. Indeed, these beliefs are so well-entrenched that many people take them as real and immutable. Nevertheless, in the spirit of this chapter and this book, I hope you will not only allow

me to dissent from these mainstream beliefs, but that you also will be open to where my dissenting voice may lead you.

As a way of helping you to appreciate the underpinnings to our modern disparagement of dissent, and at the same time pave the way for shucking such a view, I would like you to step back in time with me to Europe in the 17th century—to the beginning of the Enlightenment and the beginning of Modernity. Here I will draw on Stephen Toulmin's (1990) account of the development of modernity. He argues that, during the 17th century, the philosophers of the day—most notably, Descartes—made a number of fundamental moves away from the foundational beliefs of the Renaissance and the humanism entailed in that era.

First, the 17th century philosophers moved from an oral mode of argument for making judgments to a written form of proof that could be judged in terms of formal logic. Rhetoric as a means of questioning the conditions and the circumstances in which arguments carry conviction was dismissed as a way of assessing the rational merit of argument. Instead, only written, formal logic was valid as the means for assessment. In such circumstances, the value of people arguing for and against ideas was dismissed. By extension, the role of dissent went as well. There was no place for the dissenting voice in the rationalist pursuit for truth.

Second, the 17th century philosophers moved from a concern with the local, transient and particular aspects of life and language to a preoccupation with general, abstract principles that would apply across time and place. This set of moves took modern philosophers away from particular, practical problems to the search for abstract and timeless methods for deriving general solutions to universal problems. Implicit in this search for principles was the belief in the idea of certainty. If you applied the right methods, then you could be assured of the certain, right answer. This drive for certainty also militated against a role for dissent. It's just not acceptable to laud the role of dissent, when it is believed there can be one certain universal answer.

Richard Bernstein (1992), in his considerations of the ethical-political horizons of modernity/postmodernity, also points to the denigration of dissent as a significant outcome of our embracing of modernity. He argues that the dominant tendency in modern Western philosophy and metaphysics has always been to privilege and valorise unity, harmony and totality. But in order to do this—to valorise unity, harmony and totality, and damn dissent—we have to attribute language and communication with a peculiarly limited role. Again, this may be best appreciated by returning to the 17th century. But this time we won't visit Descartes in France.

Instead, we're going to consider a moral tale described by Davies (1987) of the struggle to redefine language in England.

Prior to the Enlightenment, the Romantics saw language as open-ended, creative and inherently imperfect. But the English 'linguistic radicals' of the early Enlightenment days found this concept abhorrent. They just couldn't cope with the idea of language as an ever-moving stream, a medium of innovation, and a source of great uncertainty. They could not build a secure, permanent body of human knowledge using rationally validated methods that relied on working from formal logic, applying general principles and abstract axioms, with something as uncertain as ordinary human language.

For example, in the Leviathan (first published in 1651), Thomas Hobbes urged that people had to purge language of all ambiguity, expel metaphor, outlaw new phrasings and reduce language to a rational system of signs. Wilkins, a compatriot of Hobbes, went even further. He argued that natural languages were just too treacherous to be tolerated—the meanings kept on changing and betraying the speaker/ listener. Wilkins wanted to destroy the very nature of language in which words referred to things other than themselves—where words stand for things—and make the words the things themselves. I personally cannot conceive of how anyone could make the words the things themselves, but Wilkins tried to in order to ensure understanding, eliminate contention and guarantee that the pathway to pure knowledge was achievable.

These linguistic radicals, however, were merely forerunners to the main work that sealed the fate of communication for three centuries. The main work was undertaken by John Locke. Indeed, it was Locke who coined the term communication in the way it is still popularly used today, to mean the transmission of ideas from one person to another. Prior to that appropriation, communication was restricted to the physical conveyance of matter or energy.

To understand the role Locke ascribed to communication, we need to start with his Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690/1997). The foundational unit for Locke's treatise on understanding was the idea. But ideas are private things and humans are, according to Locke, social beings. So how do ideas get from one mind to another? They get there via signs. To be social beings, we need 'sensible and public signs' to signify the ideas in our minds. These sensible and public signs are our words. For Locke, words stood for nothing but the ideas in the mind of the person who used them. However, he wrote: 'To make words serviceable to the end

of communication, it is necessary . . . that they excite, in the hearer, exactly the same idea, they stand for in the mind of the speaker' (Locke, 1997, p. 426).

