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Political Listening to Fellow Citizens and Other Beings

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Eva Meijer

"DEEP LISTENING AND DEMOCRACY: POLITICAL LISTENING TO FELLOW CITIZENS AND OTHER BEINGS": EVA MEIJER



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Language plays an important role in political philosophy. Speech is often regarded as a necessary condition for being part of the political community and for being a political actor. This idea is deeply rooted in the history of philosophy. Aristotle already writes in his *Politics* that humans are the only political animals because they speak informed by reason (*logos*), which enables them to distinguish good from evil. Other animals do have voices (*phonè*), but they lack rational language. Not only does this mean that they cannot be political actors, but they also fall outside the *demos*,

the people. This connection between language and politics still exists in contemporary political philosophy, for example, in social contract theory and in theories of deliberation. In these strands of thought, speaking is connected to reason and the capacity to articulate interests, and, as for Aristotle, with being part of the political community.

Speech also plays an important role in political practice. In official political settings, such as in parliament and in local and regional councils, speaking is central to the decision-making process, for example during debates or in deliberation. Social movements, such as feminism or anti-racism, also stress the importance of being able to participate in political discourse and having a political voice. Similarly, the importance of speaking out is emphasized in protest movements, for example in street demonstrations or internet activism. Who can speak is a fundamental political question – both in the meaning of who is allowed to speak, and who is seen as a speaking being.

But to focus exclusively on speech when thinking about political language is insufficient. Listening is just as important for having a meaningful political conversation, and participation in political debate only matters if one is being listened to. Despite this, listening is not often considered in political philosophy. This is problematic because speaking and listening are two sides of the same coin, and listening has an important role to play in democratic communication, especially given the strong monological focus in public and political debate. Political speech tends to be very self-regarding, with speakers only attuned to their own logic. Listening can counter this, because it is other-regarding. Developing a political attitude that is focused on the other is necessary to address major political problems of our time, such as the climate crisis and the rise of extreme right. In both of these examples, a strong focus on the self has led to a loss of common world.

By “the other”, I mean other human citizens, but also those who fall outside of the *demos* such as children – who are part of democratic communities but do not have much political voice –, more-than-human animals, and perhaps plants and ecosystems too. As I will discuss in more detail below, the concept of “deep listening” developed by the composer and accordionist Pauline Oliveros offers a way of thinking about political listening beyond the boundaries of the current democratic community – and beyond the human.

From political speaking to political listening

Political philosopher Iris Marion Young argues that ideas about language, political agency, and democracy are interconnected. She contrasts two models of democracy – the aggregative model and the deliberative model – that both capture part of how we understand democracy. These models are not descriptions of actual societies but instead are meant to shed light on the underlying political and social structures of societies.

In the aggregative model (which remains the dominant model in many contemporary democracies), political language is used purely instrumentally: to communicate a message or to gain something. This view of political language is connected with an idea of political action and citizenship in which the individual is central (rather than relations) and politics revolves around calculating how previously determined interests interrelate (rather than opening up the possibility of transforming interests). This conception of politics is linked to an atomistic view of human beings and a perception of reason as a calculating machine.

Ways of speaking that are seen as neutral, such as a focus on rational argument, often reflect the preferences of the social class which has traditionally been in control.

As Young points out, however, other practices already exist in contemporary democracies that are focused on the future, on dialogue and understanding, or on becoming acquainted with other perspectives. These practices follow from a deliberative understanding of democracy. They are not directed towards the calculation of predetermined interests, but are based on relationships and the possibility of change. When people who are different from one another talk to each other politically, the promise of something new or better arises.

At present, however, political debates do not live up to this promise. They often reflect inequalities and certain voices are less heard than others. To include unheard or silenced voices in political conversations, it is not enough to guarantee formal equal rights; we also have to pay attention to the ways that power relations structure political and social debates. Theorists of deliberation, such as Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls, emphasize the exchange of rational arguments between equals in collective decision-making. But feminist and decolonial thinkers have long pointed out that ideas about rationality and subjectivity which underlie these theories of deliberation are not universal, but reflect existing power relations. The same is true for language. Ways of speaking that are seen as neutral, such as a focus on rational argument, often reflect the preferences of the social class which has traditionally been in control.

This influences how much of a political voice humans from different groups can have. Young draws attention to the fact that those belonging to historically marginalised political groups, such as women or non-white people, may sometimes express themselves in ways that are not seen as proper forms of political speech, e.g., by using more emotion or a different kind of body language, or by using different forms of speech, such as telling stories or giving testimonies. Moreover, the ways in which people from different groups express themselves are read differently in the public arena: if a woman raises her voice in parliament, there is often a different reaction than if a man does the same. This can lead to subtle and less subtle forms of exclusion. Similarly, people who do not speak the language well, or speak in a regional dialect, might have less political voice because they express themselves differently to the norm.

