

8 *What kind of dialogue do we need?*

Gender, deliberation and comprehensive values

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Recent branches of political theory, including feminism, communitarianism, identity theory and difference theory, have criticised liberalism and liberal democratic politics for failing to recognise the importance of group diversity and identity. In response, political and democratic theorists have increasingly appealed to public deliberation as a means of resolving political questions. Deliberative democrats, for example, have sought to move beyond traditional understandings of democracy as a merely representative system by recasting it as a regime in which individual citizens determine policy outcomes and political decisions through their active participation in public dialogue with one another. Many liberals, meanwhile, have increasingly sought to ground liberal principles in agreements struck between participants in some form of deliberative process. That is, having taken on board claims about the importance of difference and identity to the ways in which people think and the values they hold, many liberal political theorists have felt the need to retreat from controversial commitments to substantive principles such as autonomy, and have instead grounded their theories in a more general commitment to public dialogue.¹ Where liberalism was generally seen as either a perfectionist theory which stipulated the supremacy of certain values over others or a contractualist theory premised upon some appropriately modelled agreement between individuals bound by common standards of rationality, it is now increasingly seen as a deliberative theory rooted in inclusive dialogue among situated individuals. In making the transition from contractualism to

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¹ See, for example, John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Martha Nussbaum, A Plea for Complexity, in Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard and Martha Nussbaum, eds., *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (Princeton University Press, 1999).

deliberation, many liberals feel that they have developed a more effective way of justifying liberal principles in circumstances of diversity, by foregrounding inclusive, collective dialogue over hypothetical contracts and agreement models which require everyone to act and think in the same way.

In this chapter, we explore in more detail the deliberative turn in contemporary political theory with a view to questioning the contribution that dialogue and public deliberation make to our understanding of liberalism or democracy. Our claim is that a focus on gender as a source of controversy, and on feminism as a theoretical and practical approach, prompts a rethinking of the role of dialogue away from the liberal constitutionalist focus common among many liberals and deliberative democrats and towards a more fluid, reflexive approach.

The chapter proceeds as follows. In the first section we attempt to show that the concept of dialogue in fact does very little work in deliberative democracy or political liberalism at the *fundamental moral or ethical level*, and that the claims made by many supporters of political liberalism and deliberative democracy about their ability to provide an inclusive, difference-sensitive forum in which to derive regulative principles for our ethical and political life are overstated. Political deliberation of the kind found in deliberative democracy and political liberalism, we suggest, is best applied to questions of practical policy once foundational ethical principles are agreed upon (although even there we have some scepticism about the potential for consensus). Furthermore, we claim in the second section that deliberation is particularly ill suited to reconciling controversies concerning gender, since many of the most pressing questions in gender ethics are themselves controversies concerning foundational principles rather than practical policy. In the third section, we go on to show that, while the deliberative democratic model may not represent an effective means of deriving the kind of overarching ethical and political rules that many of its advocates believe it can, there nevertheless is a role for the transformative power of dialogue in the context of gender ethics. We appeal to John Dryzek's distinction between discursive and deliberative democracy, and argue that the discursive model is redolent of feminist accounts of consciousness-raising. Despite Dryzek's scepticism and the general falling from favour of consciousness-raising, we suggest that advocates of deliberation and dialogue should take it seriously once again.

1 The role of dialogue and the deliberative turn

The emphasis on dialogue characteristic of deliberative democracy and political liberalism has many advantages, according to its supporters. The process of deliberation, with its gathering of ideas and development of argument, enables better decisions to be made than would result from mere preference aggregation or contracts. The deliberative model of liberalism provides a more coherent foundation for liberal principles. Dialogue builds greater understanding between people with different backgrounds and beliefs, and this greater understanding can in turn increase stability and solidarity. Similarly, the deliberative *democratic* model better fulfils the aims of democracy by encouraging greater participation among the citizen body and, consequently, producing outcomes and decisions rooted in the experiences, interests and concerns of those involved. Participation in democratic debates may also be good for people considered individually, by educating them and honing their intellectual and empathetic faculties.

Before we consider deliberative democracy in more detail, let us first look in more depth at the claims made by political liberals. Conventional liberal accounts of justice and political reasoning have attracted significant criticism in recent years for their perceived inability to take seriously the complex needs and concerns of different groups and individuals which populate liberal democratic states.² Liberals have commonly argued that, in striving to secure basic freedoms for all members of the polity regardless of their gender or their social or cultural circumstances, liberalism is able to transcend these differences and establish a moral community regulated by principles of equality and freedom which are rationally defensible to all. Critics, on the other hand, have claimed that liberals lean too heavily on a controversial Enlightenment account of the individual as shorn of those attachments that confer identity,

² See, e.g., the communitarian critiques of Michael Walzer and Michael Sandel; the multicultural critiques of Will Kymlicka and Joseph Raz; and critiques by difference-theorists such as Iris Marion Young. Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge University Press, 1982); Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford University Press, 1995); Joseph Raz, Multiculturalism: A Liberal Perspective, in *Ethics on the Public Domain* (Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 170–91; Iris M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton University Press, 1990).

affiliations and memberships which enable the individual to deliberate and act meaningfully in the world.³ Contrary to what liberals might claim, critics have said, liberal societies are not populated by ‘individuals’ who think and deliberate and communicate in the same way; rather, they are populated by men, women, Muslims, Jews, gays, lesbians, wives, sons, academics, professionals and so on – a complex multitude whose personal beliefs and understandings are shaped by the many overlapping and conflicting communities and circumstances which make them the people they are.

Diversity therefore represents both a philosophical and a political challenge. It is a brute fact of political life that liberal democratic societies are more culturally, ethnically and religiously diverse than they once were. People across the world are more mobile, often pursuing opportunities and markets created by a globalising economy. Borders are more fluid, and labour markets more changeable than they used to be. According to the last British census, 12 per cent of full-time students aged 16–25 in Britain are now from Asian and black communities. One in ten schoolchildren do not have English as their first language. Britain is now home to over a million Muslims, half a million Hindus and a quarter of a million Jews. ‘New world’ nation-states like the USA and Canada are even more diverse, with immigrant minorities and first-nation peoples seeking fair representation from their democratic institutions and representatives.⁴ The pressure that such diversity exerts on democratic institutions and mechanisms is considerable.

