Biographical Note

PAUL HEALY coordinates the Philosophy and Cultural Inquiry program at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne. One of his main teaching and research interests is the investigation of the conditions of the possibility of meaningful and productive dialogue between diversely situated participants. In addition to several articles on this topic, his monograph *Rationality, Hermeneutics and Dialogue: Toward a Viable Postfoundationalist Account of Rationality* (Ashgate, 2005) aspires to delineate the groundplan for a viable dialogical approach commensurate with contemporary needs. The present paper is an extension of this project.

Abstract

Situated Cosmopolitanism, and the Conditions of its Possibility: Transformative Dialogue as a Response to the Challenge of Difference

The challenge of accommodating difference has traditionally proved highly problematic for cosmopolitanism proposals, given their inherently universalistic thrust. Today, however, we are acutely aware that in failing to give difference its due, we stand to perpetrate a significant injustice through negating precisely what differentiates diverse groupings and confers on them their identity. Moreover, in an increasingly pluralistic and multicultural world it has become clear that doing justice to difference is an essential prerequisite for the internal flourishing as well as peaceable coexistence of diverse cultural and other groupings. Accordingly, as a corrective for the homogenising presuppositions of highly a universalistic and decontextualised template like the Habermasian, the present paper defends the need for a situated, dialogical approach which can not only accommodate difference but also treat it as a resource for promoting mutual understanding and potentially transformative learning.

In thus defending the merits of a situated, dialogical template, the present paper also seeks to shed light on the conditions of its possibility with a view to facilitating its practical implementation along with enhancing its theoretical cogency. To this end, I argue the need to overcome significant structural limitations of the Habermasian discourse model, while aspiring to preserve and enhance its distinctive strengths. Specifically, I highlight the need for a thoroughgoing reassessment of such core tenets as the symmetry requirement, the insistence on consensus as outcome, and argumentative deliberation as the means of achieving this. Proceeding thus, I defend the merits of situated cosmopolitanism grounded in plurivocal transformative dialogue as a counterbalance to an unqualified universalism. On this basis, I defend openness to otherness under appropriately structured dialogical conditions as the primary prerequisite for a viable cosmopolitanism that can meet the needs of an increasingly pluralistic and multicultural world.
Situated Cosmopolitanism and the Conditions of its Possibility: Transformative Dialogue as a Response to the Challenge of Difference

Following Kant, cosmopolitan proposals have traditionally been highly universalistic in conception. As such, they have the merit of highlighting what all peoples share in common, while correspondingly neglecting what differentiates diversely situated others. In thus emphasising our common humanity to the extent of neglecting significant national, cultural, or ethnic differences, they unwittingly perpetrate an injustice by negating precisely those factors that confer on diverse groupings their identity. As we shall see, the Habermasian template, involving a discursive reappropriation of Kant, is a case in point. Nonetheless, as discursively grounded, it also embodies distinctive strengths worth preserving.

Most notably, pace Kant, it empowers us as citizens to be the authors of the laws and policies by which we are governed, while, departing from Kant, it valorises deliberative discourse as the basis for underwriting this possibility in a 'postmetaphysical' era (Fine and Smith 2003, 481). Moreover, in that it conceives of us, as participants in discourse, as truly global citizens with the potential to transcend cultural and ethnic as well as national boundaries, the Habermasian template is genuinely cosmopolitan. Through its commitment to inclusiveness, it further reinforces its cosmopolitan credentials. But herein lies the rub. In promoting an unqualified universalism as the basis for inclusiveness, the Habermasian discourse model cannot do justice to difference in its concrete particularity. For as epitomised in the concept of an ‘ideal speech situation’,¹ it emphasises the homogeneity, uniformity, and hence interchangeability of participant standpoints so heavily that it cannot take account of what differentiates these and renders them distinctive. In thus emphasising the standpoint of the ‘generalised other’ to the extent of neglecting the standpoint of the ‘concrete other’ (Benhabib 1991, 395-96), it discounts their specific histories, identities, and life experiences,² thereby negating the distinctive contribution that diversely situated others could make to the deliberative process. The present paper contends that a thoroughgoing dialogical reappropriation is needed to rectify this problem, along with clarification of the conditions of its possibility.