In order to know what the ideas of people were and to gauge the collective will, communication had to occur—but only of a particular sort. Because Locke could only conceive of understandings and opinions as coming fully formed in the minds of individuals, he saw no need for a public process for the forming of the will of the majority. There was no need to talk about or debate ideas because we already had them in our heads. As a consequence, community opinion was taken simply to be the collective majority of individual ideas.

In Locke's view of social life, conflict and incommensurability were removed from the public realm and placed in the private experiences of individuals. This was important to Locke. He wanted to ensure that the public sphere was confined to matters of science and reason, not politics and morality. He believed that, in a civil society, people reasoned through their ideas rationally, in a scientific manner; they did not, and should not, generate their ideas out of debate or other forms of public conversations. Once again, I hope you can see how dissent has been dismissed here—as anathema to reason.

The whole sense of communication developed by Locke reflects pretty well the same view of communication we operate on in everyday life today. If you ask anyone to define communication, it will inevitably involve a description based on the sending and receiving of messages—just as Locke formulated it. More formally today, this is referred to as the conduit, or transmission, view of communication. And it is this view that we have to discard here—at least for the moment—if we are to proceed to build up a view in which dissent can have a place.

On the other hand...

But before I proceed to describe a new place for dissent I think it might be important to consider—albeit briefly—why we might want to find such a place. Why might we want to discard the traditions of the past three centuries and start to valorise rather than denigrate dissent? Haven't these traditions served us well over the past three hundred years? Is there any point in changing our worldview? My answer is yes. I believe there are two very good reasons for at least being open to the possibility of changing our worldview.

In the first instance, the tradition of Modernity has not served us well when it comes to the sustainability and viability of the human condition. In that tradition, the search

for certainty has led us along paths in which we think and act as if we can solve the world problems by the application of certain unassailable principles. But the end consequence of this scientific way of thinking has been the denial of the importance of diversity for long-term survival.

James Scott (1998) has written a compelling and tragic account of the consequences of the application of what he calls the principles of High Modernity to human problems. In his book, subtitled 'How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed', Scott describes such grand schemes as the Great Leap Forward in China, collectivisation in Russia and compulsory villagization in Tanzania, Mozambique and Ethiopia and shows how these are amongst the greatest human tragedies of the twentieth century. He also shows how these tragedies came about because of, amongst other things, an extreme self-confidence in scientific and technical progress.

The same general argument can be made in the world of agriculture, where we are increasingly recognising that the practice of monoculture—which also arose out of an extreme confidence in the application of scientific techniques—is non-sustainable. Again, James Scott provides compelling accounts of monocultures which are, as a rule, more fragile and hence more vulnerable to the stress of disease and weather than are polycultures. Scott in particular considers the modernist's approach to forest planing and use. The utilitarian commercial and fiscal logic that led to geometric, mono-cropped, same-age forests also led to severe ecological damage. Where the formula had been applied with the greatest rigor, the greatest damage was done and it eventually became necessary to attempt to restore much of the forest's original diversity and complexity.

A very different but fundamentally important example of the denial of diversity can be found in the imposition of a standard language, and usually English, across diverse cultures. Although this imposition is believed to ease so-called 'communication barriers', it also oppresses or eliminates the diversity of options for understanding. Languages are, in fact, a major source of cultural wealth for humanity, and diversity in language needs to be encouraged not minimised. If we are to enlarge our understanding of the human condition, we need to be continually searching for new expressions. Human progress depends on our capacity to create new models, metaphors and analogies and these all require new, and creative, language use.

And this brings me to my second reason for being open to a change of worldview. The traditional understanding of communication as a transmission process just does not serve us well if we want to foster creative language use, nor does it serve us well

if we want to address any number of contemporary communication challenges. As the foundation director of the Communication Research Institute of Australia, I repeatedly found over a fifteen year period that mainstream communication studies and understandings had little to offer when it came to resolving the practical communication problems that our member organizations brought to us. The mainstream understanding of communication as a simple transmission process focuses on the individuals—as senders or receivers—and thus pushes the notion of community aside. It focuses on the end effects—message received—and thus ignores the means. And, it presumes the possibility of certainty and thus denies the open-ended creativity of communicating.

