Reasoning One's Way to Justice? Rationality and Understanding in Political Dialogue

Rachel Wahl
University of Virginia

Two narratives have surfaced to describe the current American political crisis and the responsibility of educators to address it. In one, American democracy is in crisis due to political polarization. The views of Americans in the two parties are at a greater distance from each other than they have been since the Civil War, commentators warn, and the resulting animosity makes politics a zero sum game in which elected officials care more about the other side losing than finding solutions to problems.[1] This combined with the violence caused by such mutual disdain could spell the end of what seemed to be the stability of American democracy.

In another description, the primary problem in the United States is inequality. Racism is at the heart of this evil, along with related forms of bigotry and oppression. American democracy has never realized its promise due to longstanding inequities, in this view, which are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore due to new forms of evidence such as videos of police killings of unarmed people of color.[2]

Educators are meant to ameliorate the problem of polarization by teaching students how to listen to each other and engage in civil discourse. They are meant to redress inequality and oppression through anti-racist pedagogy, curricula, and practices. Educational organizations often espouse both aims. For example, the 2021 theme for the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting is "accepting educational responsibility." The Call for Submissions makes clear that educational responsibility is defined by these twin goals of reducing polarization and combatting oppression. Polar-

ization reflects a failure of the schools, the AERA Call states:

> . . . all legislators and elected officials attended school; most are college graduates. Yet far too many learned far too little in those places about how to respectfully engage across partisan lines and avert polarization. Listening, understanding, and reasonably considering the viewpoints of persons beyond one's own political party are skills educators failed to teach those who go on to make consequential policy decisions that affect entire nations.[3]

This affirmation of listening to people in the opposing party and considering their views is not meant to undermine support for a particular conception of justice. Indeed, reducing polarization is framed as complementary to fighting oppression. The Call admonishes:

> Education researchers are not merely scholars; we are also citizens of the places in which our scholarship is produced, disseminated, and implemented. Equity and justice in these places depend as much on our deep thinking as they do on what we do with what we know. Racism, xenophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and other manifestations of hate continually poison these places.[4]

AERA members are invited not to simply study these phenomena but to "acknowledge the roles we play in sustaining an array of social and educational inequities."[5] In other words, we are failing if we treat these matters as objects of scholarship alone.

Therefore educators and education researchers must in AERA's language "reject apolitical stances" toward pressing social concerns. But we must also reduce polarization regarding these issues. AERA is not alone: educators and the broader public often lament both injus-

tice and the breakdown of civil discourse.

Yet how can educators both diminish polarization regarding the most contested political questions and at the same time advance substantive conceptions of justice regarding those questions? Are Americans not polarized on precisely the issues of justice that AERA names as issues on which educators and scholars must take an engaged stance, such as regarding "racism, xenophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, [and] homophobia?" And might inspiring students to fight injustice increase polarization if other people hold opposing views?

In what follows, I first examine the assumptions about the relationship of discourse to rationality that I see as operating in the contention that political dialogue can both reduce polarization and advance specific justice commitments. Next, I consider whether and how these assumptions align with what occurred in a series of structured dialogue sessions between politically opposed university students. I observed these sessions and conducted in-depth interviews with 52 students following their dialogue participation from 2017 to 2020.

These dialogue sessions do not in any straightforward way decrease polarization regarding divisive topics or mobilize students to fight injustice. Students rarely change their views on substantive issues. But what does happen—and frequently—is that students change their views of the people on the other side of those issues, illuminating what it might mean to reduce what is often called "affective" polarization.

My interviews suggest that this occurs through understanding not why a reason is universally superior, but why a reason is reasonable for this other person. A crucial dimension of this is the capacity to recognize that the other is motivated by a moral source, when this is

the case, even when one does not also draw from that source.

An important dimension of this realization is not the achievement of consensus or even common ground but rather the identification of difference. Recognition that the difference between interlocuters is ethical in nature—rather than due to bad faith or ignorance—helps students to view each other as moral (even if misguided) actors.