In highlighting the importance of situatedness, contextuality and difference, the present proposal shares much in common with other recent cosmopolitan proposals that could qualify as ‘situated’ (e.g. Dobson 2006; Werbner 2006). What differentiates it, however, is its hermeneutico-dialogical orientation which, as we shall see, has particular merits in terms of building on the strengths of the discourse model, while correcting for its deficiencies. In this regard, it also has affinities with ‘critical’ (Delanty 2006) and ‘emancipatory’ (Nederveen Pieterse 2006) cosmopolitanism.

As a first step toward vindicating this contention, we need to critically reassess the ‘symmetry requirement’ which has functioned as a cornerstone of the Habermasian template, with a view to establishing that, though well intentioned, the injunction to trade places with the other needs to be completely rethought.

Toward dialogical reciprocity

At first sight, the symmetry requirement, which enjoins us to put ourselves in the shoes of the other and experience the situation from their perspective, would seem to be an unqualified asset in promoting respect for difference.³ On closer analysis, however, it too can be seen to embody strong presuppositions of homogeneity and uniformity which prevent it from doing justice to difference. To correct for this presumption of mirror imagery, Iris Young (1997) has called for the substitution of asymmetrical for symmetrical reciprocity. However, pace Simpson (2001), the present paper contends that rather than a simple inversion a dialogical
reappropriation is called for. A brief review of key themes in the Young-Simpson ‘exchange’ will enable us to see why this is the case.

On Young's analysis, its positive intent notwithstanding, the symmetry requirement is not only impossible to fulfil but counterproductive as well. It is impossible to fulfil because the injunction to trade places with the other embodies a presupposition of mutual identification that does not stand up to critical scrutiny. Essentially, this is because far from being a mirror image of oneself, the other's standpoint embodies distinctive features that cannot be vicariously experienced by a differently situated other. In particular, significant divergences in life experiences and personal histories prevent us from directly stepping into the shoes of the other and experiencing the situation just as they do. In addition, there are numerous other situational variables that differentiate our standpoints and that thwart the possibility of interchangeability. Importantly, however, the symmetry requirement is also counterproductive because in perpetrating the illusion of interchangeability, it effectively desensitises us to crucial differences between standpoints. In thus inadvertently negating the very awareness of difference that it is intended to promote, it actually preclude the possibility of truly understanding the other, and simultaneously forecloses invaluable opportunities for mutual learning by impeding the ‘creative exchange’ these differences could produce in the interactions between differently situated others (Young 1997, 347). As a corrective, Young contends that we must invert the standard requirement by substituting asymmetrical for symmetrical reciprocity, thereby acknowledging that, surface similarities notwithstanding, ultimately ‘each position and perspective transcends the other, goes beyond their possibility to share or imagine’ (351).

