

Private Lives and Public Dialogue: Negotiating the Moral/Political Divide

Maureen Stout
Simon Fraser University

One of the biggest challenges facing liberal, democratic, pluralistic societies is getting people from different religious and ethnic traditions to talk to one another, respect each others' belief systems and peacefully coexist. From a liberal perspective the specific challenge is how to ensure the formulation of a civic language that articulates public political values but is also interpretable by distinct moral traditions and facilitates their participation in civic political deliberations. Public schools, as sites where individuals from most traditions are present are, in theory, ideal sites from which to initiate such deliberations.

Robert Kunzman refers to Kenneth Strike's conceptualization of three types of conversations that can take place in schools: conversations within distinct moral groups; public civic discussions that can include members of all groups and which may be seen as part of a "thin" liberal political language, and a hermeneutical dialogue between members of different groups, using a pidgin or slightly modulated form of this language.

Kunzman identifies fallibilism and moral relativism as two potential religious objections to this hermeneutical dialogue but argues persuasively that these concerns need not prevent private moral traditions from participating in the dialogue, since its purpose is to promote self-reflection and mutual critique, leading not to questioning of personal moral precepts but rather improved understanding. Through hermeneutical discussion, then, young people can learn about various conceptions of the good life and see their own traditions through others' eyes.

The notion of mutually respecting, solidly founded traditions engaged in constructive dialogue is, I believe, a reasonable solution to the question of how we can all get along. Hermeneutical discussions based on tolerance, rather than on an assumption of the superiority of any private or public language help protect discrete moral languages while facilitating their entry into civic dialogue (thus also preserving the universality and public health of the political lexicon). Any imposition of a more substantive, "thick" political language would likely increase the marginalization of minority groups, thus alienating them from public life while at the same time impoverishing the civic language.

Thus working from Strike's triadic model, Kunzman's support of hermeneutical dialogue would appear to benefit all participants. The problem is, the model has some conceptual flaws that may undermine the possibility of these conversations actually occurring in the manner envisioned. The principal flaw is that the model does not adequately account for the extent to which we are all members, at any given moment in time, of both private (secular or religious) moral traditions and of public, civic life. As Charles Taylor points out, our identities depend on our dialogical relations with others.¹

Strike does explicitly acknowledge this fact, noting that the boundaries between the public and the private are not as clear as his model would suggest but neither he nor Kunzman elaborates sufficiently on this point.² Given that the aim of the dialogue is to foster meaningful, substantive exchanges, it is important, I believe, that the model reflect the quality and content of those exchanges and not just describe their technical or structural attributes. Thus although the model helps identify a variety of possible discussions, it may also exaggerate the differences between them. Whereas we can conceptually distinguish between the existence of different religious, cultural, or moral traditions when it comes to the daily actions of people who live those traditions, the triadic categorization fails to adequately account for the constantly changing multiplicity of exchanges that occur all the time, within, between, and through the private and the public domains.

Indeed, one of the principal attributes of these exchanges is that they may not be reducible to a public/private dichotomy at all. Using the example of class discussions of stem-cell research, is it necessarily the case that students who come from religious backgrounds will perceive the arguments from only that private perspective? Kunzman does explain that students can acknowledge other positions while still maintaining their own. But is it not possible that they might also be willing to examine such controversial issues from other “private” perspectives or from a publicly shared viewpoint? It does not seem that the private moral language must be assumed dominant in any given domain or with respect to any given idea. Moreover, might it not be a good thing if we began to publicly question our private moral views?

It is also important to not overdetermine the authority that these languages have over an individual’s outlook in any given context, in the way I believe the role of culture has sometimes been overdetermined in our conception of identity. Both culture and religion are immensely important in identity formation but so are language, national origin, sexual orientation, and gender, and we cannot say with any certainty which one of these characteristics may be paramount in a person’s identity at any given moment. Indeed, we may be in danger of assigning a static, monolithic stance to these private languages that actually underestimates their ideological strength while overlooking their complexity. Again, although Kunzman and Strike are doubtless cognizant of this danger we need to find a language to adequately describe those attributes.

The fact that all of us negotiate between the public and the private all the time while preserving our private views suggests that most religious traditions are not endangered species in need of protection from the dominant political discourse. Indeed, if we can establish a publicly shared discourse in the terms that Kunzman and Strike identify, that discourse is not likely to undermine any moral languages, since it exists through the voluntary participation of constituents originating from different moral worlds. Thus if we conceive of the shared as originating at least in part in the local, that means that not only are the boundaries between the two flexible but the shared civic language would be a constituent component of the local language and thus not likely to be seen as a threat by it.

Kunzman, along with Strike, John Rawls, and others identifies this public/private distinction for defensible conceptual and practical reasons: to, on the one

hand, protect a civic language from being colonized by private, parochial interests and, on the other, acknowledge the rights of individuals and groups to pursue their own conceptions of the good life. But I think the feminists were correct when they told us that the personal is political. Because we carry our private beliefs with us in public every day they are liable to scrutiny, both by us and by others, and that's a good thing. As Hannah Arendt pointed out, it is "impossible to perceive any serious gulf between the two realms; and this is not a matter of a theory or an ideology. [I]n the modern world, the two realms indeed constantly flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life process itself."³

This leads us to a second problem with the model, namely that public "civic" discussions may not be as uncontaminated by politics and the mechanisms of political power as Strike (and probably all of us) would like; as the poststructuralists have pointed out, power is embedded in virtually all human interaction. Kunzman does point out that Strike wishes to separate state political actions conceptually from public, civic discussions, and that the aim of hermeneutical dialogue between groups should not be the gain of political power by any of the participants but mutual understanding. If the poststructuralists are correct, however, even the most mundane conversations between private groups in the public domain are necessarily going to be inscribed in, and concerned with, power, in some form.

As soon as we venture out of our homes we are in, and we become, "the public"; as soon as there exists a public there is, perforce, politics (both large and small); and where there is politics, there is power. But what does that mean for the possibility of engaging in hermeneutical discussions? It may mean that we need to acknowledge that these discussions are, whether we like it or not, struggles for ideological supremacy and not simply potential learning experiences.

It is important, then, to try to identify the likely stance of minority moral (or cultural) groups upon their involvement in these discussions. In some contrast to Strike and Kunzman, I do not perceive these traditions as aiming merely for participation in society or peaceful coexistence but as groups which not only aim to recruit new members but which also try to gain more rights and recognition within society vis-à-vis other groups, again, blurring the lines between the public and the private. Fleshing out the concept of power in these discussions leads to a more complete conceptualization of their character and substance. Through hermeneutical discussions that explicitly acknowledge these tensions I believe that private moral languages will benefit from public scrutiny while the public discourse will be enriched by them and schools may become sites where we embrace such tensions and use them to better understand ourselves—and each other.

1. Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and The Politics of Recognition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 34.

2. Kenneth Strike, "On the Construction of Public Speech: Pluralism and Public Reason," *Educational Theory* 44, no. 1 (1994), 25.

3. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 33.