So, I find there are very good reasons for putting aside the traditions of modernity and its concomitant limited view of communication. In putting these traditions aside we need to be prepared to take a great leap from where we are now to where we could be in the future. Below I take this leap and invite you to do so with me.

Where dissent has a place in the postmodern world

To be able to foster diversity and valorise dissent, we need to step out of the modern worldview and into the postmodern. Although, in using the word 'postmodern', I am mindful of both Richard Bernstein's (1992) and Stephen Toulmin's (1990) caution about the slippery and vague nature of the term. More than a decade after their cautions the term is still as slippery but I shall use it to reflect a new mood or 'constellation' in which the paradigm for understanding is radically different from that associated with the tradition of modernity.

Central to the new postmodern constellation of beliefs is the crucial role played by language and communication. In this world, language is not subservient to knowledge, as Locke would have it; rather it is the means whereby knowledge is created. Our knowledge of the world is created out of our communication about it.

The recognition that knowledge is created in the human realm, in our communication, is one shared by the pragmatic philosophy tradition founded by Dewey (1981) and the newer arguments of the social constructionists (eg Pearce, 1995, Penman, 2000, Shotter, 1993), amongst others. Both traditions reject the traditional assumption of knowledge as representations of well-formed objectivity existing in an external world. Instead, it is assumed that knowledge does not have an objective, immutable base in the 'real' world—it is not out there to be found or discovered. Instead, knowledge is created by us, in our conversations. For

contemporary pragmatic philosophers such as Richard Rorty, conversation is 'the ultimate context in which knowledge is to be understood' (Rorty, 1980, p.389).

This 'relocation' of knowledge requires a profound shift in our understanding of the world. Perhaps the most significant challenge that arises from this shift is what it means for a notion of truth. In the postmodern realm we can't accommodate the commonsense or correspondence notion of truth—that a statement or claim is true if it conforms with the facts or agrees with an independent reality. In the postmodern realm there is no independent reality with which any claim can agree. So what are we to do about truth?

In considering the above question, Richard Campbell (1992) said that '[w]hether we can work out a different conception of truth, or whether we have to give up on truth altogether seems to me to be one of the profound philosophical challenges of our time' (1992, p.6). I would agree. I also believe that the way in which we approach a new understanding of truth has direct implications for our take on dissent. Here I want to briefly outline the argument for a different, and useful, view of truth developed by Campbell.

He proposed that instead of taking the conventional notion of truth (as reflecting an immutable reality) we locate the notion of truth firmly in action, particularly in linguistic practice. By a series of rigorously developed steps, Campbell leads us in an exploration of what it can mean to locate truth firmly in action. Among those steps are a number of critical points.

First, he turned the abstract notion of truth into an adverb, and wrote about 'acting truly': 'if we are to act truly, our approach to entities in the world must maintain an open attitude, so that we let them show themselves as they are' (Campbell, 1992, p. 425). There is a twofold openness required: We need to be open in our pointing to how things are in talk, and things need to be revealing something of how they are. When we turn to communicating, acting truly calls for a reciprocal openness between participants, allowing things to be revealing. This is not an easy task. All too often in everyday communicating, we have a tendency to quickly impose interpretations—to make rapid decisions about what is going on or what was said. To remain open requires us to hold off our too-quick interpretations and to allow for other possibilities to emerge.

Second, in acting truly we are at the same time committed to the continual possibility of revision in the light of a more adequate understanding. This acknowledges the very temporal and context-bound nature of all communicating and provides for the

transitory nature of what we understand. Truth is not an uncompromisable, universal fact; rather, it is a contextually bound, local phenomenon. However, as Campbell pointed out, recognizing the socially constructed and therefore changeable nature of our search for understanding is no justification for regarding questions of truth as irrelevant. As he wrote: 'Socially constructed realities may not be timeless or impervious to political action, but they are real nevertheless' (1992, p. 430).