Challenging Young's assumption that a simple inversion will suffice, Simpson (2001) highlights the limitations of a one-sided emphasis on asymmetry. In particular, by over-accentuating the differences between standpoints, it could easily mislead us into thinking that we could never really understand an other, construed as so very different from ourselves. Hence, to correct for the deficiencies of asymmetrical as well as symmetrical reciprocity, Simpson defends the need for dialogical engagement with the other as the requisite basis for coming to understand them in a manner that is genuinely attentive to, and respectful of, difference. In particular, he highlights the potential for gaining an increasingly attuned and enriched understanding of the other’s situation through engaging in a ‘reversibility of perspectives’ grounded in ‘the back and forth of hermeneutic dialogue’ (105). Importantly, a dialogical approach to achieving a textured understanding of the other’s position does not presuppose trading places with them or even bracketing our own standpoint. Rather, what the ‘respectful understanding of another’ calls for is a willingness to embark on ‘a mutual dialectic of recognition’, whereby each side strives to attain ‘an understanding of what the other takes herself to be doing’, and where each ‘can raise critical questions about the other’s position, and issue reciprocal rejoinders’ (80). Not only does this mode of dialogical interaction with the other hold open the prospect of acquiring a textured understanding of how they experience their situation, it also enhances the prospects of learning from them about new possibilities for thinking, doing and being. Elaborating, Simpson points out that as we engage in the requisite ‘reversibility of perspectives, our experiential horizon, composed of background assumptions and values that shape our interpretation of the world, can be broadened in such a way that those assumptions and values can be situated as just one possibility alongside the different assumptions and values of a formerly unfamiliar [viewpoint]’ (79). In other words, as hermeneutic theorists have it, appropriately structured dialogical engagement with the other can result in a productive ‘fusion of horizons’ (cf. Healy 2005, 46), whereby in the process of attaining a more textured understanding of the other’s situation, we can attain insight into an expanded range of possibilities for collective action, beyond those initially envisaged by any of the participants. Notably too, Young also envisages an outcome of this kind to concernful interaction with the other (see especially 1997, secs V, VI),
while mistakenly assuming that it can be achieved simply through an inversion of the symmetry requirement.

Although more productive than a one-sided emphasis on symmetrical or asymmetrical reciprocity, the foregoing brief sketch of what dialogical engagement with the other entails clearly leaves much to be worked out, beginning with clarification of the conditions needed to underwrite the envisaged dialogical ‘reversibility of perspectives’. Reinforcing and extending Simpson’s insights, I contend that what is called for in the first instance is endorsement of ‘dialogical equality’ and ‘comparable validity’ as postulates. 

**Toward comparable validity and dialogical equality**

Elaborating on the requisite conditions for productive dialogical interaction, Simpson highlights the need to take the other’s position seriously enough to count it as a potentially valuable response to a genuine concern that we and they both share, rather than dismissing it as having no identifiable relationship with our own concerns and interests. This in turn commits us to investigating ‘the possible value of construing reality in its terms’, to the extent that, as ‘the addressee’, we assume the ‘obligation of taking the claim seriously enough to enter, along with the sender, a dialogically constituted space of reasons and reasoning’ (2001: 103). Intended to counteract a tendency peremptorily to dismiss the apparently unfamiliar or foreign, this injunction commits us to interpreting the other’s position in light of ‘the strongest case’ that can be made for it, mindful that ‘it is through discovering the real strength of [another’s] position that I can learn’ from it (87). Ultimately, then, participants in dialogue need to be prepared ‘to proceed as if they could learn from, and be challenged by, the other’ (89). Reinforcing and extending Simpson’s assessment, I maintain that a productive process of dialectical learning entails endorsement of ‘comparable validity’ and ‘dialogical equality’ as postulates (Healy 2000, 65-68, 71-73).