The empirical fact of diversity has always exercised political philosophers, and liberal political theorists in particular. After all, John Rawls’ justice as fairness began with the assumption that liberal societies are characterised by a basic ‘fact of pluralism’, and liberal political thinkers since John Locke have been deeply interested in the question of how best to establish norms of toleration and freedom so that the different ways of

³ See, e.g., Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. II, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge University Press, 1985); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd edn (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), and Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

⁴ See Will Kymlicka, *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism, and Citizenship* (Oxford University Press, 2001) and Will Kymlicka, *Finding Our Way: Re-Thinking Ethnocultural Relations in Canada* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

life which exist in democratic societies at any one time might flourish alongside one another.⁵ But whilst Locke sought the peaceful coexistence of Protestantism and Catholicism, contemporary liberal theorists have sought to contend with a much more radical multiplicity of views and ways of life. Many, including John Rawls, Martha Nussbaum, Charles Larmore and Monique Deveaux, have done so by positing an account of dialogue capable of producing agreements between diverse persons on regulative principles.⁶

Let us focus for now on the political liberalism of Charles Larmore, an early influential exponent of the deliberative turn in liberal political theory. Larmore begins with the familiar liberal claim that the world is characterised by reasonable disagreement about the content of the good life, about the ends to which our lives should be directed, and about the way in which we relate to our most deeply held values, beliefs and self-understandings. Indeed, he says, contemporary liberal democratic states are characterised by a diversity not only of ideas and attitudes concerning our political obligations to one another, but also of the more fundamental, 'deep features of morality' which shape and animate our political beliefs.⁷ Consequently, he argues, a coherent conception of political justice needs to acknowledge this moral diversity and be capable of resolving the conflicts which arise out of it. Traditional forms of liberalism premised upon the prioritisation of substantive principles, such as autonomy and individuality, are incapable of doing this: rather than resolve conflicts between diverse principles and ideas about the good, liberalism has become 'simply another part of the problem'.⁸ What liberalism must do, therefore, is avoid any commitment to such controversial principles in favour of establishing a stable accommodation of divergent (yet reasonable) conceptions of the good life. Thick foundations must be rejected in favour of a thin commitment to the idea that all

⁵ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford University Press, 1971); John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (1690), in *The Two Treatises of Government*, ed. P. Laslett (Cambridge University Press, 1998); and John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), in *A Letter Concerning Toleration in Focus*, ed. S. Mendus and J. Horton (London: Routledge, 1991).

⁶ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*; Nussbaum, *Plea for Complexity*; Charles Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), and Charles Larmore, *The Morals of Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); Monique Deveaux, *Cultural Pluralism and Dilemmas of Justice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

⁷ Larmore, *Morals of Modernity*, p. 170. ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

persons deserve equal respect. For Larmore, justice is only truly served when persons are freed from the imposition of having to understand themselves in a particular way and are able to engage in meaningful and inclusive dialogue about the content of those principles which regulate and underpin the state and their wider ethical life, without first having to commit themselves to controversial principles like individual autonomy.

However, Larmore's conception of liberalism and political dialogue is more controversial than he believes. For example, he admits that his theory can be applicable only to a person who 'accepts the norms of *rational dialogue* and *equal respect*, and accords them supreme importance' and goes on to state that 'those who reject the norm of equal respect or rank their view of the good life above it . . . will usually be unable to converge on any political (coercive) principles'.⁹ In this regard, he says, 'there is a limit to the rational transparency liberalism can hope for in its political principles. The public justification a liberal polity offers for its principles must presume that citizens share a form of life that embodies a commitment to equal respect.'¹⁰ Also, he states, his argument for liberal neutrality 'applies only to people who are interested in devising principles of political association. It assumes that they share enough to think of themselves as engaged in this common enterprise . . . In short,' he goes on,

the people to whom this argument for liberal neutrality applies must already think of themselves as 'a people' or 'a nation'. They must have a common life before they can think of organising their political life according to liberal principles . . . without a common life the disagreements [born out of moral pluralism] would give ample grounds for the individuals to disband or to switch their allegiances elsewhere.¹¹

Taken together, then, the constraints Larmore imposes on public dialogues about justice and regulative political principles seem to rely upon the acceptance of two closely interwoven arguments which we find shared by a great many liberals writing from both the deliberative and contractualist traditions. The first is an 'information' argument, whereby individuals are expected to endorse neutrality as a result of what they know about themselves (that is, that they are a member of a nation or people pursuing some form of common life and that they are able to value the norms of equal respect and rational dialogue

⁹ Ibid., p. 142; emphasis added. ¹⁰ Ibid. ¹¹ Ibid., pp. 142–3.

higher than any other aims they might have). The second, however, is a 'motivational' argument which presupposes that persons will strive to overcome their disagreements about the good life in the hope that they will, in doing so, establish a social and political arrangement which allows them to pursue their more substantive conceptions of the good as fully as possible within an inclusive public sphere. These two arguments, though formally distinct, can be seen to be mutually dependent. It is conceived to be the agent's knowledge of herself (as a participant in a common non-political life and a possessor of certain beliefs and ends which she has an interest in pursuing) that leads her to engage in rational dialogue with others about how to go about organising the political institutions of the state. And, conversely, it is the desire (or motivation) to establish an inclusive and fair system of government (which will allow her to pursue her ends and practise her beliefs as fully as possible within the boundaries set by principles which are derived from rational agreements) which provokes her to temper her demands in order to satisfy the principle of equal respect and sustain meaningful dialogue in the face of disagreement about the good life. That is, it is the desire for agreement which leads participants in the dialogue to set aside their more controversial beliefs about the good life in order that rational dialogue does not merely break down in the face of insurmountable and incommensurable disagreement. To this end, the 'information' and 'motivation' arguments converge to provide an account of why persons would adopt a 'reasonable' position with regard to others, rather than merely one of domination or dogmatism.