Minimally, this recognition may reduce support for violence against people with whom one disagrees, which is no small accomplishment in a democracy ripped apart by violence and the threat of violence. Maximally, a student may reconsider whether and how her own political choices align with her beliefs in light of the questions asked by another. Being asked to give a narrative account of one's reasons can spark the desire to investigate whether one is enacting one's own commitments well.

SUBSTANTIVE RATIONALITY AND WEAK IDENTITY

What conceptions of rationality are at work in the assumption that through discussion, educators can simultaneously reduce polarization and at the same time promote a particular (for example, anti-racist) stance on issues on which students may be polarized? This assumption seems to rest at least partially on the idea that students can discover the call of justice through rational discourse. Two different conceptions of rationality may be at work in this idea: either that racist and other oppressive ideologies can be shown to be internally inconsistent and therefore illogical, or that rationality will attune us to a sense of the Good, defined as anti-racism and the promotion of equity.

Few educators would explicitly define rationality by its relation-

ship to the Good. A student is more likely to receive negative feedback in an essay assignment for an incoherent argument than for arriving at a logically coherent conclusion, however ethically objectionable to the teacher. Indeed, as educators we typically design our rubrics to encourage coherence and rigor in arguments rather than to promote the views to which we ourselves subscribe. To the extent that this conception of rationality as logical consistency drives the AERA call, the assumption seems to be that conclusions we abhor are not only wrong but incoherent.

Yet our aim as educators is not to create more logically consistent White supremacists. The University of Virginia was not seen as having failed Richard Spencer because he was not equipped to make his repugnant arguments better. It appears that in human reason at least some educators wish for more than internal coherence.

So while the maxim remains that the work of educators is to cultivate students' capacity to think for themselves, this assumption sits alongside an older conception: that a liberal education is that which befits a free person by preparing the student to exercise that freedom *well.* This conception of rationality has fallen out of favor in its explicit manifestation, at least in regard to how educators assess students. Yet subtly operating in the background of the procedural conception of rationality is a substantive one in which particular commitments are understood as delimiting what is rational. The ideal typical case of this conception was proposed by Plato, in his theorization of rationality as apprehension of the form of the Good.[6] Rationality here, as Charles Taylor has pointed out, is not only consistent internally but attuned to something true, and therefore good, that is external to the mind that constructed it.[7] This conception of rationality would make sense of the assumption that through discussion, students could become less

polarized *and* more committed to justice. For if human equality is true in the sense that it is good and real, then discourse is rational when it arrives at this conclusion—and by extension, humans should have the capacity to arrive at this conclusion through rational discussion.

Yet while political dialogue retains the potential to facilitate a shared view of justice through reason, such discussions seem not to do so inevitably or even routinely. Students in the dialogues I observed rarely reasoned their way to another view of a significant issue. This is in part because often the conflict was not over whether something is good, but how much it matters *to a person* compared to some other good. Students tend to talk past each other to the issue that matters more to them. So while everyone might agree that racist language and practices are wrong, some feel this keenly while others extend their passion to the issue of abortion, for example.

This does not suggest a relativism in which all that matters is what one feels, but it does suggest that students may understand that something is good but fail to act on this in their political choices because something else matters more. And this tendency to talk past each other to the issue that matters more does not simply reflect a need for better dialogue moderation or reasoning. For at stake is not what makes sense, but rather who cares about what.

A reliance on reason, though, is not the only possibility for how AERA and other educational organizations conceptualize the relationship between their aims of diminishing polarization on one hand while on the other hand advancing substantive justice commitments. Another possible background assumption is that fundamentally, students (and people in general) do not disagree to begin with in regard to what really matters. Therefore they do not need to be swayed by reason, but only to realize that they already agree on fundamental

questions.

