A P P E N D I X   B

EXTENDED RATIONAL DISCUSSIONS

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Introduction

Martin Luther allegedly said that Reason is a Whore (K. Feiger, 1965). Anyone who has lived with the endless discussions of professors or the devious reasons of politicians can sympathize with this view. What makes Reason worth cursing at is the nagging feeling that if only we went about discussions in the right way, then we could reach the rational agreement which so often eludes us. Indeed at many points in Concern For All I have assumed that objective criteria can be established to enable us to achieve a much more rational solution to our disagreements.

The methods I propose here for extended rational discussions have evolved out of several different academic traditions. On one hand British philosophers and psychologists such as R. M. Hare, S. E. Toulmin, and R. S. Peters have emphasized the role that reason plays not only in justifying norms but in explaining individual motives. Their work seems quite imprecise when compared to the work of American psychologists such as Milton Rosenberg, Carl Hoveland, Daniel Katz, or Milton Rokeach. Sadly enough, however, the work of American psychologists on attitude change seems unable to deal with the sophisticated type of individual reasoning which concerned Hare or Peters.

In the middle 60s, I spent a fair amount of time trying to integrate in some way the precision of American psychologists with the concern over real-life dialogues of the British philosophers. But I could never get the measure of consistency or rigidity devised by psychologists to do justice to the sophisticated reasoning process which is of interest to philosophers or policy makers.

It then occurred to me that if I could not measure how rational a person is or how good his reasons are, at least I could set up some guidelines to produce agreement or clarify differences. The end of such a process is usually not the judgment that Black's reasons are better than White's, but rather that White and Black have resolved their differences or else they have clarified their disagreement. Such a result is of little interest to those social scientists whose major aims are to measure and explain, but it should be of great interest to those who seek to find the most reasonable course of action to take on some matter.

The procedures I describe below will not produce a rational solution to all our problems. Indeed, a fair amount of testing is necessary in order to see if they will work at all. My belief is that they will work sufficiently well so as to help produce the agreement sought in Part I between loving and reasonable people concerning the best ethical system. I also believe they

will work well enough so that the High Court will be
able to make the judgments discussed in Chapters 11 and
12 regarding the rationality of some of the decisions
which need to be made within government.

Aims

The aim of setting up procedures for an extended
rational discussion (referred to from here on as ERD) is
to enable people to clarify problems and reach as
reasonable solution as possible. The procedure is rela-
tively simple and should be applicable to most problems,
whether they relate to government decision-making,
economic policy, academic disputes, or whatever.

By using a tape recorder and a moderator, and by
devoting a great deal of time to a discussion, I hope
that most discussions can be brought to one of the first
four of the following five outcomes:

1. The two participants have resolved their differences
    and now agree on what is correct or what should be
    done.

2. The two participants agree upon some practical test,
    the outcome of which will show that one or the other
    of them is correct.

3. The two participants do not agree, but have clari-
    fied their points of disagreement. These either

relate to different basic values they hold or to assumptions which are apparently irreconcilable.

4. The discussion breaks down because one of the participants either quits or refuses to follow the rules of the discussion.

5. The discussion fails in that none of the above four positions are reached even though the rules were followed and adequate time was devoted to the discussion.

The first four outcomes are interesting only insofar as they are what psychologists call "reliable" or if they lead to some process of "building." The results are reliable when the same people end up with the same result when the process is repeated. Imagine, for example, that Black and White participate in an ERD and conclude that White is correct. This is of little significance if the process is repeated in half a year and they then decide that Black's original position is correct. Of much greater significance than "retest reliability" is the situation where everyone who participates in an ERD over some particular problem arrives at the same solution.

If our only criterion of success, however, were that everyone reach the same conclusion on the same problem, then we would be adopting a very rigid, if not

faulty, notion of success. If Black agrees with White, but White changes his views in a discussion with Green, this should not be viewed as a failure. To take this position would be to ignore some of the valid aspects of Hegel's dialectic. I cannot agree with those who feel that truth is always shifting nor with those who believe that a dialectic will lead to some ultimate truth, but I believe that in any complex matter, the agreed-upon answer will evolve out of a series of discussions.

Thus I shall view the procedures set down for ERD as successful if they lead to an evolving agreement between participants. Thus if a series of ERDs are held on a given problem, in the beginning each new participant may bring the discussion to a somewhat different conclusion. An evolving agreement can be said to exist when a point of stability has been reached under one of the first three outcomes. Thus instead of having ten or twenty different viewpoints on the problem we may have two different viewpoints which center around different basic values, with a third group willing to join one of the first two groups once the results of some specific investigation are known. If new participants fall into one of these three groups, then we can say that an evolving agreement has been reached.

My aim in the ERD is not to produce the rational solution to any problem. Instead, I merely want to provide an objective reference point to help people

know how reasonable it is to do (or believe in) X rather than Y. In dealing with many empirical problems it is clear that the ERD will enable people to say that X is clearly a reasonable belief and Y is not. In other situations the ERD can lead to a statement such as: "If you value (believe in) A, then X is proper; but if you value (believe in) B, then Y is proper." If such statements are possible in many areas, then even the failure of the ERD in a particular case is significant. Such a failure would give an objective basis to the statement that there is no reasonable way to choose between X and Y.

Methods

The methods of the ERD are not very sophisticated. They are devised in order to meet two critical (and obvious) requirements for a good discussion. First it is important for the participants to reach an initial agreement on what the important points of disagreement are between them. Second, they must pursue these points until they are able to resolve the disagreement or state clearly why they are unable to agree. In order to reach these goals, I believe it is vital that there be a great deal of time to pursue the points and that everything possible is done to help the participants be guided by reason rather than emotion. These conditions are seldom

met in our present society either in the world of government and business or in the academic world.