Like many writing in the liberal tradition, then, Larmore's theory begins with the claim that contemporary liberal societies are characterised by moral and political diversity and that therefore the principles which regulate it must be uncontroversial enough to be accepted by all those involved, regardless of their various commitments, beliefs, ideals and memberships. However, he goes on to define the situation in which these principles are derived as characterised by a series of very controversial claims indeed. For example, Larmore's claims about reasonableness, equal respect and the necessary commitment among all people to rational dialogue suggests that all *individual* persons (rather than groups or representatives or village elders or whatever) 'must be free to explain to one another in full their comprehensive visions of the good life' which are their own and which cannot be simply subsumed within – or identified with – the particular culture or community to which they

belong.¹² Individual people have their own understandings of their own commitments and beliefs, weighed and interpreted in relation to their own lived experiences and circumstances. Consequently, the norms of equal respect and rational dialogue would appear to suggest that all individuals from all communities should be understood as possessing the social, political and intellectual resources they need to participate in public, political discourse on an equal basis with others *regardless of the particular values or desires which prevail in the many social, cultural, religious or other groups to which they belong*. That is, Larmore's claims suggest that dialogue must be not merely among those members of a community who are thought to be in charge or in the ascendant majority, but also among those members who have previously been excluded from such participation (either in the derivation of public principles of justice or constitutional rules or in the formation or interpretation of norms within the group itself). Larmore's theory therefore makes important claims about who should have the opportunity to be involved in political dialogue (and hence, to whom political principles should be justified) and it presupposes that participants will be capable of deliberating in the way he requires. This raises important questions about the interrelationship between our 'political' lives and our 'non-political' lives, a point which has been made forcefully by feminists. The commitment to the *political* equality of all *individuals* to enter into dialogue, regardless of what elites within cultural or religious groups might say, for example, and the idea that all persons possess an equal normative status independent of the particular group to which they belong (as demanded by the norm of equal respect) require that persons are actually enabled to conceive themselves in a way that renders these equalities (and the benefits they generate) accessible and intelligible to them.

We can see this most clearly, perhaps, if we descend from the level of abstract theory for a moment (as many advocates of deliberative democracy and public dialogue ask us to do), in order to consider some of the ways in which social and political movements have actually sought to affect and shape the conduct of political discourse in western liberal democracies. The history of these societies is at least partly characterised by internal struggles for recognition and equality by those who were previously systematically excluded from participating in their own political structures. The struggle for equal civil rights by women and

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 135.

ethnic minorities, for example, represents an overwhelming desire by those groups to secure both the basic political conditions that they need in order to participate in the constitution of their political and social structures on an equal basis with others and also, we might say, the basic conditions that characterise the lives of these people in private which make these political freedoms accessible to them. Hence, calls for universal suffrage have often gone hand in hand with calls for greater representation of marginalised groups in decision-making bodies and institutions *and* for a widening and improvement of education such that people from groups who have been excluded from political decision making and democratic debates (and, perhaps, from education) in the past can make meaningful and informed decisions about the ways in which their political institutions might be structured, how their interests might best be represented and what kind of lives they want to lead.

For example, as Anne Phillips has pointed out, the women's movement in Britain and the United States not only campaigned in favour of strikes for equal pay and for better employment protection for part-time women workers, but also sought to combat

misrepresentation of women in the media, the sexual harassment of women . . . the bullying and violence of their husbands . . . [and] the patronage visited upon women in political meetings and parties. Despite their formation of a counter-cultural movement that despised the conventions of establishment politics, feminists eventually turned their attention to women's exclusion from the conventional political arena . . . Where earlier generations had given the impression that all was now fine on the political front . . . but pretty depressing in social and economic life, contemporary feminists have argued that sexual inequality pervades the very definitions and practices of politics as well as the conditions of economic life.¹³

It is for precisely these reasons that many feminists have sought to radically reconstruct the way in which we understand, internalise and discuss our most fundamental political, legal and economic concepts and ideals.

Deliberative democrats, too, look to dialogue as the means by which political questions might be resolved, and they do so for reasons that are connected with those offered by political liberals. Deliberative democrats like Joshua Cohen, Amy Gutmann, Dennis Thompson and Jürgen Habermas argue that traditional definitions of democracy are

¹³ Anne Phillips, *Which Equalities Matter?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999) pp. 21–2.

insufficient in a world of increased diversity and declining civic and political engagement.¹⁴ In a diverse society, marginal interests are too often ignored or sidelined by majoritarian institutions, representative bodies or formal democratic procedures. Consequently, they argue, democracy needs to be recast as a regime of institutions which encourage and facilitate the widest possible engagement of citizens in democratic debates. Policies, institutions and decisions about political matters should be made by citizens themselves through collective dialogue.

Deliberative democracy is generally seen by its defenders, therefore, as better able to secure political equality, individual freedom and the legitimacy of public institutions than more traditional accounts of democratic politics. However, deliberative democrats disagree over the role of deliberation in stipulating the substantive principles which frame public debates. Cohen, for example, argues that deliberative democracy should be viewed as a procedural mechanism for deciding *policies* rather than substantive principles. Gutmann and Thompson, on the other hand, are among a group of deliberative democrats who believe that deliberation should yield not only policy decisions but also substantive principles. That is, parties to the deliberative process do not merely debate specific matters of policy; they also debate the terms under which these debates take place.

But again, deliberation cannot produce substantive principles precisely because these principles must exist prior to, and independently of, the deliberative process. Cohen argues that any deliberative democratic process must, if it is to be considered legitimate, be premised upon the prior values of freedom, equality and individuality. Debates which are not premised on those values are inconsistent with democracy, and so their outcomes will be illegitimate. Gutmann and Thompson, on the other hand, argue that the rules which govern democratic conversations

¹⁴ Joshua Cohen, *Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy*, in *The Good Polity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton University Press, 2004); Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Deliberative Democracy Beyond Process*, *Journal of Political Philosophy* 10:2 (2002), pp. 153–77; Jürgen Habermas, *Popular Sovereignty as Procedure*, in *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, ed. James Bohman and William Rehg (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 35–66. For more detailed discussion of Habermas's conception of deliberation, see [Chapters 5 and 9](#) in this volume.

are to be decided in those conversations. However, they also argue that parties to democratic debates must be understood as *free and equal individuals*, and that outcomes which violate such basic principles as bodily integrity or the right to health care irrespective of age, race or culture are impermissible.¹⁵ Gutmann, Thompson and Cohen, therefore, all share the claim that the process of public deliberation must be circumscribed by prior values which are not themselves products of the dialogue. The deliberative democratic model, like the political liberalism of Rawls, Larmore and colleagues, presupposes that persons are capable of entering into the kinds of dialogues that these theorists envisage.

