Why Should We Listen?

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There are several directions we might take in responding to Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon's essay. We might concentrate on the study of listening, on tolerance, equity, or perspective taking; on the connection between listening and democracy, or on the implications of any of these for education. In what follows, I will explore the question Why should we listen? And relate possible answers to views of democracy. A quick answer to the question of why we should listen might be that we learn by listening. It seems clear that Theaetetus expected to learn something by listening to Socrates. As soon as we have said this, however, we see a problem. We should, of course, listen to *Socrates*, but why should we listen to Joe or Susie Worker? The expectation of learning may not be the only reason for listening. But perhaps we should persist a bit and insist that we can learn from Joe, Susie, or anyone, and so the reason is still a sound one. Not everyone believes this, however, and the differences of opinion go to the heart of what we mean by democracy.

Consider the Dewey/Hutchins debates. Both men were avowedly strong advocates of democracy, but Dewey saw conjoint living (speaking, listening, working together) as a way of creating common values and understandings, whereas Hutchins saw common values and understandings as necessary precursors of cooperative (or democratic) life. Hutchins deplored ignorance of the "Graeco-Hebraic tradition," knowledge of which he claimed was necessary for participation in democratic life. He wrote:

> I had a senior of the University of Chicago in one of my seminars who had never heard of Joshua, and not long ago I was interviewed in Paris by a prominent American journalist, a graduate of a great American university who had never heard of Thucydides or the Peloponnesian War. Hence the failure of communication. When I was a student at Yale I could communicate only with those students who had happened, by accident, to elect courses that I had elected and whom I happened to know because I sat next to them in the lecture room.[1]

This is an astonishing statement. Hutchins could not even communicate with people whose intellectual backgrounds differed from his own — never mind learn from them. In what sense, then, was he an advocate of democracy? Well, he — perhaps sincerely — wanted everyone to acquire the traditional background knowledge he so treasured. Then they could communicate and participate fully in a democracy already established and waiting to be passed along. There are even now people who argue in roughly the same way.

Dewey argued, in contrast, that common values, purposes, and understandings are constructed by communicating and working together. Communication is facilitated by a common language, of course, but even that can be constructed (reciprocally learned) provided the parties retain a strong desire to communicate. It is that desire, that commitment, to communicate that lays the foundation for democracy. Given the commitment, we *find* ways to communicate.

It is not surprising that Dewey admired the way Jane Addams helped immigrants to maintain their own cultures while learning the ways of America, or that he admired Walt Whitman whom he called the "seer of democracy." Whitman wrote "I hear America singing" — mechanics, carpenters, masons, boatmen, shoemakers, mothers, and girls sewing. His poetry celebrated the wonderful diversity of occupations, interests, and backgrounds of America. Whitman listened.

In a variant of the listening-to-learn argument, we could argue that we should listen because the pursuit of truth requires listening. C.S. Peirce contended that we come closer to the truth through a process of continued inquiry, and he noted that the process depends on an ethical commitment to continue inquiring.[2] So long as a serious question remains on the table, we should not close down inquiry. With Peirce, we move from an instrumental to an ethical reason for listening.

How do we decide whether a question is serious? For example, should mainstream biologists listen to the arguments of creation science, or would this be a waste of time — a pursuit that could not possibly bring us closer to the truth? Asking this question may soften our criticism of Hutchins. We have to admit that we do dismiss questions from people we judge unqualified to contribute to a debate among experts. On certain topics, we find it almost impossible to communicate with those who are not specially prepared.[3] Thus many biologists say that listening to creationists is indeed a waste of time, not a contribution to continued inquiry. Communication, when it is attempted, is hampered by differences in vocabulary, basic premises, and even views on what constitutes inquiry. We might want to leave this question — how we decide when a question is serious — as one of the open questions Haroutunian-Gordon wants us to work on. We know that the history of science is loaded with stubborn refusal to entertain questions coming from opponents and "uncertified" speakers, and yet we feel justified in dismissing some questions.[4]

Having admitted that we sometimes dismiss the comments and questions of those we deem unqualified, the worry now is that participation in democracy may also require qualifications of some kind. If Hutchins was right, we would all better brush up on Joshua and Thucydides. But clearly he was not right. There is ample empirical evidence that many people contribute effectively to democratic life without the particular knowledge Hutchins insisted upon.

However, there is at least one element of the Graeco-Hebraic tradition that does seem essential to democracy — the widespread practice of liberal rational discourse. Political scientists have shown convincingly that attempts to impose democratic procedures ("free and open elections") on cultures where there is no tradition of such discourse fail to produce democracy.[5] Even in nations whose schooling includes much of the content so admired by Hutchins, without that discourse, democratic processes sometimes fail to take root.

It may be that the self-governance demanded by life in early America encouraged the spread of rational discourse. (The topic is too big to take on here.) But clearly, many of Dewey's educational recommendations are aimed at supplying

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practice in liberal discourse. He wants students to participate in the construction of objectives for their own learning and to become increasingly proficient in making well-informed choices. Further, he insists that the intelligent study of any subject or topic can promote rational competence. On this last, Dewey disagreed strongly with Hutchins on the centrality of traditional content for democratic education. He made arguments for the inclusion of history and geography in the school curriculum, but his interest focused on what "listening" to these subjects might contribute to the solution of present problems, and he did not endorse the idea that the subjects must contain canonical topics.

We now have a good argument for listening to one another. Listening is half of dialogue. By improving our listening skills, we increase our capacity for rational dialogue and, thereby, promote the health and vitality of democratic processes. Conscientious listening also increases the possibility of discovering the open questions to whichHaroutunian-Gordon has referred. As we listen to another and to ourselves, we reduce the number of trivial questions and those based on misinterpretation.

This reminds me that listening with an expectation of believing is a powerful technique for learning.[6] I have often advised students struggling with Dewey or Piaget *not* to read analytically at first. Do not challenge every line or pick apart every concept. Read to believe. Then, after much conscientious listening/reading, questions will emerge, and they are likely to be real, open questions — questions based on understanding.

There is another, deeper, answer to the question of why we should listen, and this one has little to do with domains of knowledge. We should listen because another addresses us. To listen is a basic moral obligation. Attention and dialogue are central in care ethics, and we also find an emphasis on receptive listening and response in the work of Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch, Martin Buber, and Emmanuel Levinas. Indeed, even in the justice perspective of John Rawls, we find an implicit emphasis on listening that arises from his claim that self-esteem is a basic human good.[7] There is little more devastating to our self-esteem than the refusal or failure of others to listen to us. Receptive attention, listening, is the basis not only for democratic life but for ethical life and for happiness.

1. Robert Maynard Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936), 61.

2. See *Peirce's Essays in the Philosophy of Science*, ed. V. Tomas (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1957).

3. See the discussion of three rhetorics in Wayne C. Booth, *The Vocation of a Teacher* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

4. See David F. Noble, *A World Without Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

5. See Robert D. Kaplan, "Was Democracy Just a Moment?" *Atlantic Monthly* 280 (December, 1997).

6. See Peter Elbow, *Embracing Contraries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

7. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

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