Embodied listening matters because the natural world is not something outside of us that we can understand solely with our minds or write about from behind our computers.

Language plays an important role in democratic interactions, and Young shows that investigating how political language works can bring out patterns of exclusion that remain hidden when we focus exclusively on rights or access to political institutions. However, in her discussion of political

language, Young focuses mainly on speaking, and does not discuss listening in detail. The same is true for most philosophers discussing political language and deliberation.

Political listening

Within various theories of deliberative democracy, listening is described as necessary for successful deliberation, but what listening entails and how we should listen is currently undertheorised. Philosopher Michael Morrell, for example, notes that the importance of listening is often mentioned or assumed, but that it is primarily discussed in negative terms. Not listening is analysed, for example, in relation to silencing. There are a number of exceptions, however.

Some environmental philosophers, such as Andrew Dobson and John Dryzek, write about embodied listening to nature as a vital step in deliberating about it. Embodied listening matters because the natural world is not something outside of us that we can understand solely with our minds or write about from behind our computers. We are part of nature, we think in part through our bodies, and we are always bodies in the world. To be able to understand and represent the world outside of us, we have to attend to it, and our body is part of this process. When we listen, we do not simply pick up information from the air with our ears: we are influenced by the air temperature, bacteria in our bodies, scents we might not register cognitively, emotions, and many other factors. Just as the whole body is part of speaking, the whole body is part of listening. As bodies, we also affect our surroundings.



collective judgement possible.

Another important exception is philosopher Susan Bickford's work on listening as a democratic practice. People enter the public sphere to defend their views and ideas with passion, but if no one listens there would be only conflict. Following Hannah Arendt, Bickford emphasizes the importance of plurality in political action, and of a common world in which political action can take place. All humans are different and enter politics to defend their interests. For meaningful political action to take place, rather than just conflict, there needs to be a holding environment, a common world. According to Bickford, listening creates this kind of space, one in which different people can show themselves to each other. This makes an agonistic form of

For Bickford, listening is both an embodied experience and a political stance. In describing that experience, she connects listening to attentiveness and to being still. In order to listen to someone, you have to take a step back. Bickford turns to Simone Weil, who wrote that "all that is 'I'" must become passive in order to be attentive to the other; we have to become empty so that the other can enter. But, according to Bickford, political listening also demands presence. To conceptualize this, she draws on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. According to Merleau-Ponty,

in political listening the listener becomes the background against which the other can speak. The listener remains situated but directs their attention to the speaker, enabling them to step into the foreground. In a conversation, speaker and listener alternate.

Beings who do not wish to be part of a human political community, such as some animal communities, also have political interests, sometimes interwoven with those of human citizens.

This focus on the concrete other in the public arena is part of cultivating a universal political attitude, which allows both for the encounter of humans who are different from one another and for new forms of conversation. Bickford rightly draws attention to the importance of political listening in a world made up of many different perspectives. She also recognises that listening is always situated and that power relations play a role in who is heard. However, her discussion of political listening is focused on those who are already seen as political agents. This is problematic, because it presupposes that the boundaries of the political community are fixed, while in fact they are always open to discussion and contestation. Moreover, beings who do not wish to be part of a human political community, such as some animal communities, also have political interests, sometimes interwoven with those of human citizens. Paying attention and listening politically to groups not recognized as citizens, or even political agents, matters in order to discover what their interests are, how they relate to those of human political communities, and, in some cases, whether they should be recognized as part of the multispecies community themselves.

From listening to fellow citizens to listening to others

Many important political issues of our time ask us to take seriously the perspectives of political actors who do not belong to the demos, or who do not have a political voice. For example, children have different interests with regard to the climate crisis than adults. The same applies to nonhuman animals, who at present are more seriously affected than humans by the collapse of ecosystems, both on land and in the oceans. Another example is that western patterns of consumption lead directly to the deforestation of the Amazon and indirectly to global warming and rising sea levels, situations that have already created human climate refugees, but these humans are also not listened to when decisions are made that concern their lives and future.

Political listening to these kinds of political actors matters from the standpoint of justice. This is clear in the case of climate refugees, who should have a voice in questions which affect their lives. But it is not only adult humans who have their own perspective on life; other animals and children, and perhaps other creatures, also do and should have a right to speak. To include their voices, the dominant group must start listening.

Political listening matters because the lives and interests of humans and human communities are often entangled with those of nonhumans.