Third, Campbell argued 'Being true is an achievement attained when the commitments expressed in making the statement, or in performing the deed, are fulfilled' (p. 436). For Campbell, being true is being faithful. Campbell noted that this notion of being true as faithful returns us to a much earlier conception of truth shown in the Old English root of the word, meaning 'good faith'. Indeed, there was a similar understanding in ancient Greece (before Plato purged it). Truth, in the Homeric sense, required such things as fidelity, loyalty, constancy and allegiance. When we apply this notion to communicating, being true is acting faithfully into our social situations. It is acting with integrity and insight towards others and the reality—however socially constructed—of the situation.

To sum up Campbell's argument: 'The truth, therefore, is not to be found ... in trying to construct an impersonal and timeless account of reality which flies in the face of our own humanity. It is rather to be achieved in the quality and authenticity of our faithful life-activities' (1992, p. 438). Campbell has very much turned the notion of truth around with his philosophical investigations. He has transformed it into an activity (a verb) that is ongoing and essentially moral in character, for to evaluate activities as true requires us to ask questions about faithfulness, integrity, authenticity and the like. This can be nothing else but an ongoing open inquiry that occurs in our communicating.

Where communicating is reconstructed

This brings me to the next step we have to make in order to give dissent a place of value. We have to reconsider our understanding of the process of communicating. If this is the process where we can act truly, in good faith, and where dissent can have a role, then it behoves us to consider its nature in the postmodern realm seriously.

There is no little irony in the fact that what I now propose to do is to build up a picture of the practice of dissenting based on my previous conceptual work on communication (Penman, 2000) that, in itself, dissents from the status quo. Here I will draw on that account to briefly describe another way of construing

communication and to explore the practice of dissenting as one form of communicating.

As a starting point—and one radically different from Locke—we need to imagine that the basic human reality is not individual people or their ideas, but people in conversation. This is in marked contrast from the Cartesian position, where the person is first and foremost an isolated thinker employing reason to objectively derive knowledge. This is captured in Descartes's famous Latin motto, *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). In contrast, Heidegger argued that we are first and foremost a situated interpreter, understander or 'sense maker' engaged in everyday coping, and as a situated interpreter we are irreducibly relational not individual, social not psychological. For Heidegger, the primary human reality was being in the world—being engaged with others in language (Stewart, 1995).

When we start with ourselves as being-in-language, our focus moves to how we make sense *in* communicating—not *out* of it. In jointly acting together in communicating we create a wonderfully uncertain and often mysterious process—something readily recognized by the Romantist before the advent of the Linguistic Purists in the Enlightenment. The most amazing thing about this mysterious and uncertain process, though, is that somehow we usually manage to go on. But how?

Given that our understanding of the world is generated in communicating, and that this is a process occurring over time, it makes sense that the temporal context plays a major role in our understanding. What we determine to be knowledge and how we interpret communicative action is a function of the historical context in which the process takes place. As the context changes, so too does our understanding. Just as important, without the context, we cannot make sense of communicative action.

This very temporality of understanding means it is not possible to have a stable knowledge base. Nevertheless, it is still possible to say, at any point in time, that 'Now I understand'. But, what does it mean to say this, to say we know for the moment? This was one of the central questions of Wittgenstein's extensive investigations into the philosophy of language. He argued that we understood when we were able to simply keep going on with each other: '[T]ry not to think of understanding as a "mental process" at all'; instead, simply ask 'in what kind of circumstances do we say "now I can go on"?' (1953, no.154).

Trying to imagine this notion of understanding can be very difficult. We have developed such an entrenched set of intramental terms that locate meaning and understanding in ideas inside the heads of people, it can be difficult to relocate

meaning outside in the momentary understandings between people. Sometimes I find it helps to imagine a good conversation as something akin to a good dance. Although in this instance it can only be a particular kind of dance: one whose performance relies on the co-ordinated action between partners. With each step that the partners take in co-ordination with each other, the dance moves forward. Each partner is able to go on with the other when each moves in ways that enable such progress. That the dance goes on shows that moments of understanding have occurred.

However, the understanding achieved is only momentary. The meanings generated in communicating are never complete or even capable of being finished. In continually bringing about a new state of affairs, joint participations and the implicated meanings are always emergent and never finished. This last point is important. There is no possibility that meaning can be complete, if only... . On the contrary, meanings are essentially unfinishable.