This is important because it raises a further question about the ability of political liberalism to represent a more effective account of liberal reasoning than any other – for example, contractualist – approaches, especially regarding questions of gender inequality. Furthermore, it raises questions about the ability of deliberative democracy to yield substantive principles. One of the main differences between deliberative democracy and political liberalism is, of course, that in political liberalism the deliberation described is hypothetical, much like the contracts invoked by thinkers such as Brian Barry, T. M. Scanlon and Rawls.¹⁶ One appeal of the deliberative approach for its defenders is the fact that it descends from the level of abstract philosophical reasoning and presents instead an account of agreement between real people with real beliefs, ideals and unique perspectives, which takes place ‘not only in the private homes of citizens or the studies of philosophers but in public political forums’.¹⁷ Deliberative democrats seek to cut through liberal assumptions about common reasoning and abstract Archimedean points and show instead that public deliberation among the citizens of a democratic polity can provide outcomes consistent with liberal principles in a way that does not presuppose the prior supremacy of these principles. But this raises crucial questions for deliberative democracy and for the dialogical model, for as soon as we shift from hypothetical agreements between appropriately defined actors to actual agreements between real individuals, we are forced to look carefully at the conditions which must

¹⁵ Gutmann and Thompson, *Deliberative Democracy Beyond Process*, p. 161.

¹⁶ Brian Barry, *Treatise on Social Justice*, vol. II, *Justice as Impartiality* (Oxford University Press, 1996); Thomas Scanlon, *What We Owe to One Another* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); Rawls, *Theory of Justice*.

¹⁷ Gutmann and Thompson, *Deliberative Democracy Beyond Process*, p. 157.

exist in the real world in order for these agreements and dialogues to take place. We must ask who should be involved, what resources and capacities people need in order to be involved, and how they might be provided.

Feminism has demonstrated that our political and non-political lives are fundamentally intertwined. Our capacity to contribute to political debates is shaped by the circumstances which exist in our supposedly non-political lives. Hence a commitment to open and inclusive political dialogue requires that other general conditions are met. It requires, for example, that women from all parts of society should have the opportunity to be fully involved in political debates, including those who belong to groups or communities in which such involvement is forbidden. And it also requires that communities which seek to exclude women from gaining the kind of education or civic attachments that prepare them for meaningful participation in collective dialogues about political matters, or which encourage women to think of themselves as unequal or not worthy of participating in democratic debates, must be reformed.

The principle of equal respect that we find in Larmore and other liberals, like the commitment to freedom, equality and individuality that we find among deliberative democrats, requires that all individuals are capable of engaging in meaningful discourse concerning the legitimacy of substantive, regulative principles of political association, and also that these persons are capable of discussing and reflecting upon the nature of their private beliefs and commitments on reasonable terms. For liberal justice to be truly neutral in the way that political liberals envisage, and for democratic institutions to be capable of producing fair and inclusive outcomes in the ways envisaged by deliberative democrats, the model of deliberation at their hearts must be rooted in the capacity of *all* individuals to have the opportunity to participate *equally* in both the derivation of political rules and principles and the interpretation and revision of those practices and ways of life which constitute their non-political lives. In other words, the norms characteristic of political liberalism and deliberative democracy necessarily embody a commitment to ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their particular religious or cultural beliefs, and regardless also of the prejudices or discriminatory attitudes which might prevail in the community to which they belong, are allowed to access political dialogue and are provided with the resources they need in order to debate meaningfully about their own ideas about value, the importance of their beliefs and experiences

to them, and the extent to which these beliefs are of continued worth. It contains within it, that is, an implicit commitment to individuality, political equality and an ability to reflect upon one's ends and values that necessarily trumps the ideals and beliefs embodied in groups that reject them.

Thus, if inclusive, democratic debates of the kind advocated by Gutmann, Thompson and colleagues are to get off the ground, then they must be premised upon the prior good of political equality and the provision of those intellectual and civic goods to all individuals such that they might engage meaningfully in deliberative reasoning with other persons on an equal basis. And, as feminists have pointed out in the past, the capacity for women and men to participate equally in the political realm will be shaped and sometimes thwarted by prevailing non-political conditions or norms which undermine equal citizenship or individual freedom.

This point also holds for those non-liberal thinkers who foreground the notion of inclusive democratic dialogue as a means of resolving political disputes and configuring institutions. As other contributors to this volume have pointed out (see [Chapter 2](#) and [Chapter 9](#)), Iris Young criticises liberalism for its tendency to 'reduce difference to unity.' Instead of deriving some substantive account of justice which is capable of regulating and ordering political conflicts, she argues, political theorists should seek ways in which different people with different identities and perspectives might collectively resolve political questions. 'Members of a polity', she writes, 'need not seek and arrive at agreement on a general account of justice in order to argue productively about their problems and come to morally legitimate resolutions' to political questions.¹⁸ But again, here we must ask what distinguishes a 'morally legitimate' resolution from merely a 'resolution'. Young's reply is that political outcomes 'can only be considered morally legitimate . . . if those who must abide by or adjust to them have had a part in their formation'.¹⁹ Consequently, then, whether or not a resolution to a political question or conflict is 'morally legitimate' depends, for Young, on the extent to which it was arrived at through an inclusive and fair process of democratic dialogue which is maintained and made effective by the fact that all individual

¹⁸ Iris M. Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 29.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

participants are able to 'explain their background experiences, interests, or proposals in ways that others can understand' and to 'express reasons for their claims in ways that others recognise could be accepted even if in fact they disagree with the claims and reasons'.²⁰ But this sounds a lot like the liberalism that she wants to reject.

For all the radical credentials backing up Young's critique of liberalism, therefore, it would seem that her politics of difference in fact rests upon the rather familiar claim that, in order for persons to resolve questions in a morally legitimate way, they must be willing and able to adopt a reasonable standpoint with regard to their own ends and commitments, and to keep talking even when faced with apparently incommensurable disagreements. What Young seems to assume is that all persons who are party to the dialogue will be reasonable in the sense that they are willing and able to articulate, debate and justify their particular claims and ends in ways that others can accept and will have an open mind about the values and commitments of others.

Not only does the politics of difference seem to embody both the *agreement* motive and the *reasonableness* requirement that we found in Larmore (and which is also found in contractualist liberals such as Barry and Scanlon), it also fails to escape the central question of what is to be done about groups and individuals whose non-political circumstances thwart their equal entry into democratic dialogues with others. Even defenders of a politics of difference such as Young, who reject the need for overarching accounts of justice for their tendency to 'reduce difference to unity', are surely compelled to encourage those virtues and understandings among all individuals which are compatible with political equality at the expense of those which uphold unequal norms that thwart or undermine the ability of some people (for example, women) to participate in democratic dialogues on an equal basis with other citizens.