Political listening is also of epistemological importance: listening to different perspectives influences the content of political discussions and helps to determine what is at stake in deliberation or decision-making. We often do not know what the interests of others are. For example, philosopher Vinciane Despret shows that stereotypical views of nonhuman animals influence the knowledge production about “animals”, which negatively affects human ideas about them, which in turn intensifies their exploitation by humans. However, listening to the perspectives of formerly disregarded groups matters not only in order to gain new knowledge about these groups, but also in order to make better political decisions for all. Human perspectives are limited, and nonhuman animals may have better views on nature preservation than humans, for example.

Finally, political listening matters because the lives and interests of humans and human communities are often entangled with those of nonhumans. Taking these webs of relations seriously is a vital part of making informed decisions about the future, and of developing a new attitude as humans that reflects an understanding of ourselves as part of a greater whole. The interests of rivers, forests, plants and ecosystems cannot, for example, be conceived of separately from the interests of human inhabitants of the earth, and different multispecies communities may be interdependent. There is much we do not yet know about many of these non-human agents, especially within Western knowledge paradigms. Indigenous theories and practices generally have much more experience with listening to natural entities, and a different vocabulary for describing relations and webs of interdependence. For Western knowledge systems to get a better understanding of political relationships and shape them differently, they have to start listening.

It may be argued that listening to many different actors is asking too much of us, given that humans already have considerable difficulty listening to other humans.

Transforming anthropocentric structures and foregrounding the perspectives of others raises many new questions regarding the borders of the political community, political speech and language, and multispecies justice. These cannot be answered by a philosopher behind a laptop, but need to be answered following the process of listening itself. It may be argued that listening to many different actors is asking too much of us, given that humans already have considerable difficulty listening to other humans. In the context of the current ecological crises, however, we need to learn to engage differently with others, and with the planet more generally, and listening can help us do that. Political listening is a skill that we need to cultivate towards all others.

In this process, Bickford's work offers a good starting point for listening to the voices of climate refugees, some children, and some nonhuman animals. But in other cases her conception of listening and political communication is insufficient. We still know very little about many animal languages, for example, and animals speak not only through sounds, but also communicate through colour, scent, and movement. Learning more about what they are saying and how they say it calls for new forms of listening. For certain human actors, too, such as those who do not speak or are very young, the conversations that Bickford describes are not possible or desirable. And there are always voices that are not yet heard, or not yet recognized.

Deep listening

The concept of deep listening, developed by the American accordion player and composer Pauline Oliveros, can help us think further about political listening to beings not yet recognised as political actors, whose language we don't understand – or about whom we don't even know whether they have a language – as well as to as-yet-unknown others. For Oliveros, deep listening is primarily a musical endeavour: it involves literally listening to music, sound rituals, improvisation, and environmental noises. Oliveros believes that we can learn to listen better and has developed compositions and exercises with that aim. The most well-known of these are her *Sonic Meditations*, a series of exercises or rituals that people can perform in groups. Sometimes these are very quiet, such as "Native": "*Take a walk at night. Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears.*" In other cases, they are loud and require the use of loudspeakers, droning sounds, chanting, or yelling.

The sonic meditations can teach humans to listen better with their ears, but also to develop a different attitude to the world through listening. In this sense, they are political meditations: Oliveros describes listening as a political practice and as a basis for forming judgements. Meditation is often associated with retreating inwards or stepping out of the world, but Oliveros shows that learning to listen better can help us to hear others better and perhaps even understand them. Recording technicians, composers, musicians or birdwatchers can hear more than most others, which shows us



that we can all train to listen better, and become more present and attentive. But this literal meaning of listening can also be connected to its normative dimension – listening means obeying too. If I listen more carefully with my ears, I might learn to recognize the meaning of a bird's song in my garden. Through practising listening as a general attitude, I teach myself to become more open to the world of which I am part and what it has to tell me, and to give myself to that world.

Oliveros' listening offers more space for difference and the unknown than Bickford's. In deep listening, the listener becomes the background for an other who is not fixed and who may or may not appear, or may only appear after a long time. This is a different practice than Bickford's exchange of background and foreground by two beings who are similar to each other. Many sonic meditations are intended to be practiced in groups, and aimed at collectively training ourselves in listening – this matters to cultivate new collectives and ways of performing community. Moreover, the world that is central to these meditations is not the human political world of Bickford or Arendt, but planet Earth. Bodies, voices, musical instruments, footsteps, passing cars, birds, memories, forests, oceans, tape recordings, and other beings, events, and objects can be part of it.