The very constitutive nature of communicating, along with its vagueness and indeterminacy, guarantees that there is a great deal of diversity to communicating, or at least in our interpretations of it. Then when you realise there is no empirical base to any interpretation—there is no world out there outside of our communicating about it—the possibilities are endless.

And putting dissent in its place

Underlying this construction of communicating as a wonderful, messy, diverse and essentially open-ended process is the recognition that disorder and chaos are at the base of social life. Once we come to this realisation, then dissent starts to make more sense. Indeed, within this view, dissent is an inevitable aspect of life in which communicating is involved. But, more importantly for the argument here, it is also a process to be valued. Within a modern worldview, you may accept that dissent cannot be avoided, at all times and at all costs, but within that same worldview dissent is not to be encouraged. Here—from a postmodern frame—on the other hand, dissent is to be valued and encouraged.

By dissenting, or accepting dissent, we keep ourselves continually open to alternative possibilities and to new directions. Richard Rorty argued that this openness in human conversation is so important that it should be the moral task of any social philosopher or critic to defend it. Rorty has also argued that it is far more important to keep the argument going than to finish it and I would agree with him—to

some extent. Yes, it is important to keep the conversation going, to avoid premature closure, to consider dissenting views and to recognise that understandings are never complete and inviolate. But, on the other hand, I would want to be careful not to fall into the nihilistic trap of the deconstructionists (eg Derrida 1977). From their perspective, all attempts at discovering underlying order must inevitably fail and therefore there is no point in attempting such a search. While I agree there is no point in searching for an underlying order, there could be every point in imposing order onto chaos in some instances, at some times. This means that yes, dissent does have a place, and a very important one, but not all dissent is necessarily good all of the time. There could well be good reasons for confining dissent or for choosing some form of dissent over others.

At this point, I cannot help but recall a recent event in Australia that well illustrates the need to make judgments about dissent, and most importantly, shows that some dissent is still bad even when viewed from a postmodern perspective. With the 'war on terror' we are all being cajoled into keeping an eye out for 'the terrorist next door'. This so-called war has, of course, generated an increasing fear of the other, the foreigner in our midst and especially the foreigner from the Middle East. As I was writing (nearing the end of 2005), this fear erupted at one beautiful beachside suburb in Sydney suburb into a horrible tribal war. While there were many contributions to this violent outburst, the final straw was the gathering of thousands of Australian youth (mainly male and all 'white') to protest against the 'Lebs' (Lebanese) coming to the beach. This started as a peaceful rally to demonstrate the superiority of white Australia (that's blunt, but it was how it was) and then turned into an ugly running brawl that continued for days and over different locations.

These Australian youth were expressing a dissenting view from the ostensibly mainstream stance of multiculturalism. That they wanted to dissent is acceptable, but their mode of doing so is not—indeed, it was nothing short of reprehensible. This points directly to the need to consider the mode or practice of expressing dissent.

Dissenting well

The importance of understanding the practice

So far, I have built up a picture, using the postmodern worldview, of dissent being a natural or ordinary aspect of every day life. It is an inevitable outcome of the very nature of communicating—in which disorder and uncertainty reign supreme. But in

order to appreciate the positive role that can be played by dissent, we need to turn to a consideration of the practice of dissenting.

It helps here if we talk about dissenting and not dissent—in the same way and for the same reason that I have been using communicating and not communication, and acting truly and not truth. When we talk about dissenting, or communicating, in the verb (or gerund) form we are bringing the process to the fore. Rather than treating dissent or communication as a ‘thing’—noun-form—we are saying that it is an act in progress, it is something we do, and it is something we do jointly with others.

This emphasis on doing and experiencing is very much at the heart of the arguments of John Dewey and the pragmatic philosophers who followed him. Dewey (1981) argued that it was critical to take everyday human experience seriously and to do this we need to value what is in process, not what is presumed finished or ended. In arguing thus, Dewey strove to redress the imbalance of the Cartesian school that relegated experience to a secondary and almost irrelevant place in the scheme of things.