Briefly stated, these postulates stipulate that if the potential for enlarged understanding and transformative learning inherent in our engagement with difference is to be actualised, we need to allow others to articulate their own positions in their own terms and accord them the status of equal partners in the conjoint exploration of a topic, to the extent that we are prepared to allow their views actively to challenge our own ‘settled opinion’, to modify our preconceptions when they are found wanting, and to learn from what they have to tell us rather than simply asserting the superiority of our own viewpoint. In short, commensurate with Simpson’s reversibility of perspectives, the point of these postulates is to enjoin us to stop treating those who occupy different discursive standpoints either as mirror images of ourselves or as denizens of a deficient socio-cultural standpoint who need to prove themselves to us before we will accord them a respectful hearing, and instead recognise that they represent a position comparable in value to our own from which we can productively learn. Equally importantly, however, according the other’s position the status of comparable validity does not entail its equal validity. On the contrary, as considered further below, the tenability of each party’s views needs to be held open to critical intersubjective appraisal in appropriately structured discursive forums. Hence, a commitment to these postulates also presupposes an accountability requirement whereby each side remains committed to holding its beliefs, values and practices open to principled comparative evaluation by others who occupy different discursive standpoints and to effecting needed modifications when they are found wanting. This requirement derives from a dialogical awareness that in our interaction with diversely situated others, we inevitably issue criticisable moral as well as epistemic claims which these diversely situated others are entitled to contest and challenge. In short, the real point of these postulates is to open up a conceptual space for the principled comparative evaluation of proffered claims with a view to generating an enhanced and more finely tuned understanding of issues of mutual concern.
Indeed, the overall intent is to promote transformative learning through a commitment to finding and building on common ground while respecting and preserving difference. From a dialogical perspective, it is in this way that we appropriately carry through on the cosmopolitan ideal of participating in the formulation of the laws and policies that regulate our lives while demonstrating a genuine respect for difference. In other words, it is in this way that we truly contribute to the creation of a ‘cosmopolitan public sphere’ (Kogler 2005).

Moreover, as we shall now consider, taking a commitment to dialogical equality and comparable validity seriously also entails reconceptualising the anticipated outcome of the deliberative process in terms of enlarged understanding and transformative learning rather than consensus, as the discourse model has traditionally presupposed.

**Toward enlarged and potentially transformed understanding**

As is well known, the notion of a ‘rationally-motivated consensus’ represents another cornerstone of the Habermasian discourse model. But while few would deny consensuality its merits, from a situated dialogical perspective, the problem is that an unduly consensual orientation, grounded in the presuppositions an ‘ideal speech situation’ and a ‘universal audience’, perpetuates the illusion of homogeneity, uniformity, and hence of interchangeability of standpoints that pervades the discourse model and effectively renders it unresponsive to difference. Indeed, by thus implicitly reinforcing the impression that difference is ‘something to be transcended’, a heavily consensual orientation inadvertently functions as ‘another mechanism of exclusion’ (Young 1996, 126).

As a partial corrective, sympathetic critics have valorised the concept of an ‘overlapping’ consensus on the grounds that it goes further toward genuinely acknowledging real differences in participant standpoint (see further Abdel-Nour 2004, 87). But in addition to the fact that the standard discourse model is not conducive to accommodating this adjustment, it does not go far enough to incorporate the implications of endorsing dialogical equality and comparable validity as postulates, as we have seen genuine dialogical interaction to presuppose. In particular, while the concept of an overlapping consensus has the merit of acknowledging the legitimate persistence of disagreement and difference deriving from significant divergences in worldview and outlook, it does not entail that we commit to actively engaging with and learning from difference as endorsement of these postulates calls for. Hence, it lacks what Simpson aptly epitomises as ‘the mutual dispositions of participants in dialogue to proceed as if they could learn from, and be challenged by, the other’ (2001, 89). Instead, by focussing attention only on what participants have in common, settling for an overlapping consensus effectively dispels the creative tension needed to fuel the dialectical learning process that a respectful engagement with difference calls for. Since an overlapping consensus thus does not go far enough in promoting this type and level of critical engagement, it cannot account for what Young valorises as ‘the transformation that the communicative process should often produce in the opinions of the participants’ (1996, 127).