It is the conclusion of this first section, then, that deliberative democrats and political liberals share a common conception of, and faith in, deliberation as a means of resolving political questions, and furthermore that this model of deliberation *presupposes* rather than *produces* substantive regulative principles. The notion of public, inclusive dialogue occupies broadly the same role in the theories of political liberals as do contracts or a commitment to substantive normative principles:

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

they represent a way of understanding the implications of certain principles (that is, political equality and freedom) which are valued independently of – and prior to – the dialogue itself. Indeed, it is crucial that they are valued independently of the dialogue because they provide the grounds on which the dialogue itself is constructed and regulated. Put more generally, any normative strategy which aims to produce publicly justifiable democratic institutions, or which seeks to resolve questions of justice, via a process of public dialogue must provide an account of dialogue framed and regulated by ‘democratic’ principles of freedom and equality. Consequently, the argument for political liberalism or deliberative democracy appears to be circular: outcomes produced by dialogues which are themselves underwritten and regulated by democratic principles will be democratic ones. Rather than look to the political liberal or deliberative democratic model to set our regulative principles of justice, therefore, we should look to the ways in which democratic dialogues might produce better *policies* within constraints set by our prior commitment to democratic values, or to ways in which dialogue might encourage transformative reflexivity. This is the real strength in the dialogical model, as we will see.

2 Deliberation and gender

We have suggested that collective deliberation has often been proposed as a way of taking into account diversity, particularly cultural diversity, and have argued that it is problematic to attempt to use deliberation, as political liberals and many deliberative democrats do, to determine foundational questions in the context of pluralism. In this section, we develop this point with specific regard to gender. Using the work of Seyla Benhabib, a feminist who is committed to the use of dialogue to resolve controversies of gender, we demonstrate that it is precisely those foundational questions that dialogue cannot resolve which are most at stake.

Benhabib agrees that dialogue is particularly appropriate given the facts of cultural diversity. Moreover, she notes that many of the most contentious issues of multiculturalism are in fact issues of gender. Of Bhikhu Parekh’s twelve cultural practices that most engender conflict, Benhabib states, most concern gender (in)equality:

Of the twelve practices listed by Parekh, seven concern the status of women in distinct cultural communities; two bear on dress codes pertaining to both

sexes (the wearing of the turban and the *hijab*); two are about the lines separating private from public jurisdictional authority in the education of children; and one each concerns dietary codes and funeral rites. How can we account for the preponderance of cultural practices concerning the status of women, girls, marriage, and sexuality that lead to intercultural conflict?²¹

Although, as James Gordon Finlayson details in Chapter 1 above, Benhabib does not endorse the whole of Habermas's original form of discourse ethics, she nevertheless proposes a form of 'discourse ethics' as a solution to such conflict. Like many deliberative democrats broadly construed, she combines the premise that *agreement* on a norm is necessary for that norm to have validity with the stipulation that certain *predetermined ground rules* must govern the process of deliberation. Both principles are combined in her approval of Habermas's statement that 'only those norms and institutional arrangements are valid which can be agreed to by all under special argumentation situations named discourses':²² agreement is necessary, but only under specific, predetermined conditions. Benhabib characterises discourse ethics as a 'metanorm' that should be used to test and validate other 'more specific norms'.²³

This metanorm's predetermined conditions of discourse require further specification. Benhabib lists three such conditions, which, she feels, render 'pluralist structures . . . quite compatible with a universalist deliberative democratic model'.²⁴

- i Egalitarian reciprocity. 'Members of cultural, religious, linguistic and other minorities must not, in virtue of their membership status, be entitled to lesser degrees of civil, political, economic and cultural rights than the majority.'²⁵
- ii Voluntary self-ascription. 'An individual must not be automatically assigned to a cultural, religious, or linguistic group by virtue of his or her birth. An individual's group membership must permit the most extensive forms of self-ascription and self-identification possible . . .

²¹ Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 83–4. The practices that directly relate to gender are female circumcision; polygamy; Muslim and arranged marriages; marriages within prohibited degrees of relations; Muslim withdrawal of girls from coeducational practices such as sports and swimming lessons; the Muslim headscarf; and the general 'subordinate status of women and all that entails'.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 107. ²³ *Ibid.* ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19. ²⁵ *Ibid.*

the state should not simply grant the right to define and control membership to the group at the expense of the individual.²⁶

- iii Freedom of exit and association, including the freedom to remain a member of a group even when marrying outside of it.²⁷

Underpinning these principles is a more general principle: that of individual autonomy. 'In discourse ethics', Benhabib states, 'autonomy is seen as a moral as well as a political principle'.²⁸

Building upon the claims we made about political liberals such as Larmore, and deliberative democrats such as Gutmann and Young in the previous section, it seems that these principles appear to constrain not just the process of dialogue but also its conclusions. Freedom of exit and association, for example, does not really make sense as a procedural rule of deliberation and is better understood as a required protected norm in society more generally – one of the 'more specific norms' that was supposed to be derived from the discourse. However, this seems to conflict with Benhabib's statement that such norms are valid only if they are agreed upon through argumentation. Moreover, all four principles are, in themselves, exceedingly controversial. It is therefore unlikely that diverse cultural groups would converge upon them through discourse unless the constraints upon that discourse were exceedingly stringent. (The possibility for agreement on these principles seems even less likely when considering the international dialogue that is the focus of Kimberley Hutchings' chapter in this volume.) And such stringent constraints, in turn, are unlikely to be accepted by all as the ground rules for dialogical exchange and thus are problematic as the underpinnings of discourse. If such controversial principles may legitimately be stipulated prior to dialogue, then there seems to be rather less work left for dialogue to do.

Moreover, what we wish to emphasise here is that these four principles are significantly content-laden; indeed, so much so that adherence to them would in itself resolve many of the controversies of gender without recourse to dialogue at all. Benhabib argues that discourse ethics emphasises 'the resolution of multicultural dilemmas through processes of

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid. These three principles are restated several times throughout the book.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 114. Benhabib also makes this point when she describes principles 2 and 3 as being based on 'the concept of persons as self-interpreting and self-defining beings' (p. 132).

will- and opinion-formation in civil society'.²⁹ However, discourse ethics appears rather to resolve the key multicultural dilemmas of gender merely by stating its founding principles.

