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Can We All Agree that Consensus is Over-rated? From Righteousness to Relations Across Differences

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Many believe that building consensus is the best way to solve problems. If consensus means bringing people together as a community, as it does in the Quaker tradition, then perhaps consensus might be a generative way to problem solve. Yet this is not the commonly shared understanding (or use) of consensus. In this paper I refer to our popularized view of consensus and not to views associated with Quaker or other traditions where consensus is focused on building community. I am limiting my focus to our more common understanding of consensus-as-agreement because I believe it is this limiting view of consensus that is most often practiced, with the result of fracturing communities and furthering social problems.

In our common view, consensus refers to unanimous agreement achieved by a group of people. Unanimous agreement is reached typically through a slow and arduous process where each person presents his or her opinion and, once all opinions are “on the table,” discussion ensues on points of difference. It is during this discussion that those with more authority and power and/or those with “accepted” verbal abilities dominate the discussion thereby encouraging (forcing?) others to withdraw particular features of their own opinions from the overall discussion. Such withdrawal begs the question: Is the outcome of this popularized understanding of consensus really unanimous? If I feel pressured from more forceful speakers to withdraw my opinion, is the conclusion reached consensus? This raises the issue of power and authority as they enter into our attempts to build common ground as we problem solve. Additionally, is unanimity of opinion even possible or desirable? This question challenges us to consider replacing the value of unanimity with

coordinated difference. Both power and unanimity need further discussion.

Power as an Obstruction to Reaching Common Ground.

We are all familiar with consensus-as-agreement emerging out of the silencing of some voices. Perhaps you have been part of classroom conversations where the professor has offered a “democratic” vote on whether to assign a final exam or a research paper. Some students excel in writing; others excel on exams. Let’s imagine that, in this class, those who excel in writing papers far outnumber those who excel in exam taking. The “writers” voice their opinion immediately and with forceful enthusiasm. The “exam-takers” feel the writers will shame them if they voice their opinion. And so, the “democratic choice” is a research paper.

Has this group reached common ground? I don’t think any of us would say that they have. Rather, the powerful voice of the majority has silenced any alternative voices. Instead of promoting common ground, the opposite occurs: relationships that are fraught with antagonism and division are ignited.

Unanimity as an Obstruction to Reaching Common Ground

Our lives are populated with anything but unanimity. We are bombarded by diverse and competing viewpoints and belief systems daily – even by those to whom we are closest. We see the clash of opposing traditions everywhere – East vs. West, Democrat vs. Republican, straight vs. Queer/Gay/Bisexual/Lesbian/Transgender, Christian vs. Muslim. In a world of diversity, is it desirable to valorize unanimous opinion, as if we were all

“of one mind”? What might be lost when we set for ourselves the goal of consensus-as-agreement? Whose voices are silenced in the name of unanimity and at what superficial level are our agreements solidified?

Consensus of this sort minimizes differences, erasing the very struggles that generate a dynamic and diverse public sphere. With so many traditions, beliefs, and values to coordinate, how could unanimity be possible? The world is complex, not simple. It is time that we embrace this complexity and develop ways of coordinating complexity rather than eliminating it. After all, wouldn't it be more generative to replace the impulse to agree with the impulse to be curious about differences? Let's not define common ground as agreement; let's define it as respectful attempts to understand differences. Our respectful attempts to understand might foster community. From community common ground might emerge.

From Agreement to Curiosity: A New Approach

Perhaps we should embrace differences and learn how we might become curious about alternative views. Are there more productive ways of approaching “the other” or “the problem” from the stance of interested inquiry? If we adopt a stance of interested inquiry, we explore how various and often competing views enable possibilities, open us to alternatives, and give way to creative, collaborative problem solving. To do this requires a major shift in our thinking about problem solving; it is a shift from agreement to coordination of incompatible but potentially comparable views. Our question becomes: How might we coordinate multiple views rather than obliterate differences through agreement on “one right solution”?

