

Receptivity and Responsibility

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In a historical moment in which too many of us take perverse pleasure in systematically misrepresenting and misunderstanding other persons, Rachel Wahl makes a deliberate attempt to identify the conditions for the possibility of mutual understanding. Her particular goal seems to be to uncover the potential for democratic dialogue in a space where it seems to have gone missing, in evangelical Christianity. In her framing, “a certain kind of Christian evangelical education can form a philosophical foundation and encourage practices of self-formation that are good for democracy.”

In a position stated clearly, Wahl recognizes the splintering that the November 2016 election occasioned and then makes use of interviews with two putatively different groups of university students – secular undergraduates from the University of Pennsylvania and evangelical Christians of nearby Cairn University – to demonstrate the splintering and to illustrate the concept of “inner life” as foundational to developing the capacity for democratic dialogue.¹

Focusing on the Cairn students, Wahl takes up this idea of “ethical self-formation” from a perspective she characterizes as virtue ethics. She invokes Michel Foucault’s secular understanding that one disciplines or delimits oneself to be and become what one has adopted as a “moral goal,” while holding on to Christian virtue as the substance of their self-becoming. In a move that I find puzzling, she sidesteps Foucault’s view of limited agency to point to that which is beyond the self, but which is active agent in the transformation of the self. It is this acknowledgment of the Divine that “makes possible a form of receptivity that is beneficial for democracy.” In this way, Wahl shines a light on what enables a small group of students to seek understanding rather than accept splintering.

Her argument is bolstered by descriptive evidence of the experience

of being open and being Christian, and I view this as a solid basis for pursuing her philosophical goals. The case proves nothing, yet it is a “proof,” a test, of the plausibility of the philosophical possibility Wahl offers.

I find Wahl’s argument here to be extremely interesting, if perhaps usefully wrong. I think she is right about something, but I am not sure exactly what that is. Below, I will dissect her major (two-part) claim to explain. However, both prongs of her claim depend on what she means by “a certain kind of Christian evangelical education,” so I will start there.

First, it is an education that views reciprocal—not instrumental—dialogue as “an exercise in self-formation,” tending toward the kind of [Christian] person one wants to be. Second, it involves the intentional formation of Cairn students as “Christians who can love and respect others, hold their commitments with humility, and dwell in uncertainty.” Third, this intentional formation is conducted in part through a required class called “The Integrated Life” with the explicit goal of experiencing, valuing and practicing careful listening, thoughtful humility and the capacity for uncertainty *in the light of committed belief of Christian doctrine*.

I have no doubt about the value of education for dialogue, conducted with humility and practiced in the face of uncertainty. I agree that humility is underexplored and that uncertainty is a fact of 21st century existence, especially after 9/11. I do wonder whether the education at UPenn might have the same focus or outcome. I also wonder whether the “uncertainty” Cairn claims as intrinsic to its mission is actually uncertainty at all. If a student has an unquestionable commitment to God as the designer of all experience, then what is the nature of the uncertainty that they are learning to live with and through? Is it existential uncertainty of the kind that at least some of the UPenn students feel in the face of an administration that careens from policy to practice and back again, threatening their physical, economic, and political futures?

The first half of Wahl’s claim is that this “certain kind of Christian evangelical education can form a philosophical foundation [for a version of self-formation that is good for democracy].” I am not convinced that Wahl actually offers a philosophical foundation. She touts Barbara’s way of thinking as

non-consequentialist, apparently a good thing that distinguishes at least Barbara from most of the UPenn students. She also offers a provocative “evangelical insight” that to be instrumental, one must first become an instrument. Neither of these seem to me to be philosophical foundation for this version of self-formation, nor is it obvious why this would be good for democracy.

Here, I suggest that Wahl take a look at the Christian ethic of response outlined in H. Richard Niebuhr’s *The Responsible Self*.² Niebuhr’s framing of decision-making into action follows (in the tradition of Dewey and other pragmatists) a rhythm of response to prior action, in light of interpretation of the situation and anticipation of the consequences of possible responses, all within a community of action/practice. This framing of response is rendered explicitly Christian as a result of what Niebuhr calls the agent’s “Center of Value,” that is, the value that anchors all other valuing. This is consequentialist, but not only consequentialist; aware of principles, but not only deontological; informed by virtues as proven habits of response but not only virtue-driven. There is room in this view for humility in the face of complex circumstances and uncertainty in the light of not-totally-predictable consequences. Niebuhr’s *phenomenology* of persons’ move(s) to action describes the way in which both the Cairn students and the UPenn students, respond. What differentiates them is the Center of Value (and the derived system of values) that they hold. The Cairn students claim Christ-centeredness; the UPenn students’ centeredness is unstated and unexplored here.

That this philosophical foundation might be good for democracy is congruent with much of what Wahl has to say about the Cairn students, but has the virtue of applying to the UPenn students as well.

The second half of Wahl’s claim is that a Cairn education encourages practices of (ethical) self-formation – in particular a disposition of receptivity – good for democracy. Wahl seems to highlight the quality of that receptivity in Barbara as:

- 1) Ability to learn from those whose political views conflict with her own.

- 2) Ability to hold competing truths in her mind without rushing to a resolution.

For anyone who knows the example of the New Testament Jesus, this *imitatio Christi* is appealing. Wahl praises Barbara for seeking to “understand different perspectives rather than fighting for what she believes.” She highlights the discomfort of the UPenn students who lack the faith that all will be well (especially if they don’t take action). They take responsibility *before* they understand. Barbara seeks to understand but not to take responsibility.

I agree completely with Wahl (and John Dewey, Jane Addams, William James, and Mary Parker Follett) that the abilities highlighted here are basic democratic dispositions. I agree with Wahl (and the same cast of pragmatist characters) that dialogue is an exercise in ethical self-formation, that one shows (and becomes) who one is through dialogue. I am not certain that I would call this “inner work,” if by that term we mean to distinguish it from the development of the community that is democratic.

Wahl suggests that the “secular” UPenn students without a centering and calming Christian faith may not listen because they think the stakes are too high, i.e. they perceive a “political emergency.” She seems to believe that the faith-based folks are better off when it comes to the behaviors that enact democracy. I don’t have to discount the value of the humility and the capacity to listen to diverse others evidenced in Barbara’s interview to know that it is not OK to act as if we are not in the throes of a political emergency. I wonder whether the UPenn students who seem to be more accurately interpreting the state of the political world can listen to the Cairn students despite the uncertainty and anxiety built into their understanding.

Barbara says, “I’m so confident in what I believe that I don’t have to be afraid of other people.” Fair enough. Fear is a critical token in the splintering of American democratic practice and deserves much more attention than Wahl or I give it. But there seems to be an under-meaning in what Barbara says: the others are the ones who are afraid – and should be because they don’t have Jesus Christ. She can be a sinner who is forgiven. They are also sinners but do

not know forgiveness. She can “be a light.” They don’t know the light. This implicit discounting of the experience of others is why I am not compelled by Wahl’s argument. The possibility of democracy rests on actual and honest interaction – with each other and with the world as it engages us. In the end, I find that the common ground apparently available to the Cairn students is neither generally accessible nor durable enough.

Rachel Wahl’s essay refocuses us on the very possibility of democratic communication across the secular-Christian boundary. It should not be unthinkable but it too often is. While I am not yet convinced that common ground is in view, I am grateful to Wahl for this critical reminder.

1 That these particular students willingly participated in deliberative dialogue on “politics in the age of Trump” may indicate that they had more in common than might be imagined initially.

2 H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).