Take, for example, one of Parekh's gendered multicultural dilemmas: female circumcision. When practised on children before the age of consent, it directly violates Benhabib's fundamental condition of voluntary self-ascription, since it is a major and irreversible practice that makes sense only from within a particular cultural membership. We could also plausibly argue that the practice violates egalitarian reciprocity, since it imposes significant costs on women that are not borne by men and this violates the need for equal 'civil, political, economic and cultural rights'. The same could be said of arranged marriages, 'marriages within prohibited degrees of relationships'³⁰ and polygamy: to the extent that these practices are involuntary, they violate freedom of association and exit and the moral value of autonomy; to the extent that they create or are founded on unequal rights, they violate egalitarian reciprocity. As for the most general controversy of culture – 'the subordinate status of women and all that entails'³¹ – there seems no possible way that it could pass the tests of entry into the dialogical process while remaining a controversy. It is surely structurally impossible for anyone to argue in favour of women's 'subordinate status' while adhering to the norms of egalitarian reciprocity; 'the most extensive forms of self-ascription and self-identification possible' within groups for *all* individual members, including women; freedom of association and exit; and the moral (as well as political) value of autonomy.

Benhabib herself seems to note this problem in passing, but dismisses its significance. 'Whether cultural groups can survive as distinct entities under these conditions is an open question', she notes with remarkable bluntness. But she quickly adds: 'I believe these conditions are necessary if legal pluralism in liberal democratic states is to achieve the goals of cultural diversity as well as democratic equality, without compromising the rights of women and children of minority cultures.'³² She does not explain how cultural diversity would survive the annihilation of cultural groups.

It seems, then, that the preconditions of discourse in Benhabib's account go a long way towards solving the main cultural dilemmas of gender without requiring the intervention of dialogue. In general, we might say that any meaningful prior stipulation of the values of equality and

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 106. ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 83. ³¹ *Ibid.* ³² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

autonomy will more or less rule out any non-liberal/feminist practices or ethics of gender.³³ This should not be surprising, since equality and autonomy are, after all, both the founding values of liberalism and in themselves extremely demanding.

We do not wish to suggest that there is no room for controversy on matters of gender from within a liberal perspective. There is, of course, a great deal of controversy concerning an enormous number of gendered practices within liberal societies as well as between liberal and non-liberal cultures. But it is important to distinguish two types of controversy. The first builds on an acceptance that gender equality and autonomy for women are crucial goals, and debates instead whether or not a particular practice or policy violates these principles. Thus we can debate the extent to which practices such as cosmetic surgery, housewifery or prostitution are compatible with equality and autonomy. The problem with this sort of debate is that it demonstrates that Benhabib's preconditions are not in themselves sufficiently determinate to be used as the sort of test she has in mind. We are stuck in a vicious circle if our dialogue must be constrained by the unquestionable principle of egalitarian reciprocity, for example, but only through debate do we unearth what that principle itself might mean. Which comes first, the principle or the dialogue establishing it? And if it is legitimate to use dialogue to establish the meaning of the principle, why is it not also legitimate to leave the question of the principle's legitimacy to debate?³⁴

³³ A truly meaningful stipulation of equality and autonomy may also rule out in advance several practices that are currently accepted in liberal societies. For example, for a discussion of the philosophical similarities between cosmetic surgery and female genital mutilation, despite the vast difference in the extent to which western societies view the practices as acceptable, see Clare Chambers, *Are Breast Implants Better than Female Genital Mutilation? Autonomy, Gender Equality and Nussbaum's Political Liberalism*, in *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 7:4 (2004), pp. 1–33.

³⁴ A similar problem confronts Young's claim that what she terms 'communicative democracy' must meet three conditions: 'significant interdependence, formally equal respect, and agreed-on procedures'. It is not clear why only the procedures and not the conditions themselves must be agreed, or what to do if portions of the polity oppose equal respect. Young is correct to claim that these 'are much thinner conditions than those of shared understandings or the goals of finding common goods', but they are nevertheless sufficiently thick to be controversial, particularly when considering questions of gender. Iris M. Young, *Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy*, in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 126–7.

The second sort of controversy concerning issues of gender does not take place from an acceptance of the values of equality and autonomy, but rather is based on a rejection of those principles in the context of gender. In other words, practices such as the multicultural dilemmas that Benhabib discusses may be justified from the point of view of a cultural rejection of women's equality and autonomy. It should be clear that, while stipulating in advance that equality and autonomy are non-negotiable underlying principles may give rise to a solution (indeed, to the just solution), it does not do so through the mechanism of dialogue. Rather, gender ethics in this context are resolved by the assertion of particular values regardless of cultural disagreement.

3 Private experience versus public reason: discursive democracy and consciousness-raising

So far, we have argued that dialogue is not best suited to resolving issues of gender, if it is used to develop foundational principles, for two reasons. First, advocates of this use of dialogue tend to rely on regulative principles which are themselves sufficiently substantive as to resolve many issues of gender prior to dialogue. Second, without such regulative principles there is no reason to suggest that dialogue would bring about consensus or that, if consensus were reached, it would be egalitarian rather than discriminatory. Instead, we have argued that dialogue necessarily presumes the value of equality and autonomy, and thus does not provide a neutral basis for agreeing on those values.

The question which arises from this argument is whether dialogue has any role in issues of gender at all. We envisage two potential roles, but shall explore only one of them. The first is that dialogue might play a part in resolving questions of practical policy. For example, the values of autonomy and equality demonstrate the need to enable women and men to share paid and caring work. Members of a society might engage in a debate as to which policies, such as childcare provision or working hours' legislation, are preferable. We shall say no more about this potential role for dialogue here.³⁵ Instead, we focus on another potential

³⁵ For the argument that deliberative policy-making should take place only among elected representatives and not among citizens, see Phil Parvin and Declan McHugh, *Defending Representative Democracy: Political Parties and the Future of Political Engagement in the UK*, *Parliamentary Affairs* 58:3 (2005), pp. 632–55.

role for dialogue in matters of gender: directly enhancing individuals' autonomy by encouraging them to question and possibly revise their understandings of, and assumptions about, the structures of society. This alternative understanding of the role of dialogue draws on what Dryzek terms 'discursive democracy' and on the second-wave feminist method of consciousness-raising. These two approaches can usefully be compared: despite Dryzek's explicit criticism of consciousness-raising, the transformative possibilities of this form of dialogue remain relevant to feminist ethics.

