

Learning to Live Together, or Moral Deliberation 101

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Drawing largely on Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson's latest book, *Democracy and Disagreement*, Matthew Pamental delineates the dispositions and capacities that make democratic deliberation possible in the face of conflicting moral commitments.¹ Pamental's own project is to elucidate the habits of mind that will enable the participants in these deliberations to make the sorts of principled moral accommodations that enable them to live together in the midst of moral disagreements. This recognition that moral disagreements are not only unavoidable in plural democracies but are vital to a "robust democratic life" is what sets deliberative models of democracy apart from their proceduralist and constitutionalist counterparts (*DD*, 3). Proceduralists do permit moral deliberation in the political realm, but only if the moral perspectives brought to the table are in principle compatible with one another, and thus, allow the possibility that moral conflicts can be resolved and moral consensus can be forged. Constitutionalist, by contrast, are not concerned simply with the process by which moral consensus is forged, but with the content of this discourse. They limit public discussions of moral matters to those commitments that are compatible with constitutional principles, or which need to be revised so as to become compatible with them. As Gutmann and Thompson point out, constitutionalist efforts to resolve moral conflict do not always succeed. Not only are there bound to be disputes about what particular political principles entail, but there are inevitably differences of opinion about how best to apply these principles (*DD*, 35).

Because these sorts of disagreements are inevitable, deliberative models of democracy do not set limits on what is worthy of moral deliberation. Nor do they attempt to contain the give and take of the deliberative process by establishing a systematic method of moral argumentation, as their cognitive and proceduralist counterparts attempt to do. To deliberative democrats, setting limits on what is up for discussion and delimiting the deliberative process does little to reduce moral conflict, and it does even less to facilitate our understandings of moral commitments that differ from our own. The problem with efforts to establish what can and cannot be discussed prior to deliberative engagements is that they attempt to short-circuit the very deliberative process which illuminates areas where moral agreement is possible and where it remains elusive. Indeed, one of the goals of deliberative disagreement is to clarify the nature of moral differences in order to understand better their political ramifications. Often, it is only in the face of these profound moral differences that democratic citizens recognize the need to establish some common ground. But this common ground does not necessarily require moral agreement. What is required, rather, is that deliberative democrats attempt to minimize moral conflict.

Thus, deliberative democracy has two broad aims. First, it opens spaces for moral deliberation about public policies in ways that are public, which is to say, in

principle open to all who care to participate. Second, deliberative democracy enables citizens to generate “an economy of moral disagreement.” This notion of an “economy of moral disagreement” is Gutmann and Thompson’s uniquely suggestive contribution to models of deliberative democracy. They describe this process as the attempt on the part of deliberative democrats to “accommodate the moral convictions of their opponents to the greatest extent possible, without compromising their own moral convictions” (*DD*, 3). Because the political consequences of moral disagreement are potentially serious, moral disagreements require a certain thrift. An economy of moral disagreement aims to minimize moral conflict. As Pamental explains very well, minimizing moral disagreement does not mean downplaying disagreement, but rather clarifying the nature of the disagreement. This enables disputants to distinguish between those values which do not seem to allow for moral resolution, and thus are genuinely incompatible, and moral disagreements which might be resolved via deliberation. The latter include conflicts which are a result of clashing self-interests as well as disputes that are fueled by misunderstandings or incomplete understandings of particular points of view. While it may not always be possible to resolve moral conflict, some sort of political accommodations will need to be made if we are to continue to be able to live together in the face of profound moral disagreement.

Pamental carefully delineates the habits of mind which sustain an economy of moral disagreement by orienting us toward others in ways that grant their perspectives moral weight and thus make it possible to establish “fair terms of social cooperation.” On Pamental’s understanding, these habits of mind fall into two categories: civic virtues and a capacity that Pamental calls “civic intelligence.” He defines the latter somewhat narrowly as a set of specifically “intellectual skills like logical reasoning or the ability to perform mathematical tasks.” Pamental notes that these categories are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. This becomes clear in his discussion of the principle of reciprocity, which requires that parties to a moral dispute seek to establish “mutually agreeable moral premises.” Since the goal of deliberative democracy is to establish a moral meeting ground, deliberants will need to have the kind of moral character that leads them to want to engage with their compatriots. But they will also need to know enough about one another’s moral commitments to understand both the assumptions that undergird their beliefs, and the particular — and sometimes peculiar — logic of the arguments that follow from these beliefs. This calls for civic intelligence, to be sure, but one that is broader than the approach to moral reasoning that Pamental proposes. The trouble with so many of the deeply held moral commitments that are at the root of moral disagreements is that they are impervious to the kinds of logical reasoning or methodological scrutiny that Pamental emphasizes.