Daily, we are faced with complex problem solving: negotiations between the values of Western modernity and traditional cultures, confrontations between local campus groups and administrative policies, differences in expectations between

friends and intimate partners. Every time we are confronted with a problem, we are confronted with a different worldview. A worldview is a way of being in the world that is taken for granted as “right.” Worldviews emerge out of the unwritten social conventions that serve to maintain a sense of social order. We operate within worldviews every time we utter to ourselves, or others, the “oughtness” or “shouldness” of a given action or set of actions.

Think about the off-handed ways that we justify our actions: “This is the best solution because this is the way we've always done it,” or “This is the right solution because the majority agrees.” But from where do these ritualized patterns and procedures materialize? Each represents its own worldview – the taken for granted expectations we have for “how things should be.” And each is no more permanent or solid than the patterns of interaction that create them. Worldviews arise out of our interaction with others. They are made not found.

Consider this: When you confront difference, do you think about how to craft your argument, what persuasive tactics to employ, and privately rehearse the anticipated conversation? It is precisely this focus that traps us in unending conflict. We are not able to successfully persuade the other to adopt our solution because our good reasons and compelling evidence are discounted as irrational by the other's standards and vice versa. We are trapped in a debate of “my good” over “yours.” And this is why “consensus-as-agreement” is not a useful solution to complex problem solving.

What if, instead of – or at least in addition to – careful crafting of our argument, we entertain the possibility that each different solution is actually coherent within a particular group or community? What if instead of combating the logic of that solution, we became curious about how it has become sensible, meaningful, and value-laden to its advocates? What if our goal of winning was replaced by the opportunity to be in extended

conversation with the other where new understanding – not agreement or validation – could be constructed? In so doing, we shift our attention from a value on certainty to a value on connection with others. We shift from righteousness to relationship. This is the difference of engaging with others to understand differences and build relations. Engagement of this sort, as opposed to consensus-as-agreement, opens space for the exploration of diverse worldviews.

Consider public discussion focused on resolving the issue of same sex marriage. We know already that there are diverse views on this topic. Yet, consider this: No one is born with a position for or against this issue. Rather, the positions we adopt are worked out in the give and take of our conversations with others – family, friends, acquaintances, religious communities, and media. The position we take on this issue emerges from interactions that are most central to us. And, while discussing this topic with others who share the same opinion, we experience a particular form of coordinated action that confirms and substantiates our view – we feel certain and righteous.

Reflect for a moment on the various issues about which you are passionate. Think about some of your strongest beliefs. Over what issue or issues would others claim you lose your “objectivity”? What are the topics you have a difficult time discussing with others? Now think about the conversations, the coordinations, and the relational histories where you feel supported and virtuous for your stance on these heated issues. It is rare that we enter into interaction with others curious of their coherence – if they disagree with us, they are wrong. We rarely ask for detailed descriptions of how and why their very different view has emerged as viable and logical and for whom. Instead, we typically enter into these interactions with the idea of persuading others to accept our view as the “right” view. And yet, if we enter into problem solving with the hope of understanding

differences rather than attempting to reach agreement (i.e., persuade), we are more likely to forge new relational and interactional possibilities. I am much more likely to stay in conversation with someone who genuinely wants to understand my position than with one who simply attacks me or claims I am wrong. Note how abandoning the desire for consensus-as-agreement opens us to the possibility of creating new forms of understanding with others. We are no longer talking about universal good or bad but good and bad that are worked out at a very local level. This is the shift from “consensus-as-agreement” to processes of engagement that build understanding of diversity and thereby community – common ground. Can we dissolve the dichotomy of incommensurate worldviews by creating opportunities where we can engage in interested inquiry and curiosity with others? And, in dissolving the good/bad, right/wrong dichotomies we encounter in social problems, can we achieve some form of coordinated social action where diversity is initially approached with tolerance and respect? Can we imagine – and more important, can we create – a social order that is not ordered by similarity but is ordered by coordination of diversity?

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