In *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*, Dryzek mourns the fact that the term 'deliberative democracy' has replaced his preferred 'discursive democracy'. The latter term is preferable, he argues, for several reasons. First, whereas deliberation can be done by an isolated individual, discourse is 'necessarily social and intersubjective' and thus must involve communication.³⁶ Second, whereas deliberative democrats have often wanted to place limits on the sorts of dialogue deemed legitimate, favouring only dispassionate and disinterested statements of principle that have the potential to ground consensus, discursive interaction can take many varied forms. In particular, discourse can encompass 'unruly and contentious communication from the margins',³⁷ thus better meeting the aim of genuine inclusion. Third, the term 'discursive democracy' draws attention to discourse in the Foucauldian sense. For Dryzek, discourses are not merely free expressions, as Habermas implies; rather, they can also function as structural constraints on thought and discourse, influencing people's preferences as much as expressing them. Dryzek emphasises the relevance of *both* the Habermasian and Foucauldian models: discourses are not fully determining, but neither are they fully free.

Taken together, these three features of discourse form a conception of deliberation that improves upon the liberal constitutionalist approaches of theorists such as Rawls and Larmore by stating explicitly the importance of 'non-political' constraints upon our ability to act politically. In other words, discursive democracy recognises one important contribution of critical theory: the observation (proposed in [section 1](#)) that individuals can be constrained by factors other than the coercive powers of the state, and thus that there can be 'extra-constitutional agents of

³⁶ John Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations* (Oxford University Press, 2000), p. vi.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

distortion',³⁸ such as social norms. Such norms can inhibit certain people's entry into democratic debates and/or constrain the kinds of dialogue and reasoning which seem possible or appropriate. Dryzek claims that liberalism acts 'only on the surface of the political economy'³⁹ while critical theory, and the discursive democracy that draws upon it, goes deeper. This approach is particularly applicable to gender since much gender inequality, particularly in liberal societies, is perpetuated not through formal or legal restrictions but through internalised norms. A complete ethics of gender, then, requires that unequal social norms are addressed.

As it stands, the observation that individuals are constrained by (gendered) social norms does not in itself justify the use of dialogue as an emancipatory strategy. To move from critical theory to discursive democracy, a further argument is needed. Specifically, discursive democracy flows from the idea that individuals can be the source of their own emancipation, and that they can do this most significantly and effectively when acting *in concert* and through *dialogue*. In Dryzek's words, it must recognise 'the competence of citizens themselves to recognize and oppose such forces, which can be promoted through participation in authentically democratic politics . . . democratic participation can transform individuals'.⁴⁰

Any reader familiar with feminist theory can hardly fail to recognise the echoes of consciousness-raising in this argument. The consciousness-raising group was a key feature of second-wave feminism – so fundamental that Catharine MacKinnon describes it as feminism's method.⁴¹ It consisted of a group of people, usually women (though there were also feminist consciousness-raising groups for men), who would meet regularly to discuss issues of importance or concern in their lives. Crucially, consciousness-raising groups operated on strict norms of *equality* within the group, with no hierarchical structure or leadership. Their aim was to allow each member to talk about her own experiences and, through interaction with the other members and their stories, to develop a more critical understanding of those experiences. With this critical understanding of experiences would come new perspectives on social structures, particularly those relating to gender inequality. Ultimately, the aim was

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21. ³⁹ *Ibid.* ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. vi

⁴¹ Catharine MacKinnon, *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 83.

transformative: through consciousness-raising, many women instigated changes in their own lives, the lives of their families and their interaction with society and the political structure.⁴²

Consciousness-raising therefore shares key features of Dryzek's discursive democracy. First, both recognise individuals' competence to recognise and challenge even those social forces that constrain them. As MacKinnon puts it, in consciousness-raising, '[w]omen are presumed able to have access to society and its structure because they live in it and have been formed by it, not in spite of those facts'.⁴³ By introspection, women can critically examine the gendered norms that they have internalised and which have become embodied in them. (As Diana Coole notes in this volume, embodiment is a crucial part of dialogue specifically and politics more generally.) For example, a woman engaged in consciousness-raising might notice that she subconsciously tends to sit with her legs crossed whereas men often have their legs apart. She might reflect that the explanation for this is rooted within the different norms of decency and modesty inculcated into children from a very young age, and develop this reflection into a more generalised critique of sexism. In other words, a general social theory can be developed by starting at the individual and personal level, and change can be initiated from small-scale resistances. Consciousness-raising thus shares discursive democracy's faith in individuals' ability to transform society from the bottom up.

Second, both consciousness-raising and Dryzek's discursive democracy operate with a strongly egalitarian participatory framework. All participants in a dialogue have the equal right to speak and to have their concerns and views taken seriously. Indeed, feminists sometimes characterised consciousness-raising in explicitly democratic terms.⁴⁴ Thus, whilst consciousness-raising as an abstract method can be used to develop either egalitarian or reactionary consciousness, its founding assumptions according to both feminist theory and the comprehensive liberalism we defended in section 1 are profoundly progressive.

⁴² Susan Bruley, *Women Awake: The Experience of Consciousness-Raising* (London: the author, 1976), p. 21; Kristin Henry and Marlene Derlet, *Talking up a Storm: Nine Women and Consciousness-Raising* (Sydney, NSW: Hale & Iremonger, 1993), p. 88.

⁴³ MacKinnon, *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*, p. 98.

⁴⁴ Sheila Rowbotham, *Women in Movement: Feminism and Social Action* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 275.

Third, like discursive democracy but unlike the liberal constitutionalism that Dryzek criticises, consciousness-raising allows for a range of communication. Indeed, in contrast to the Rawlsian bar on private reason that is familiar or of interest to only the speaker, consciousness-raising explicitly invites and values the expression of local, private, particular experience. Rather than requiring that all communication be framed in abstract, universal terms, consciousness-raising asserts that ‘personal experience could reveal dynamically a social reality’⁴⁵ and thus be relevant politically; hence ‘the personal is political’. Finally, consciousness-raising is, like discursive democracy, inherently a collective activity. It cannot be done alone, but relies on dialogue between individuals to further understanding and prompt self-reflection.⁴⁶

Dryzek’s account of discursive democracy is therefore an account of dialogue that seems immediately relevant to questions of gender, since it strongly echoes second-wave feminist accounts. The idea here is that dialogue does not serve to decide upon overarching normative principles such as equality or autonomy, in the way that political liberals and many deliberative democrats appear to believe. Nor does dialogue operate as a method for deciding upon controversial yet foundational policy questions such as how extensively to protect gender equality, as it does for Benhabib’s discourse ethics. Nor, finally, is it a method for reaching group decisions on technical policy questions such as which sorts of public services to provide, so as to replace traditional aggregative democracy. Instead, the dialogue of discursive democracy and the consciousness-raising group focuses on enabling individuals to investigate and alter their own attitudes, preferences and understanding of society, by sharing their own experiences and listening to the experiences of others. It allows women and men critically to assess the role of gender and to develop their own considered accounts of gender ethics rather than uncritically adopting those that are prevalent in any given society or culture.