A number of researchers have taken this approach. They often base their work in social psychology experiments that reveal the superficial nature of social divides. In one often cited experiment, a homogenous group of boys was taken to a summer camp and randomly divided into two teams. Without provocation, the teams spent the summer deepening their animosity toward each other. Several authors return to this experiment throughout their work as an analogy for American political polarization.[8] The point is to show that opposition may not be about anything meaningful and is a matter of what has come to be called "identity."

These authors are not not wrong when they note that political opposition is linked to something that we refer to as group identity. Yet what many of us feel intuitively and what my research on dialogue suggests is that these oppositions are based on deeply-held commitments, not merely on situational divides that are analogous to the teams in the summer camp experiment. While the concept of "identity" is complex and contested, in politics it often includes our deepest ethical commitments, our aspirations to goodness. If it is "identity" that drives people to call their senators, attend protests, and donate money in response to horrors such as family separation at the American border, then identity must refer to who I must be in order to live with myself.

Therefore suggesting that our political divides are "really" issues of group identity does not suggest that they are not rooted in substantive ethical divides, as identity can be rooted precisely in such moral commitments. The ethical content of what some call "identity" arose clearly in the dialogues I observed. Students strained to overcome divides only to find themselves thrown back upon moral

impasse. They did find principles in common. These shared principles were at times celebrated and at other moments lamented as insufficient. But in both cases they were minimal.

In sum, the dialogues I observed rarely operated according to conceptions of rationality and dialogue that might support the ambitious at which AERA and other educational endeavors aim. Students infrequently reasoned their way to a view of justice that is less polarized because it coalesces around a progressive view. Nor did students often discover that they already share their commitments, at least as it concerns polarizing issues. What then might be the more readily available benefits of political dialogue and what conceptions of reason might help illuminate these benefits?

reasons rather than Reasons

For the novelist George Elliott, reason forms a different purpose than the universalizing operations described above. When we reason, we do not simply seek consistency or attune to an objective good. Rather we attempt to understand why a reason is a reason for a person. According to a scholar of the novelist, for Elliott:

> to grasp someone's intentions is to situate them within a narrative. That act of situating requires grasping how their intention is a reason: in other words, to fit an intention within a story is to see how that intention makes an action comprehensible as a rational thing to do.[9]

An act is rational not universally but *for a person;* we understand its rationality by drawing nearer to the narrative conception of a life within which the reason is situated.

Such an approach falls within the broader framework of social

reasoning proposed by Tony Laden, in which reasoning is defined not by the content of our reasons but by our responsiveness to those with whom we reason.[10] What I suggest is that the responsiveness Laden proposes is aided by an orientation to understanding not only the reason but its bearer, specifically in seeking to know why a reason appears reasonable to this person. This includes inquiry into why someone cares, and why this person's care is expressed in this way.

It is this aspiration that was most resonant for the students in dialogue as well as most available to them. Rarely were students persuaded to change their own reasons. But they did seek to understand why a person's reasons are reasons for them. And they often succeeded.

POLARIZATION AND JUSTICE

This process neither reduces issue-based polarization nor advances social justice—at least, not independently and not inevitably. Take for example a 2017 dialogue between James, a White Republican college student from suburban New Jersey who voted for Trump and Malik, an African American college student from Philadelphia who voted for Clinton. They discussed the issue of football players kneeling during the National Anthem to protest police violence. James opposed the protest, believing the players were disrespecting the flag. Malik supported the protest.

What changed through dialogue was not their views, but rather their understanding of how the other's reasons could be reasons for him. James admits:

> I don't think I had ever heard the viewpoint of African Americans on the subject. I think I had always just been listening to Trump talk about it or friends or people on Fox News

or whatever news network I was listening to . . . I hadn't really listened intently to why an African American would feel that it's an important form of protest . . . I definitely gained new insight into their perspective, which is very important.

Ultimately my opinion on the matter has not changed. I still think it's disrespectful to kneel for the flag. But at least now I have a greater sense of empathy for why people are doing it. I definitely do agree that there is a need for people who are feeling oppressed to express their discontent. I think that's extremely important . . . It's like they say, it's inherently American to protest.

