



Politics of Decency

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Abstract

The article bears an implicit appeal to judge political programs not by ideological labels but rather by the criteria I call 'decency.' I enjoin Martin Buber's concept of dialogue to argue that a politics of decency seeks to promote human well-being that reaches beyond mere material flourishing but is attentive to the full sweep of the regnant existential, social and politics realities that diminish fundamental human dignity. Such a political ethic, as Buber would put it, transcends the barriers of regarding others as "It" – as perceived and conceived by the divisive categories of religious and cultural affiliation, age, sexual orientation, so-called race, and as inveterate political opponents.

Keywords: Avishai Margalit; Martin Buber; Nelson Mandela; Bishop Tutu; the Zulu concept of Ubuntu; Truth and Reconciliations

Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself? Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the you? Franz Fanon [1]

Introduction

It is said that Nelson Mandela's political vision was, at bottom, "driven by a profound sense of decency" [2]. This may also be said of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965). Alert to the indignities faced by his fellow human beings, he found it simply indecent to allow such a situation to continue. Accordingly, he taught that a sense of decency should inform our ethical and political judgments [3]. As a philosopher he would say that decency is a meta-political principle.

Buber's approach to ethical and political questions was determined by this overarching principle. He thus held that it was indecent to treat other human beings as objects, as

"it." This holds true for both our inter-personal and inter-communal relations. When we treat others as objects – as opposed to fellow human beings – we not only, in effect, deny their humanity, we also diminish our own. Our humanity comes to full expression in our relations with others, initially with our parents and relatives, and ultimately extends to our relations with all other members of the human family. Buber elaborated this "insight" – an "in-sight" because it articulates a basic truth of life that all of us implicitly "see," if not fully grasp as a philosophical principle he called "dialogue."

Dialogue is not a mere verbal exchange; it is not synonym for a conversation. Dialogue may be conducted without words; indeed, words often block and frustrate dialogue. When we meet another human being not as an "it" – that is, not "objectified" as an opponent, or as an "object" of our fears, anger, and ambition but as a fellow human being, we enter into dialogue with him or her. In dialogue we acknowledge the other as a person whose journey in life is accompanied by similar torments and hopes as our own. Yet we are at

the same time to be respectfully cognizant that we are also different, that our life-stories are biographically distinct. Dialogue accordingly is attentive both to the fundamental humanity we share and the biographies that define our individual and collective identities.

Refracted through an appreciative affirmation of our common humanity, our biographical - as well as historical, cultural, and political-differences, paradoxically, also bind us. Our differences bind us for through attentive, dialogical listening to each other's story we are able to recognize analogies to our life-experience. Buber calls such listening "in-clusion" (Umfassung) [4]. As we listen, we include and internalize the other's tale into our own sense of self; we make, as it were, room for the other's reality to dwell along side our own. Inclusion thus does not entail the denial of our own story and sense of self; we rather simply allow the other's voice and life-experience to touch upon our own [5]. In some basic sense, Buber's philosophy of dialogue is an elaboration of the Golden Rule –which was eloquently articulated by the Prophet Muhammad as "I'amal ma'a al-naas kamaa tahub –As you would have people do to you, do to them [6]." It was Ali ibn Abi Talib (the 4th Caliph in Sunni Islam, and first Imam in Shia Islam) who perhaps gave the Golden Rule its most penetrating expression:

My dear son, so far as your behavior with other human beings is concerned, let your 'self' act as scales to judge its goodness or wickedness: Do unto others as you wish others to do unto you. Whatever you like for yourself, like for others, and whatever you dislike to happen to you, spare others from such happenings. Do not oppress and tyrannize anybody because you surely do not like to be oppressed and tyrannized. Be kind and sympathetic to others as you certainly desire others to treat you kindly and sympathetically. If you find objectionable and loathsome habits in others, abstain from developing those traits of character in yourself. If you are satisfied or feel happy in receiving a certain kind of behavior from others, you may behave with others in exactly the same way. Do not speak about them in the same way that you do not like others to speak about you [7].

In commenting on the biblical verse commanding one "to love others as oneself" (Leviticus 19:18), the Jewish Sage Hillel expressed the same thought more succinctly: "That which is hateful to you, do not do unto others..." Hillel's younger contemporary, Jesus of Nazareth further elaborated this teaching: "Do to others what you want them to do to you. This is the meaning of the law of Moses and the teaching of the prophets" (Matthew 7:12, see also Luke 6:31). In a word, the three monotheistic religions share as basic to their respective faiths, a common sense of decency, or what Buber called a life of dialogue. Understood through the lens of the Golden Rule, Buber's concept of dialogue challenges

our egocentric and ethno-centric attitudes and perceptions of the other, even those with whom we are in conflict. It is from this perspective that dialogue gains relevance for the Palestinian-Zionist/Israeli conflict.

By the same measure that dialogue affirms differences, it acknowledges that conflict is real and demands to be addressed as such. Both sides of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict have their grievances, although, Buber would readily agree that those borne by the Palestinians are far greater. Zionist settlement has harmed – and continues to harm the individual and national rights of the Palestinians [8]. Moreover, the establishment of the State of Israel led to the massive displacement of the Palestinians from their ancestral homes, of which hundreds of villages and towns were depopulated or utterly destroyed. Buber, who emigrated from Germany to Palestine in 1938, was quick to demand that the State of Israel not only accept political responsibility for the Arab refugee problem but also moral accountability for the human rights abuses and indignities suffered by the Palestinians consequent to Zionist political actions. Such accountability must necessarily precede any hope of resolving the conflict.