Gutmann’s earlier work indicates that she shares Pamental’s rationalist bias. In *Democratic Education*, Gutmann argues against including creation science in the biology curriculum.² Gutmann quite rightly points out that creation science is inconsistent with established standards of scientific inquiry. But it is one thing to exclude creation science from the biology curriculum on the grounds that it is a religious rather than a scientific doctrine, and quite another to exclude it from the

public schools altogether, as Gutmann seeks to do. Gutmann justifies her position by distinguishing between “secular” reasoning, which is the domain of rationality that schools need to foster, and “religious” reasoning, which Gutmann suggests has no place in schools. She does not base her argument on the notion that secular standards are neutral but on a more substantive claim. She contends that “secular standards constitute a better basis upon which to build a common education for citizenship than any set of sectarian religious beliefs — better because secular standards are both a fairer and a firmer basis for peacefully reconciling our differences.”³ Shortly thereafter, Gutmann dismisses creationism as “unreasonable” and thus incompatible with the aims of public education in a democratic society, namely cultivating the capacity for “rational deliberation among competing conceptions of the good life.”⁴

I press this point about the need to broaden what it means to have civic intelligence precisely because Gutmann’s narrow conception of rationality suggests an approach to education that may squelch the very capacities for moral deliberation that Pamental wishes to foster. Moral deliberation cannot be delimited to topics of secular concern or to standards of secular rationality. Indeed, the challenge for deliberative democrats is to foster the dispositions and the capacities that enable secularists and religious alike to develop the kinds of principled moral accommodations that make political coexistence possible, even when we are confronted with distinctive and often incompatible rationalities. This poses a challenge to educational institutions and, specifically, to teachers and administrators whose particular secular or religious commitments make it difficult for them to imagine promoting, as opposed to simply permitting, moral debate. Precisely because these kinds of engagements are so emotionally fraught, teachers tend to avoid them. Sometimes they do this in the name of moral neutrality that is borne either out of legalistic fears of crossing the line separating church and state, or out of pedagogical concerns that their position of authority may unduly influence the direction of their students’ moral development. At other times, they simply want to avoid conflict in their classrooms, since conflict is not only uncomfortable but noisy. It can also appear to be unproductive. None of these are good reasons for avoiding moral deliberation about even such conflict laden and morally contentious issues as abortion. Still, these fears speak to a need to ensure that teacher educators clarify what is distinctive about the model of moral deliberation that Gutmann and Thompson propose. As Pamental’s paper makes clear, moral deliberation is educationally and politically much more productive than moral debate. The point, after all, is not to win a moral war, but to make it possible to live with one another in the face of moral disagreements.

We will need to confront two challenges. The first concerns the development of civic magnanimity, which puts us in a position to engage with others across moral differences. As Pamental points out, recognizing that particular points of view have “moral weight” is key to fostering the broad-mindedness that is essential to the development of deliberative moral character. Fostering broad-mindedness means that teachers will not only need to engage students with one another, but perhaps more importantly, we will need to engage students with a representative range of

well-written, carefully reasoned and politically salient moral perspectives. This of course means that teachers have to be similarly broad-minded in our selection of topics and course materials, and we will have to exemplify what it means to concede moral weight to other points of view in our own conduct toward our students.

Of the two challenges, this is fairly easy. Broad-mindedness is, after all, a central tenet of multicultural education, and much has been written about what it does and does not mean. Much more difficult, and far more important, is the challenge of finding ways to engage students in the distinctively political question which is also the question that motivates and sustains moral deliberation: “given this moral disagreement, how are we to live together?” This is the question that paves the way toward generating the “economy of moral disagreement.” The plural “we,” and the recognition that this is a question that demands a response, even if it never affords a final answer, is what makes this a definitively democratic question.

Developing a moral economy means alerting students to one of the more disconcerting facets of democratic life, namely that while forging moral consensus is not an impossible aim in certain situations, it is not always possible. Students and teachers will need frequent reminders that the point of moral deliberation is not necessarily “to overcome the problem of moral disagreement” as Pamental suggests at one point in his essay. Moral deliberation is better understood as an attempt to figure out ways to learn to live with moral disagreement. As Gutmann and Thompson explain, in societies that aspire to be both pluralist and democratic, moral disagreement is “a condition with which we must learn to live, not merely an obstacle to be overcome on the way to a just society” (*DD*, 26). And finally, students and teachers alike will need to remember that deliberative democracy does not guarantee social justice; it is at best a provisional attempt to establish “a mutually justifiable way of living with...ongoing moral disagreements” (*DD*, 18).

Inviting students into the ongoing project of establishing an “economy of moral disagreement,” first with their classmates and later with fellow citizens, is one of the ways in which the model of moral deliberation described by Pamental might be brought to life, revitalizing democratic life in the process.

1. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996). This book will be cited as *DD* in the text with page numbers for all subsequent references.

2. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), 102-3.

3. *Ibid.*, 103.

4. *Ibid.*, 104.