Well, that's only that way because the flag makes it so, because American freedoms allow us to protest . . . but I can empathize with the root of their protest, in that they feel they're not being represented properly and they feel that they're being disadvantaged in some capacity, and they're looking to elevate that conversation.

James has not changed his opinion of the issue, then, but rather of the people with whom he disagrees. And this is precisely what Malik perceived: that he had not changed James' mind, but that James had gained an appreciation for his reasons. Malik derived satisfaction from this form of understanding, reflecting, "I felt that I was heard instead of just tolerated." Malik continued:

I think the most meaningful moment was when [James] and me, we got a chance to express our opinions about kneeling. Even though he didn't necessarily like it, he

heard me out on the reasons why people would do it. And he
understood it's a form of protest . . . For him to at least get an
understanding of . . . how some minorities feel, and that the
practice of kneeling was to express how we're treated . . . So
I think even if he didn't necessarily agree with the protest, he
understood what the protest was for . . .

I think it's meaningful for him to hear and understand
because it gets him to acknowledge . . . another person's per-
spective. And I think whether he changes, which I don't think
he will change his view about the kneeling, it brings awareness
to the fact that there's an issue with the way that minorities are
treated. And I think even though he didn't necessarily agree
with the kneeling, I think he understood that there was an
issue. I don't think that was something that he could *not hear*.

James' learning from Malik may seem woefully lacking and in
fact problematic. Indeed, there is much to critique in James' state-
ments. First, the conversation has not advanced social justice directly.
James has not become a supporter of a protest movement that many
consider the most crucial civil rights struggle of our era. Moreover,
the dialogue may have in fact done harm. James can now better enjoy
his privilege as a White man, critics would likely point out, secure in
the knowledge that he has listened to the other side and expressed
empathy without having to make any concrete changes.[11] Finally, given
that James and Malik still operate on opposite poles of the political
spectrum, the conversation has not clearly reduced polarization on the
issue.

This all suggests the limits of dialogue for those twin aims of
advancing social justice and reducing issue-based polarization. Dia-

logue is unlikely to serve as a tool of political change in the ways that protest, voting, lawsuits, and other advocacy work must, nor is dialogue likely to moderate views on issues.

Yet important public goods are served nonetheless by attending to the sources of another's position. First, one advantage of this form of dialogue is precisely that it fails to reduce polarization. This may be salutary given that some issues warrant hardline views and democratic participation may be galvanized by passionate commitment.[12] While many people, myself among them, may wish to see James abandon Trump and support *The Movement for Black Lives,* dialogue that aims too steadily at consensus may be at least as likely to sideline Malik's perspective, as many critics of the inequities of deliberation have argued.[13] That students *do not* readily abandon their commitments may be a redeeming feature of dialogue.

Second, revealing that a person is motivated by a sense of the good, or at least by an understandable human predicament, can help humanize opponents and legitimize their participation in democracy. At the least, while James is unlikely to show up at a *Black Lives Matter* protest, he may also be less likely to support violence against people who do show up. And he may even begin to question his support for candidates who stoke such violence. He may even question the tendency among elected officials and his peers to dismiss such protests, recalling that the protestors may have reasons that he understands.

It is this capacity—to recognize the ethical nature of another's position even though one has not been persuaded by it, without weakening one's own commitments—that makes dialogue uniquely valuable. And it was this capacity that was most readily available to students across my interviews.

For example, in another 2017 dialogue between students from

a conservative Christian university who had voted for Trump and students from an elite secular university who had voted for Clinton, none of the students I interviewed were persuaded that those who had voted for the other candidate had made the right choice. But they did see for the first time the sense of the good that motivated those others. One liberal student reflected that he is typically "disgusted by people" who voted for Trump. But he saw that students who voted for Trump were, in his words, "innocent." There was a sense of the good that motivated them, since "if they legitimately think that Hillary was a baby killer . . . we can't really assume that they support everything Trump's doing" and therefore "they certainly didn't deserve to be called fascists or assholes or idiots or Nazis."