Political listening in practice

Bickford's democratic listening and Oliveros' deep listening seem far removed from existing political discourse and the emphasis on certain forms of speech in contemporary politics. Yet within existing political practices and institutions, we can already find entry points for taking listening seriously. To investigate where and how we can start listening politically, we must first map out where political communication takes place and how different spheres of deliberation are connected. Political communication takes place in official political venues, such as in parliament or in regional or local councils; in counter-movements, such as demonstrations, social movements, citizen initiatives and art; and in other spheres such as the media and universities. More-than-human political discussions are often found outside of spaces usually seen as political: in houses, nature reserves, cities, and parks. These various types of political communication have their own forms of political listening.

To make more room for listening within existing political practices and institutions demands attention to time and space. Current political decision-making is strongly directed towards measurable outcomes. Meetings and assemblies are often clearly delineated in time. In parliament, for example, different points of view are presented, and then people vote. The listening here is often instrumental: the different parties involved are trying to convince others, and their standpoints are already decided upon. There is also little time for reflection on what is heard. Slowness is not a welcome guest in societies that are focused on efficiency. But a constant increase of pace comes at the expense of the strange, the new, and those who are othered and silenced. Holding several meetings would allow a clearer process to develop; the time in between creates a space in which listening can happen.

Because humans have so long believed that other animals cannot speak, there is no common world in which we can speak together.

More time is not enough, however, for if participants keep repeating their own positions, this could result in less listening taking place. So, we also need to also create new spaces in which those who make decisions listen to those affected by them. Listening sessions could take place in conference halls, hospitals or in assisted living homes for young people; they could happen on

farms, where both the farmers and the cows can be listened to regarding the transition to just food systems; or sessions could be held in nature reserves, whose inhabitants are negatively affected by pollution. Listening well often involves more than sitting quietly, and some activities, such as walking, lend themselves well to conversation and listening.

While political listening to other animals could take place on a farm or in a nature reserve, in these spaces there would still tend to be an unequal balance of power. Canadian philosopher Sue Donaldson draws attention to the importance of freedom of movement in improving multispecies relationships and communication. In order to find out what animals want, humans need to literally give other animals more space, make the infrastructure safer (for example by banning cars), and create new public commons to which all kinds of animals have equal access and can encounter each other in freedom. Animals belonging to different species and communities could not only speak with each other in that space, but also about it.

This asks us to be attentive to other forms of dialogue with other species, which may involve interventions in the landscape (planting or not planting vegetation can structure conversations), learning about their languages, and using objects. For many companion animals, for example, food, toys, the sofa, and the car, already play an important role in communication with their humans. Because humans have so long believed that other animals cannot speak, there is no common world in which we can speak together. This is not the fault of the other animals, because they generally do pay a lot of attention to humans (out of necessity, curiosity or for other reasons); rather, humans need to learn to listen to them.

Listening can also play a role in developing new collective political rituals. Some indigenous communities, such as the Onondaga, begin their meetings by thanking the natural world that makes their existence possible. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer describes this as an expression of a world view in which humans are a part of a greater living nonhuman world, and as a way of recognising the agency of others in that world. Just like forms of greeting, which in politics can have the function of recognising one's interlocutor as a person, such rituals can make other forms of interaction with non-humans possible. Similar rituals could be developed in which listening to the nonhuman world has a central place. This could give humans new information about that world and would be an exercise in a different attitude, an attitude of attention, in which humankind is not the ruler of other beings but a part of the whole.

Listening cannot be forced, but making an explicit space for it in political life and recognising its importance can make new relationships possible.

Listening to the natural world can also be of importance in other forms of political decision-making. When decisions are taken about a conservation area of world importance or some other natural entity, a starting point could be provided by deep listening. In some cases, human representatives could play a part, perhaps because they possess specific knowledge about a

particular situation or place. But at present everything goes through humans and that distorts what is at stake, because humans themselves have their own interests in these issues.

Making space for listening

Political systems tend to magnify certain voices and silence others. Thinking about how those who express themselves differently can also have a voice is of fundamental democratic importance. This is a project that will never be finished: we must continue to speak not only about the content of politics, but also about its form, and there will always be new voices to listen too. More listening does not imply that everyone will speak, nor does it automatically lead to better collective judgments or understanding. There will always be beings who prefer to conceal themselves, some interests and ideas are not (yet) able to be expressed because of the form of the language, and no one knows where their words will end up in the future. In learning to listen, education can play a role, as can art and literature, but we also simply need to begin, in existing conversations and new ones. As with understanding, listening cannot be forced, but making an explicit space for it in political life and recognising its importance can make new relationships possible. In the unknown there is always the possibility of something new. In any case, better listening will make political discussions more difficult, beautiful, and rich.

*This is an edited version of an essay that was originally published in *Wijsgerig Perspectief* (2022/3). The translation from the original Dutch is by Antoinette Fawcett.*

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