Dewey urged us to ask: What do we experience about things we do and about happenings in our world? For Dewey, and for me here, it is this point of experience that is our empirical reality. What we experience as we act into our world is the primary point of any reality we can know. This observation is especially important when it comes to considering communicating and the dissenting form of it. We cannot even attempt to understand what it is to participate—to act jointly with others—if we do not return to our experience of it. Experience leads us directly to embodied persons in the real, everyday world and it is our lived experience in communicating that is the fount of our practical knowledge.

Acting in good faith

Because we are working within the new constellation of postmodernism, we have no recourse to an independent or external form of evaluation when it comes to making judgments about the process of dissenting. We cannot say that an act of dissent was good because it did something outside the process of communicating; rather, we can only say it’s good from within the process of communicating itself. In other words, any judgment or evaluation that we make about a practice of dissenting relies on the quality of the practice of communicating itself.

To help here, let’s return to one of Richard Campbell’s argument about truth. He said: ‘If we are to act truly, our approach to entities in the world must maintain an

open attitude, so that we let them show themselves as they are' (1992, p425). What Campbell is pointing to is the need to respect, and act in good faith towards, the inherent aspects of the process we are dealing with. Here, we are dealing with communicating. So, to develop criteria that act in good faith means to evaluate the process of communicating in terms of the extent to which its features are recognised or denied. In other words, I am proposing a principle of self-affirmation: Good communicating affirms all the characteristics of itself—it is true to itself. On the other hand, bad communicating renders aspects of the process invisible, or denies their existence. Bad communicating does not reflect good faith with the process.

The best example I can think of to illustrate this point here is the view of communication as a conduit or transmission process—where communication is described as the simple act of sending and receiving messages. You might still want to think that that's the right view, because however else could it be? And, if you do, then, from within my framework, you are confining a very complex process to a simple act of passing on messages. This transmission view renders many aspects of the communicating process invisible, or denies their existence, and thus is a form of bad communicating.

In what I have discussed so far about the practice of communicating in a postmodern world, we can identify four key characteristics of communicating that would require open affirmation for the process to be classed as good: constitutiveness, contextuality, diversity and incompleteness. Dissenting well comes about when there is open affirmation of these same features during the practice of dissenting. Let's have a closer look at what this can mean.

When I talk about communicating being constitutive, I am talking about the way in which we construct our understanding in our communicating, not independently of it. We don't make sense of something and then engage in communication with others about it; the sense is made in the act of communicating itself—even if it is only communicating with oneself. This assertion inexorably follows from the starting point I discussed earlier—where we need to take the basic human reality as people in conversation, or being-in-language.

Given that we constitute our understandings in communicating, meaning is neither fixed or invariant; rather it is constantly changing with our every act of participation. A poor communicating practice, and a poor dissenting one, would be where the rightness of a point or argument was asserted on the grounds of an objective reality. What springs to mind here are arguments between different religious groups where

each asserts the correctness of their faith on the grounds of 'god's' word—usually written and usually taken as inviolate.

The second important feature of communicating is the pivotal role played by context. We understand things by using the context in which communicating takes place. Context provides the frame for meaning generation. The context, however, is no more stable than the communication process itself. So, the meaning given to any particular communicative action or episode must be seen as subject to infinite revision. The understanding of an action at any particular point in time and in any given structural context is subject to constant revision as the retrospective and emergent contexts change with the process itself.

When the meaning of an action or set of words is taken to be immutable over time and/or space, then this critical feature of contextuality is denied. As Richard Campbell expressed it, this denial of context is a denial of our historicity that flies in the face of our own humanity. In contrast, if we are to act truly and respect the communicating process for what it is or could be, we must be committed to the continual possibility of revising our understandings. Realising that the same action can take on new meanings in different contexts means that we recognise the transitory nature of our understanding.

The third feature we need to be sensitive to is the diversity to communicating, or to our interpretations of it. There can be as many different interpretations of acts or utterances that we as participants are capable of generating. Most importantly, there is no necessarily single, right interpretation—although you'd probably think so if you've ever overheard a marital argument (not your own, of course) that's goes from bad to worse on the basis that each partner's different claim to interpretation is the only correct one. Those sorts of arguments are clear examples of bad communicating.