To meet the above requirements, the ERD will consist of a series of meetings between two participants and a moderator. These meetings should last for something like two to three hours, with the meetings extending over a period of weeks or even months. A few very long meetings might produce quicker agreement, but such agreement is likely to be the result of fatigue or boredom and thus be unstable. All meetings will be recorded.

The role of moderator has three important functions: (1) to help the participants stick to the point during the discussion itself, (2) to review the discussion afterwards and produce a concise memo summarizing the major points of disagreement, (3) to help the participants not to be defensive or overly emotional in the discussion. A tape recorder is a necessary tool for the moderator. After one discussion is over, the moderator can listen to the tape to check out his or her feelings that one of the participants tended to stray from the point or become defensive over some point.

Since "defensiveness" and "sticking to the point" are difficult criteria to measure objectively, the moderator's role will be more that of asking questions rather than presenting conclusions. Instead of telling

White that he failed to stick to the point, the moderator can play back the relevant part of the tape and then ask Black and White whether they feel that the point was given adequate consideration. If the moderator feels Black is being defensive, the solution may be to pursue the matter with Black alone rather than putting Black on the spot in front of White. The skillful moderator should be able to create a climate such that both Black and White feel they are searching together for the right answer, instead of competing to win the argument.

Clearly the ERD is a very expensive procedure. This means that it should be undertaken only when important questions arise in which recognized authorities disagree. It is this situation which is likely to make the ERD a very difficult experience psychologically. It is no easy matter for a recognized authority in some area to have his or her inconsistencies or defensiveness pointed out. In the few pilot experiments I have performed (lasting no more than a single three-hour session), many volunteers noted how wearing the process was.

It is my belief that only in circumstances such as these can all of the intricate facets of any complex problem be given an adequate hearing. Some readers may feel it is foolish to grandly label a process "the ERD" and then do nothing more than follow some very old rules

of thumb for holding reasonable discussions. It is quite
correct that the ERD introduces no new techniques. The
only thing novel about the ERD is my desire to seriously
pursue the discussion to its end. The network of argu-
ments surrounding most important problems is very large.
Unless this network is pursued in an orderly fashion
over a long period, confusion results and the partici-
pants can go away, each claiming that their position is
reasonable.

Thus the method of the ERD is for two people to
pursue their argument until they agree that every
reason they have to offer for their position has been
adequately pursued. The only requirements for this are
a tape recorder, a sympathetic and yet rational
moderator, and a great deal of time. Since the
moderator plays such a critical role, it might be wise
to have a panel of "reserve" moderators available. Then
if one of the participants felt the moderator constantly
opposed him, the participant could choose his own
moderator to come and help with the discussion.

Discussion

It is clear that much experimentation will have to
be done with the ERD before we can see whether it will
lead to the results I intend. Criteria will have to be
developed to define as clearly as possible the "proper"

role for the moderator. It would also be useful to have criteria in terms of which a tape recording can be analyzed to see when a person "fails to stick to the point" or to show when a person is "defensive." The methods used to test out the ERD should resemble the methods used to analyze the process of psychotherapy, although it should be easier to establish objective criteria for the ERD than for psychotherapy.

This process of testing should lead to a good understanding of when we can expect the ERD to work. Even without any testing, however, there are certain types of discussions where the ERD is unlikely to work well:

1. In disputes over factual matters where the tests proposed to resolve the problem are too expensive or would take too long.

2. In disputes over world-views or basic philosophical outlooks. Although some people may be able to clarify their disagreements over such problems, it would be foolish to expect the ERD to solve some of the basic problems which still puzzle philosophers. If the result were to show how different world-views are tied to different aims (outcome 3), this would probably be as much as we could hope for.

3. In resolving moral disagreements about what a person should do. The ERD should be expected to work here

only if it takes place within an accepted system of norms such as System One.

4. In helping people to understand their interpersonal difficulties. Although the ERD has similarities to psychotherapy, it should never be seen as a substitute for psychotherapy. The ERD can help people resolve their disagreements on an intellectual level, but it is not intended to help people resolve their disagreements on an emotional level.

Some readers may be skeptical that the ERD will ever lead to the outcomes I hope for. The methods of the ERD, after all, are quite simple and are hardly novel. My answer to this is that the ERD is more of a sociological than a philosophical innovation. The ERD tries to provide a setting in which people are motivated to pursue their discussion to some clear solution. Such conditions seldom exist in our present world. Most action-oriented bureaucracies would find the ERD to be too time-consuming and too different from their normal style of operation.

The academic community should find the ERD more suited to their normal way of operating, but it likely to be quite threatening to their careers. Tenure protects professors if they happen to be bad teachers or espouse unpopular ideas, but it cannot save their pride or their salary if they are shown very frequently to be

mistaken on a matter in their area of expertise. I do not want to imply that professors are any more vain or greedy than those in other professions. The insecurity of anyone's career within most modern bureaucracies is great enough so that the ERD poses a threat. But it is important to note that if the academic community has not seen fit to resolve its own disputes through something like the ERD, this may indicate the lack of security found in academic careers rather than the inadequacy of the ERD procedures.

In making such statements in support of the ERD, I am not trying to say that any failure of the ERD is bound to be a failure in the participants' bravery rather than a failure in the methods I suggest. Any extended testing is bound to show which failure is causing the major difficulty. If it does turn out that the failure of the ERD lies in fears the participants have, this should be seen as a further indication of the failure of present society rather than a "failure in moral fiber" on the part of certain individuals. The testing of the ERD, therefore, has some potentially interesting results which go beyond the mere success or failure of the method itself.

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