When as the first president of the post-Apartheid South Africa, Mandela established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; he underscored the significance of acknowledging moral accountability for past actions as a precondition for political reconciliation [9]. Admission of responsibility for the pain one's action has caused others serves to restore the victim's dignity; it is an essential step toward restorative justice and that paves the way to a healthy co-existence. In terms remarkably similar to Buber's philosophy of dialogue, Mandela and Bishop Tutu, who was appointed chairman of the Commission, evoked the African concept of ubuntu as the premise of their notion of reconciliation. Literally meaning humanity, ubuntu denotes "a person who is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, affirming of others, and who does not feel threatened that others are able and good; [this person] has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing they belong to a greater whole [that is, humanity], are diminished when another is humiliated, diminished, tortured, oppressed, and threatened as if they were less than they are [10]." Bishop Tutu has also defined ubuntu as the quality of interpersonal relations in which one's own "humanness" depends on recognizing it in the other.

Reconciliation is thus perforce dialogical. Hence, the Palestinians would have to acknowledge that in opposing the Zionist project, they often used violent means that have served to harden the "battle lines" and deepen the conflict. To be sure, the Zionist story has its roots in the Diaspora, in which the Palestinians had not part; nonetheless, for the sake

of reconciliation they would have to acknowledge the Jewish people's historical and spiritual attachment to the land that they, the Palestinians legitimately also regard as their country and birthright. Dialogue demands that somehow these opposing claims must be reconciled. As elusive as this somehow may be, Buber embraced it as a commanding possibility. "Under the sway of [this] commandment," he explained:

We consider it a fundamental point that ... two vital claims are opposed to each other, two claims of a different nature and a different origin, which cannot be pitted one against the other and between which no objective decision can be made as to which is just and unjust. We consider it our duty to understand and to honor the claim which is opposed to our endeavor to reconcile both claims. We cannot renounce the Jewish claim.... But we have been and still are convinced that it must be possible find some form of agreement between this claim and the other; for we love this land and believe in its future; and, seeing that such love and such faith are surely present also on the [Palestinian] side, a union in the common service of the Land must be within the range of the possible. When there is faith and love, a solution may be found even to what appears to be a tragic contradiction [11]. Resolved to find a solution, Buber advocated a single, unified state, in which Jews and Palestinians would share political sovereignty over the land they both love and treasure as their common homeland. In the envisioned bi-national state the two peoples who are destined "somehow" to learn to live together will enjoy constitutional parity without one side imposing its will on the other [12].

Although Buber promoted a bi-national state as the most just and humane solution to what many hold to be an intractable conflict, he emphasized that it was ultimately, but a heuristic proposal meant to illuminate a horizon of political possibilities allowing for the Jews and Palestinians to live side by side in mutual respect and dignity.

Six months before his death in Jerusalem in June 1965, the eighty-seven-year-old Buber wrote a response to an article by Bashir Ben-Yahmed (1928-2021), the editor of the Tunisian weekly *Jeune Afrique*, in which he appealed to the Arab world to reconcile itself to the reality of the State of Israel. In his editorial, Ben-Yahmed stated. The State of Israel, however unfortunate its creation may have been, is a reality that cannot be eradicated short of a war whose only certainties are the suffering and destruction that will follow [13].

Buber applauded Ben-Yahmed's appeal, which he understood to herald a propitious occasion for the Jews and Palestinians to "enter into a true dialogue with one another,

a dialogue based on shared sincerity and mutual recognition alike [14]." Only such a dialogue, he explained, "can lead to a purification of the atmosphere, and without such a precedent of purification the first steps on the new way are bound to fail [15]." Tellingly he entitled his reply to Ben-Yahmed, "It is Time to Try."

References

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2. Annan K (2013) General Secretary General of the United Nations Statement on the Death of Nelson Mandela. See also Oppenheim CE (2012) "Nelson Mandela and the Power of Ubuntu." *Religions* 3/2: 369-388.
3. Margalit A (1996) *A Decent Society*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, USA.
4. Buber (1947) "Education," in idem, *Between Man and Man*. Macmillan, New York, USA, pp: 96-98.
5. As opposed to empathy, whereby one "glides" one's own feelings into that of another, inclusion allows "one person, without forfeiting anything of the felt reality of his activity, at the same time lives through the common event from the standpoint of the other. A relation between persons that is characterized in more or less degree by the element of inclusion may be termed a dialogical relation." Ibid, 97.
6. Abu Ja S, Al Kulayni MY, Al Kafi K (2015) *Hadith*. Islamic Texts Institute, Cape Town, South Africa, 2: 146.
7. A Letter from Father to Son, *The Last Will and Testament of Ali ibn Abi Talib*. Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project 1995-2023, pp: 9.
8. Edward W (1979) *The Question of Palestine*. Especially Part Two: "Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims". Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, pp: 56-114.
9. Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 1995. *Government Gazette, Act 34, 361(16579)*: 49.
10. Archbishop DT (2004) *God Has a Dream. A Vision for our Time*. Double Day, New York, pp: 134.
11. Buber M (2005) *A Land of Two Peoples*. Martin Buber on Jews and Arabs. In: Paul Mendes F (Ed.), Introduction and commentary. 2nd W(Edn.), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp: 122.
12. Buber shared with other likeminded individuals a bi-national state in which Jews and Arabs will share

sovereignty on the basis of absolute parity. They would thus pave the path to realize the prophet Ezekiel's vision: "I will seal a covenant of peace [Brith Shalom] with them; it will be an eternal covenant with them." Ezekiel 37, 26. See *A Land of Two Peoples* 72-75, 81-91, 194-214. Also see Shalom Ratzabi, *Between Zionism and Judaism. The Radical Circle in Brith Shalom 1925-1933*, Brill, Leiden.

13. *Jeune Afrique*, 27 December 1964.
14. Buber (2005) "A Time to Try," in *A Land of Two Peoples*, pp: 305.
15. *Ibid.*