Similarly, a conservative student remarked, "I'm a little ashamed to realize that my presuppositions were that liberals are supporting their ideas from a position of hate or . . . social control." After speaking to a Clinton supporter, he reflected, "I would imagine there's more people than I expected . . . who are thinking positively about it and really have hope and high ideals and aspirations."

Several concerns may arise in response to this form of dialogue. For some, the recognition that the other is motivated by a sense of the good may seem too modest as an aim for political dialogue. Finding common ground, generating consensus and persuading others to agree with us are more explicitly useful to democratic politics. Yet the legitimation of other people, even short of legitimizing their views and choices, offers a crucial intervention in a democracy rife with the suspicion that one's opponents act with no ethical motivation at all.

To others, this aim may seem too conciliatory in a society marked by legitimate and even righteous conflict. Might such recognition of persons gloss over crucial moral and political distinctions?

Could such dialogue reduce moral clarity?

But it is in fact in recognizing that the other side is (sometimes, at least) motivated by a sense of the good that we can more clearly perceive our differences. When we assume that the other side acts with no moral source, our differences seem to be that of good versus evil, or intelligence versus ignorance. This can obscure understanding of what values and goods are at stake. Recognition of another's sense of the good allows us to see precisely how we differ, and then commit more deeply to what we affirm.

This approach may generate fear of a privatization of reasoning that could undermine the purpose of dialogue. If we only seek to understand the personal history that makes a reason, then do we give up on public speech? If we aim to understand why a person's reasons are reasons for them, then might we foreclose the potential for these to become reasons for us?

Yet by understanding why a person's reasons are reasons for them, this opens the possibility that they might become reasons for me. Students rarely felt ready to adopt another's reasons directly after a dialogue session. Yet follow-up interviews years later revealed that these conversations may gain significance over time, depending on when in a person's life the dialogue occurs and on what follows.

For instance, a conservative Christian student, Alice, told me that she had thought of the dialogue often in the intervening years. She has continued to ask herself, as she was asked that day by others: If you say that you believe this, then why did you vote like that? In 2017 she was attempting to explain why she had voted for Trump. In October 2020, she was still trying to decide whether to vote for him again. The dialogue was not uniquely responsible for her reluctance to vote for Trump. But the dialogue was, she relayed, the first moment in

which she had to give an account of why her reasons were reasons for her. This destabilized her assumptions about her choices and sparked a desire to have reasons that are authentically her own.

While this student's experience was not ubiquitous, it also was not entirely unique. Some students had not thought about the dialogue over the years. Others recall the dialogue as a time in which people on the other side treated them with kindness and respect, even though their political views remain unchanged. Yet others remember it as a start or support to their questions about their political choices. If someone asks me why I care, believe, and vote as I do, then I am invited to ask myself these questions.

Like Alice, in October of 2020 James too was unsure of whether he would again vote for Trump. He did not—like some students—look back on the dialogue as a significant moment that prompted his questions. But his interview nonetheless suggests that dialogue may become part of the interpretive framework in which views take shape. When I asked him in 2020 what he thought of football players kneeling in protest, he replied:

> It's funny to think how that was a big issue back then, where now that's a normal thing for athletes to do . . . I think I probably have a similar opinion now . . . that it's their right to express that, it's their freedom of speech, I'm not going to criticize it. Although I am intensely patriotic and I myself will never kneel for the flag. I think that it's their right to do that. And I understand why they're doing it.

What he claimed in 2017 was a new realization about why someone would support this form of protest had become by 2020

commonsense for him, even a view he had always understood and supported.

      While the dialogue almost certainly was not uniquely responsible for shifts in James' assumptions, it may have helped to deepen his questions and to open the possibility of another way to interpret events. In a time of political crisis, questions may seem a luxury. However, it may be a luxury that we cannot afford to lose, as questions sit at the heart of learning. And maintaining hope that we and others may yet learn offers reason to refrain from coercion and the temptations of violence.

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