As a corrective, the primary regulative orientation for discursive interaction needs to be reconceptualised in terms of a commitment to attaining an enriched and potentially transformed understanding of issues of mutual concern through engaging in appropriately structured processes of dialogical interaction, whereby each side strives to achieve a well-grounded understanding of the other’s animating concerns and their supporting rationale. Through thus ‘listening across difference’, ‘each position can come to understand something about the ways proposals and claims affect others differently situated’; and ‘by internalising this mediated understanding of plural positions, participants can gain ‘a wider picture of the social processes in which their own partial experience is embedded’ (Young 1996, 128). Notably, however, this outcome will eventuate only through ‘genuinely symmetrical’ learning processes (Simpson 2001, 75) which presuppose active critical engagement with the other’s
position in appropriately structured forums, and not just a passive acknowledgment of difference, as settling for an overlapping consensus might suggest. Embarked on under these conditions, the encounter with difference provides a major stimulus to the transformative advancement of understanding in that it reveals our own construal of the problem domain as perspectival relative to that of differently situated others. In so doing it alerts us to the need to factor in their perspective along with our own if we are to respond to the situation in a way that can do justice to the needs, values, and interests of all concerned. Moreover, provided participants are truly committed to finding creative and inclusive solutions to the policy dilemmas confronting them, these dialectical exchanges support an interactive learning process that can transform their whole way of thinking about the problem domain. Indeed, as indicated earlier, under these conditions, we can undergo a ‘fusion of horizons’ whereby, as Charles Taylor perceptively puts it, we learn ‘to move in a broader horizon, within which what we have formerly taken for granted as the background to valuation can be situated as one possibility alongside the different background of the formerly unfamiliar position’ (1994, 67). As thus conducive to promoting a fusion of horizons incorporating the best insights deriving from multiple perspectives, a dialectical exchange of views enables participants to develop a new ‘situation definition’, an ‘enlarged’ mode of understanding, embodying creative new possibilities for responding to a problematic situation, possibilities that transcend, and indeed transform, those initially available to any of the participants. In itself this transformative potential provides a potent stimulus for effecting a dialogical reappropriation of the discourse model.

Finally, by way of consolidating and extending what has been established, let us consider why, and how, transformative dialogue can provide a more adequate template for situated cosmopolitanism than can discursive deliberation.

**Toward transformative dialogue**

Along with the factors already considered, the standard discourse model defines itself in terms of a commitment to the argumentative vindication of proffered claims and proposals. Indeed, on the Habermasian template, it is this very factor that renders the deliberative process rational. But notwithstanding the merits of deliberative discourse, a dialogical reappropriation is once again needed to render the discourse model maximally responsive to, as well as inclusive of, difference. Here again, Young perceptively pinpoints a primary rationale for this much-needed reform.

Essentially, the point is that, as defined purely in argumentative terms, deliberative discourse is too formal and rigid a means of communication to enable a diversity of cultural, and other, groupings to articulate their needs, interests, and concerns effectively. Since an unqualified focus on such a delimited and exclusive style of self-presentation inevitably disadvantages the multiplicity of socio-cultural groupings to whom this style of communication is unfamiliar or foreign (Young 1996, 123-24), it clearly runs counter to the inclusiveness requirement, and hence does little to promote mutual understanding or transformative learning. As a corrective, this one-sided orientation needs to be reconfigured so as to accommodate more informal, narrative styles of communication which can enable participants to articulate and effectively communicate their distinctive experiences in their own terms to others who occupy different socio-cultural standpoints. In addition to enhancing inclusiveness, this reappropriation also significantly enhances the prospects for transformative learning through making available from each perspective what Young terms ‘the situated knowledge’ available to differently situated participants, such that ‘the combination of narratives from different perspectives produces the collective social wisdom not available from any one position’ (132). Moreover, through thus intensifying the interplay between diverse viewpoints, ‘participants can come to see one another in new ways; problems can be redefined and reformulated;
opportunities can be clarified; priorities can be reordered individually and collectively’ (Forester 1996, 323). In contrast to argumentatively grounded deliberation in its more restrictive Habermasian sense, these more inclusive, informal and loosely textured modes of communication are more appropriately conceptualised as structured conversation or dialogue with transformative potential. Notably, however, notwithstanding the merits of thus accommodating a diversity of modes and styles of communication, Young oversteps the mark in calling for ‘an equal privileging of any forms of communicative interaction where people aim to reach understanding’ (1996, 125). Rather, a commitment to transformative learning entails that we cannot altogether dispense with the argumentative ground rules enshrined in the standard model, designed as they are to ensure that contending positions are evaluated on their merits and not endorsed on merely arbitrary or strategic grounds.