Unfortunately, however, Dryzek is distinctly sniffy about the consciousness-raising group and does not recognise either its transformative potential or its similarity to discursive democracy. (Another contemporary (male) theorist who is dismissive of consciousness-raising

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 272.

⁴⁶ Pamela Allen, The Small Group Process, in *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Barbara A. Crow (New York University Press, 2000), p. 279.

despite its relevance to his own approach is Pierre Bourdieu. As Diana Coole notes in this volume, Bourdieu alerts us to the political and social significance of our lived, embodied experience. Noticing and analysing this significance was a fundamental insight and activity of consciousness-raising. And yet Bourdieu, like Dryzek, fails to recognise this contribution).⁴⁷ One of Dryzek's chapters is entitled 'Difference Democracy: The Consciousness-Raising Group against the Gentlemen's Club', but rather than celebrate the merits of the former over the latter, he admonishes 'if [difference democrats] have replaced the gentlemen's club only with the consciousness-raising group, that is not good enough'.⁴⁸

Dryzek's main criticism of the consciousness-raising group is, rather oddly, that it is coercive. Despite endorsing the legitimacy of a wide variety of forms of communication, he insists that there must be some limits. Specifically, discursive democracy can allow dialogue only if, first, it neither coerces nor threatens coercion and, second, it connects the particular to the general.⁴⁹ Consciousness-raising violates one or both of these conditions, according to Dryzek. He cites Young's discussion of storytelling, the sort of communication he associates with the consciousness-raising group, and warns:

There is a danger that such groups will require correct storylines, and punish incorrect ones which cannot easily withstand the normalizing gaze of the group. The storyline must begin with oppression whose character is not recognized by the victim, and proceed through recognition of the oppression to the search for the need to contextualize that realization in more general framework.⁵⁰

Dryzek's warning does seem to reflect the experience of some consciousness-raising groups.⁵¹ However, it would be too quick to conclude that because some groups can become dysfunctional then all groups must be condemned, particularly when the dysfunction would be recognised as such according to the principles of the consciousness-raising and feminist movements. Indeed, the need to tell a convincing story is not in fact part of many feminist understandings of consciousness-raising. Rather, expressing one's own personal, particular and disparate feelings and dissatisfactions is emphasised, in stark contrast to the Rawlsian need for 'public reason'. It may be that a story emerges from within the

⁴⁷ See Clare Chambers, *Masculine Domination, Radical Feminism and Change, Feminist Theory* 6:3 (2005), pp. 325–46.

⁴⁸ Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*, p. 75. ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 68. ⁵¹ Rowbotham, *Women in Movement*, p. 275.

shared experiences of the group's members as how to best understand these feelings. This process, however, is one possible *outcome* of dialogue and not the requirement for *entry*.

This understanding of the process of consciousness-raising, though responding to Dryzek's first worry, actually falls foul of his second test. Despite criticising as 'coercive' the supposed requirement that an individual's communication conform to a particular generalised story, Dryzek insists: 'if an individual's story is purely about that individual then there is no political point in hearing it . . . The story must be capable of resonating with individuals who do not share that situation – but do share other characteristics (if only a common humanity)'.⁵² Dryzek may be right to say that there is no political point in a *purely* personal story, but he is wrong to turn this observation into a test for participation in dialogue. For it is in the nature of much experience, particularly 'private' gendered experience, that its generality and relevance is not realised or understood until it is shared with others. Consider, for example, the following comment from a woman who had been a member of a consciousness-raising group:

None of them have been through what I've been through if you look at our experience superficially. But when you look a little *deeper* – the way we've been doing at these meetings – you see they've *all* been through what I've been through, and they all feel pretty much the way I feel. God, when I saw *that!* When I saw that what I always felt was my own personal hangup was as true for every other woman in that room as it was for me! Well, that's when my consciousness was raised.⁵³

In other words, consciousness-raising in particular, and the feminist movement in general, alerts us to the political significance of private, personal experience. (As Judith Squires notes in this volume, the political does not exclude the expressive.) Whether a personal story has a general point is something to be discovered through dialogue, not used to foreclose it.

There are a number of ways that consciousness-raising could connect with the democratic process. One possible option is that it could be thought of as the precursor to more traditional democratic participation, in the sense that it is through consciousness-raising that some

⁵² Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*, p. 69.

⁵³ Vivian Gornick, Consciousness, in *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Barbara A. Crow (New York University Press, 2000), p. 289.

individuals transcend entrenched discrimination and come to see themselves as equal political actors. It might also help participants come to understand what they believe the state should do on their behalf, and what policy outcomes they would support and argue for. However, it is important to note that dialogue does not have to connect directly with state institutions or formal democratic mechanisms in order to have political significance.

4 Concluding remarks

We can now pull these threads together. Our first claim has been that the dialogical process cannot be used to generate foundational moral or ethical principles such as equality and autonomy. This is because such foundational principles are usually stipulated as the basic requirements for legitimate dialogue even to begin, and so it is question-begging to attempt to derive them from that dialogue. On the other hand, dialogue with no predetermined procedural conditions is capable at least in principle of producing fundamental ethical principles, but in practice it is highly likely that diversity and disagreement will be more prominent than consensus.

Our second conclusion is that, in matters of gender, the predetermined procedural conditions themselves do a significant amount of the normative work. To elaborate: where there is a controversy concerning gender that derives from a clash between liberal and non-liberal cultures, merely setting the ground rules that govern dialogue and its outcomes will in itself be taking a stance on one side of the controversy. On the other hand, if deliberation is supposed to occur only between people who already concur on the basic liberal values of autonomy and equality, then it will be unable to deal with many of the multicultural dilemmas that are most fundamental to gender and that motivated the deliberative turn in the first place. Deliberative democracy and political liberalism therefore *require* cultural groups to respect women as equal and autonomous political actors, regardless of the norms that prevail in that community.

Third, though, there remains a role for dialogue in questions of gender: to prompt critical reflection by individuals, interacting with each other, on the way that gender affects their lives. The effects of this dialogue are not merely internal. By reflecting on the gendered aspects of our own experience we also gain the means to begin to change it. This change may

be the result of our actions at the ballot box or in other state institutions, but it may also be the result of changes we make in our own 'private' lives. Since gender is to a large extent internalised, a transformative dialogue *about* gender is in itself a part of transforming gender itself.

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