Better descriptions or interpretations need to recognise that there are no objective, outside grounds on which to make a claim that one interpretation is better than another. It's not possible to say that this interpretation is better than that one because it is more real. In other words, we cannot resort to fact and, instead, must inevitably return to value. We may wish to say that this interpretation is better than another, but we can only do so on nonfactual grounds, such as moral or aesthetic ones. This has some very important implications when it comes to dissenting. If those in the dissenting process are to respect this postmodern stance on communicating, then no-one has the right to reject the dissenting views on so-called

factual grounds. Instead, the value of the dissenting view(s) needs to be open to consideration on moral grounds and/or aesthetic ones.

As a way of contemplating this proposal, consider my very own dissenting voice in this chapter. If you, the reader, are not willing to accept what I have to say about communicating but are willing to accept the postmodern stance when it comes to notions of truth, then you would need to make a judgment about the worth of my statements on non-factual grounds. For me, the most important grounds are practical and moral. I would want to ask: What can I do with such a dissenting view of communicating, where does it lead me in practice? And, then, I would want to ask: Does it lead me somewhere good, is it good for the human condition?

The final consideration is one of incompleteness, or open-endedness. If we are to engage in good communicating we must recognise its open-ended nature. In doing so, we acknowledge the unfinishability of the meanings generated in communicating. We recognise that there always can be a different interpretation, a different way of understanding, a different way of experiencing, as we proceed in open conversation with others.

Theories and practices of communicating that presume the possibility of perfect (and therefore only one way of) understanding illustrate bad communicating within the framework being developed here. In assuming perfect understanding is possible, the ongoingness and unfinishability of the meaning generation process is denied. On the other hand, theories and practices of communicating that have no closure, when the practical exigencies of the world seem to call for it, could be classed as equally bad.

Although we might want to respect all opinions and theories, there may be very good practical reasons why we should not. The right to hold any opinion may be sustainable, but the implications for practice cannot always be supported morally. For example, while I might want to be open to, and respect, a range of understandings of the human condition, I cannot morally support a view that I believe has an impoverished representation of human experience and that, in practice, negates a range of possible actions for improving the human condition. As I've said earlier, the transmission view of communication illustrates an impoverished representation of human experience and, as such, can be classed as bad within my framework here. Similarly, a reductionist model of human nature that views humans and societies within such narrow horizons and restricts opportunities for moral explorations and social growth can also be classed as bad.

When these four criteria are recognized as essential to this new worldview, then the place for dissent is opened. By respecting differences and by being continually open to alternative possibilities the practice of dissenting takes on value. Respecting these four criteria also ensures that the dissenting process is done well because it acts in good faith with the process of communicating. And, in the end, in our postmodern world, acting in good faith is acting truly.

What does all this say about leading?

Leading from a moral, communicating frame

In the postmodern worldview constructed here, leading is as much a communicating process as dissenting. So, rather than see leadership as a technical or administrative act, we need to reconstrue it as a process of joint action with others and when we make judgments about the process of leading we also need to rely on moral grounds, not so-called factual ones.

In the end, the whole argument in this chapter rests on a moral core. So here I want briefly to expound on what it is I'm really talking about when I use the word moral, because I am using it in a far broader and richer way than the understanding offered in the worldview of modernity.

The conventional understanding of morality has four main features. First, in everyday life, the concept of morality is relegated to an extraordinarily narrow domain and, most typically the domain of the religious—moral grounds are almost always taken to be religious ones only. Second, in philosophy, morality lies in the realm of reasoned principle—the moral order is based on a set of principles objectively derived and established. Third, the concept of morality has been instrumentalised as 'ethics'—a set of injunctions for professional behaviour that is context-free and timeless (see Ciulla, Prince & Murphy, 2005). Fourth, our modern conventional understanding of morality is that it is unimportant—of no more than purely academic interest.

In contrast, here the moral domain is in the domain of everyday, practical experience. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1992) argued against a scientific, pure knowledge approach to morality and for the use of practical knowledge when it comes to understanding the human, social realm. For Gadamer, practical knowledge is moral knowledge and it has three important features. First, moral knowledge

comes out of practice, from human activity itself; it is not something that is rationally discussed and derived. Second, moral knowledge is knowledge of particulars that help direct action in good ways, not to desirable ends. It is knowledge that emerges from particular practices in particular contexts to guide action in that particular situation. Third, moral knowledge is never knowable in advance, as is knowledge that can be taught. We do not possess moral knowledge in such a way that we already have it and can then apply it to specific situations. Rather it is in the doing of things that we bring about our moral knowing. A list of general ethical injunctions that are expected to be applicable across all situations does not reflect a moral knowing; moral knowing is always emergent in practice.