But if argumentation thus cannot be dispensed with, given its inherently, if inadvertently, monological character on the Habermasian template (Healy 2005, 23-24), the operative conception clearly stands in need of dialogical reappropriation with a view to rendering it more genuinely responsive to difference. As already noted, Simpson epitomises the need for such a reappropriation in pointing out that what the ‘respectful understanding of another’ actually calls for is a willingness to embark on ‘a mutual dialectic of recognition’, whereby each side strives to attain ‘an understanding of what the other takes herself to be doing’, and where each ‘can raise critical questions about the other’s position’ and issue ‘reciprocal rejoinders’ (80). What is actually needed to underwrite this outcome is a style of argumentation that allows for a process of ‘cross-arguing’ and ‘cross-justification’ grounded in a principle of ‘symmetrical mutuality’, whereby contending parties ‘play the same double role as a protagonist/antagonist’ and ‘bear the same burden of justification’ (Liu 1999, 309-12). Only genuinely dialogical ground rules of this sort have the potential to underwrite ‘reciprocal learning processes guided by critical evaluations’, which can both apprise us of ‘the nature and limits of our own presuppositions’ and challenge us ‘to review the world we had taken for granted’ (Simpson 2001, 75). This is because only such ground rules can ensure that that participants remain genuinely responsive to critical feedback emanating from a diversity of standpoints, and hence remain open to the emergence of potentially transformative new ways of conceptualising the issues at stake.

In sum, then, it is through effecting a dialogical reappropriation of the discourse model that we can best preserve its strengths while correcting for its deficiencies, thereby enhancing its responsiveness to as well as inclusiveness of difference. Importantly, however, we have seen this to entail a shift in our operative template from deliberative discourse to transformative dialogue. Accordingly, we may conclude that transformative dialogue provides a more fitting template for a situated cosmopolitanism capable of meeting the needs of an increasingly pluralistic and multicultural world than does the Habermasian discourse model, notwithstanding the latter’s pivotal role in spurring our reflections on the need to undertake such a ‘dialogical turn’.  

Notes

1 While Habermas has increasingly sought to distance himself from explicit endorsement of this formerly pivotal concept in recent years, it nonetheless clearly continues to exert a pervasive influence on his discourse model, with its core tenets still figuring prominently in more recent statements of his position albeit now couched primarily in terms of ‘idealising presuppositions’ (see further Healy 2005, 17ff).

2 As Benhabib herself puts it (ibid.),

The standpoint of the “generalised other” requires us to view each and every individual as a rational being entitled to the same rights and duties we would want to ascribe to ourselves. In assuming this perspective, we abstract from the individuality and concrete identity of the other. We assume that the other, like ourselves, is a being who has concrete needs, desires, and affects, but
that what constitutes her moral dignity is not what differentiates us from each other, but rather what we, as speaking and acting rational agents, have in common.

3 The symmetry requirement, deriving from Habermas's insistence on the need for mutual respect and reciprocity, is an especially prominent feature of Benhabib's reappropriation of the Habermasian template (see e.g. Benhabib 1996).

4 Notwithstanding its intent to be egalitarian and inclusive, it is difficult for the Habermasian discourse model to altogether avoid something of this condescending attitude to other cultures given its belief in what Simpson terms ‘the developmental superiority of the standpoint of modern procedural universalism’ (2001: 75).

5 Clearly, it is in this sense that Simpson’s insistence on the need for forging ‘situated metalanguages’ (e.g. 2001, 13, 68, 82f.) needs to be understood, and not as entailing the development of distinct metalanguages, different from the vocabularies or conceptual frameworks natively employed by the diversely situated participants.

6 For an independent valorisation of the merits of a situated dialogical approach to cosmopolitanism and global politics, see too Dallmayr 2004 and Giri 2006.

References