I think it is the last point that brings home how strikingly different this idea of moral knowing is from that inherent in the worldview of modernity. Moral knowing is a process that, in itself, is never-ended and always open to new developments—it is not something handed to us independent of ourselves. So, from this viewpoint, making moral judgments, or bringing about moral knowledge, has nothing to do with the independent application of a standard of good. Instead, making moral judgments is all about acting in good faith within the process of communicating; the aim being to bring about good ways of proceeding for all involved. This is where leading comes in.

Good leading is all about making contributions to the process of communicating that, in all good faith, enable those involved to move on and to do so in better ways. Good leading is about recognising and fostering the importance of moral, practical knowing. Good leading makes a place for the practice of dissent. Good leading is about fostering and managing dissent.

Fostering dissent and asking good questions

The idea of dissenting and the idea of leading are related. Both take place within the process of communicating and for both to be done well there must be open respect for the inherent features of that process. And both in their different ways contribute to the process of morally knowing. So how do they differ?

Dissenting keeps on opening up new possibilities but does not necessarily provide the appropriate practical closure that I talked about above. It is here that the act of leading plays a critical role. While dissent helps to keep our options open, good leading helps us to manoeuvre through these options in ways that are best for us.

Richard Bernstein talked about one of the major challenges of living in this new constellation of postmodernity as follows: 'we have to learn to think and act in the in-between interstices of forced reconciliation and radical dispersion' (1992, p.9). Good leading does this. Good leading helps to take us to where we can best act in the interstices. Good leading is working well in the practical moral domain and being open to continual revision of understandings and approaches to proceeding

I find that I have come to a rather interesting position here and have something directly to say about the approach to dissent taken by the current Australian Prime Minister in the new terrorism laws described at the beginning. Rather than suppressing all dissent as his laws intend, my argument here would suggest he needs to consider ways to foster and manage dissent so that we can move forward in the 'interstices'. This does not mean that we must encourage terrorists. These terrorists no more engage in good dissenting practices than does our Prime Minister engage in good leadership practices. His approach is one of 'forced reconciliation'—and one forced to his view alone—and neither he, nor the terrorists he is attempting to engage war on, show any respect for the process of communicating. Neither party is acting in good faith with the process.

On the other hand, we do need to consider ways in which good dissent can not only be allowed (and not suppressed) but encouraged. This is the task of leading in a postmodern worldview. Central to this task of leading is the asking, and encouraging, of good questions. In the end, our way forward relies on the questions we ask—not necessarily the solutions we propose. It is in the very asking of good questions that we open up new pathways and generate new possibilities for going on. These good questions preserve an orientation to openness; they reflect genuine curiosity; they are concerned with practice; and, most important, they are asked in good faith, in the process of communicating.

So, once again we return to the process of communicating and the practice of dissenting and leading within it. For both types of practices, participation is essential. And it is this 'methodical participation', to use John Ralston Saul's phrase (1992, p.584), that is essential to supply the decent, democratic values on which advanced civilizations rest. Without continual, or methodical, participation in the public sphere, we simply cannot contribute to that sphere—as is the right and responsibility of all good citizens.

Dissenting well, and fostering and managing that dissent with good leading, are essential elements in a genuinely democratic society. In engaging in these practices, the essentially contestable nature of public life is brought to the fore and the open-endedness of that life encouraged. For Saul, the 'secret, then, is that we must alter our civilization from one answers to one which feels satisfaction, not anxiety, when doubt is established. To be comfortable with panic when it is appropriate. If ours is the advanced civilization we pretend it is, there should be no need to act as if all decisions were designed to establish certainties' (Saul, 1992, p.584-5).

For us to alter our civilization, to one based on values—and important democratic ones at that—we need to enter the type of postmodern world I have been describing in this chapter. In this world, doubt through dissenting is encouraged and good leading brings about new and better questions through participating. Good leading and good dissenting, done in good faith, become two parts of a whole that point to the truth for the moment and ways forward into new ones.

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