

Democracy and the Need for “Healthy Moral Selves”

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A fairly precise vision of a healthy *physical* self can serve as motivation for undertaking the means to that end. The same cannot be said with regard to “healthy *moral* selves”. By definition, democracy is about living with others and, as we argue, a healthy *moral* self is one that lives well with others. However, precisely what “living with others” entails is ambiguous, particularly in a capitalist economy that presumes that the greatest happiness results from antagonistic competitiveness. In an attempt to demystify how self-focused individuals may nonetheless thrive in “the space between”, we will examine, with the help of Kant and Foucault, the Enlightenment Project that promoted maximal reasonableness (or what we are referring to as “healthy moral selves”) and then, with the help of Steven Pinker and Alisdair MacIntyre, explore the factors that have led to its seeming relatively recent failure. We will argue, following Iris Murdoch and others, that the best hope for its revitalization, and with it, democracy, lies, on one hand, with the debunking of *counterfeit moral selves* who use a “moral stance” to deliver what Frankfurt refers to as “bullshit”, and, on the other, with the reinvigoration of our understanding that *healthy moral selves* require a steady *diet* of engaging in “objective practical reasoning” with those who think differently, thereby potentially starving our fat relentless egos that are so often the source of divisiveness and, in so doing, become happy by becoming worthy of being happy. In animating the value of this goal, the hope is that the means, i.e., education for the reinvigoration of practical reason (the forgotten twin of theoretical reason) and genuine deliberative dialogue across difference will become sufficiently attractive that it will energize democratic practice and dialogue to such an extent that democracy, as a form of government, may yet flourish despite the atomizing forces of capitalism.

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Introduction

A fairly precise vision of a goal is necessary to animate effective means, particularly if the means are onerous. So, too, we must articulate clearly the evident value of that goal. Thus, a fairly precise vision of a healthy *physical* self can serve as motivation for undertaking challenging exercise, refraining from excessive junk food, drink, and drugs, avoiding excessive risk, seeking out prophylactic and therapeutic medication, getting enough rest, etc. And, of course, the evident value of the goal of a healthy *physical* self is a long life, absent of pain and deformity.

The same cannot be said with regard to the vision of “healthy *moral* selves”. By definition, democracy is about living with others and, as we argue, a healthy *moral* self is one that lives well with others. This claim may seem simplistic on the one hand, but highly ambiguous on the other, since to say that the goal is a healthy *self*

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suggests that the goal is the well-being of an *individual* which, at the very same time, may seem at odds with the goal of the well-being of the *community* of which those individuals are a part.

This ambiguity is one faced by individuals in a democratic market economy. Capitalism suggests that, as *individuals*, if we all pursue our own happiness, the happiness of everyone will thereby be increased. Thus, as an unforeseen consequence, it promotes antagonistic competitiveness as an overarching ideal. This vision, however, may be detrimental to democracy because democracy, and its need for dialogue across difference, requires that, in the name of the well-being of the *community*, we ought to frequently forego our self-focused all-for-me attitude.

This, in turn, prompts the question of: Why should we be prepared to do that? What is the reward for graciously allowing those who think differently to have their way? Why should I welcome opposing viewpoints instead of trying to cancel anyone who holds clearly erroneous positions? That many democratic citizens are asking themselves precisely these questions and are having difficulty coming up with compelling answers may be the agar for the prevalent divisiveness that many modern democracies are presently experiencing.

In an attempt to demystify how self-focused individuals may nonetheless thrive in “the space between”, we will first examine, with the help of Kant and Foucault, the extraordinary impact of the Enlightenment (and its goal of maximal reasonableness) as a force in ending the ongoing religious wars that once seemed so necessary as a means of living up to one’s value commitments, which, in turn, gave rise to the very possibility of democracy. We will then examine, with the help of psychologist Steven Pinker and Alisdair MacIntyre and his book *After Virtue* (1984) the factors that have led to the seeming relatively recent failure of the Enlightenment Project and suggest that the best hope for its revitalization, and with it, democracy, lies, on the one hand, with the debunking of *counterfeit moral selves* who use a “moral stance” to deliver what Harry Frankfurt refers to as “bullshit” (1986), and on the other, following Murdoch (and her book *The Sovereignty of the Good* (1970/2001) and others, that the best hope for the revitalization of the Enlightenment Project is by reinvigorating our understanding that *healthy moral selves* require a steady *diet* of engaging in “objective practical reasoning” with those who think differently, thereby potentially starving our fat relentless egos (p. 51) that are so often the source of divisiveness and, in so doing, become happy by becoming *worthy of being happy*. In animating the value of this goal, the hope is that the means, i.e., education for the reinvigoration of practical reason (the forgotten twin of theoretical reason) and genuine deliberative dialogue across difference will become sufficiently attractive that it will energize democratic practice and dialogue to such an extent that democracy, as a form of government, may yet flourish despite the atomizing forces of Capitalism.

The Enlightenment

Kant and Foucault

The first paragraph of Kant’s piece entitled *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* (1784/1992) reads as follows.

Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. Sapere Aude! “Have courage to use your own understanding!”—that is the motto of enlightenment. (p. 1)

This entreaty, that we ought to have the courage to use our own understanding, on the face of it, seems to support a “do your thing” individualist vision: That being “enlightened” means that I ought to think about what

is good *for me*. But this is a misrepresentation of Kant’s position, as Foucault (1984) is at pains to point out. According to Foucault, when insisting that we ought to reason for ourselves with regard to what we ought and ought not to do, Kant uses the German term *räsonieren*, which does “*not refer to just any use of reason, but to a use of reason in which reason has no other end but itself: räsonieren is to reason for reasoning’s sake*”. Thus, when Kant says that we ought to have courage to use our own understanding, Kant is patently not suggesting that we have the courage to maximize our reasoning capacity in the service of maximizing the fulfillment of our own desires. He is, rather, urging us to maximize our reasoning capacity in the service of becoming servants of that capacity, i.e., that the maxims of our actions are the product of unbiased or objective reason. And, according to Kant, of course, to act according to the dictates of reason is to act morally and this means to accept responsibility for the consequences of one’s choices, the very antithesis of selfish individualism. This is precisely why it takes courage to use reason objectively.¹

This claim that maturity requires that we aspire to be reasonable in the sense of striving for “objectivity” needs qualification, and this qualification can be found in Kant’s distinction (also emphasized by Foucault) between the *public* and *private* use of reason. According to Kant, humans make a *private* use of reason when we act as “cogs in a machine”, i.e., when we have roles to play in society and jobs to do that require that we pursue particular ends. Outside of these roles, however, we ought to reason solely for reason’s sake, and according to Kant, this sort of reason ought to be both free and public.

What is particularly interesting about Kant’s answer to the question “What is Enlightenment?” is that, rather than using the term to refer to a historical epoch or a form of societal organization based on, for instance, the ideals of individual liberty, religious tolerance, constitutional government,² etc., he uses the term to refer to individuals insofar as they have the courage to reason objectively and, hence, autonomously. Indeed, he tries to undermine an often-prevalent idea that Enlightenment is about a form of government or societal organization (something that perhaps was assumed during the Arab Spring) when he says (1784/1992),

Perhaps a revolution can overthrow autocratic despotism and profiteering or power-grabbing oppression, but it can never truly reform a manner of thinking; instead, new prejudices, just like the old ones they replace, will serve as a leash for the great unthinking mass. (p. 2)

Thinking for oneself despite sometimes overwhelming forces to conform is both difficult and frightening, which is precisely why Kant suggests that we all adopt the motto: *Sapere Aude!* “Have courage to use your own understanding!” and why Foucault, after him, suggests that Enlightenment may be best described as an *attitude* that requires the “heroization” not only to aspire to reason objectively in public but also to have the courage to undertake a “critical ontology of ourselves” in order to estimate our own degree of maturity.

What both Kant and Foucault are saying is that in order to have a “free society”, i.e., a democracy, there first must be “free thinkers”, i.e., free of both external pressures of following the crowd and free of internal pressures to pursue one’s desires.

Pinker

In the first sentence of Chapter 1 in his book *Enlightenment Now* (2019) Steven Pinker refers to Kant’s 1784 attempt to answer the question “What is Enlightenment?” (p. 7) and goes on to agree with Kant that the era gave birth to a cornucopia of ideas, the most important of which was the need to hold our beliefs accountable to

¹ More on this below in our discussion of Pinker.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_Enlightenment.

objective standards (p. 8). Pinker follows this with a mind-numbing amount of evidence that shows that we have been poor disciples of this edict. We are often far from reasonable in the sense that “we marshal evidence that confirms our convictions and dismiss evidence that contradicts them” (p. 26). And, not surprisingly, since the measure of morality is objective reasoning, we are generally “morally misguided” in the sense that we demonize those we disagree with, attribute differences of opinion to stupidity or dishonesty, seek scapegoats for every misfortune, and, ultimately, use morality as grounds for condemning rivals and mobilizing indignation against them (p. 26), all of which has led to the emergence of new wars of religion—the very thing that the Enlightenment sought to eliminate—though this time the religions are secular: left-wing and right-wing political ideologies that offer their followers catechisms of sacred beliefs, well-populated demonologies, and a beatific confidence in the righteousness of their cause (p. 32).

What is particularly striking about Pinker’s analysis is his suggestion that we have fallen into the habit of referencing morality primarily to artificially support both the *moral* righteousness of our own cause and the *moral* condemnation of others. Thus, ironically, the very tool that the Enlightenment offered humanity as a way to *see past* divides, e.g., Kant’s notion that we ought always to treat others as ends in themselves (Kant, 1785/1964), is now being used to *create* divides by firing up moral diatribes to condemn rivals and mobilize indignation. Rather than striving to be moral persons as the Enlightenment instructed us to do, we are, instead, striving “to act *as if* we are being moral” by “morally condemning” others without actually “*thinking* morally”. Let us pause to analyze this notion.

Acting As If We Are Being Moral

Though Kant did a brilliant job of articulating the goal of thinking freely, aka “morally”, he himself may be guilty of the ultimate misuse of the label. In arguing that we ought to follow the dictates of reason, he offered some fairly simplistic rules for doing so. His first categorical imperative, for instance, that one could determine if one’s maxim for action is immoral if it does not pass the universalizability test (Kant, 1785/1964) is in fact deeply flawed because it fails to point out that the *maxim* for one’s action (i.e., a description of one’s intended action) must *itself* be one that meets both complete and *objective* standards. Thus, his own example that lying is always immoral because you cannot universalize the maxim “I am about to lie” is utterly untenable in the situation in which, for example, you are hiding someone from a murderer (Kant, 1797), and it is untenable precisely because a complete and objective description of your intended act is *not merely* “I am about to lie”; rather, it is “I am about lie to a cold blooded murderer in order to save the life of an innocent individual”. This second maxim is most certainly universalizable.

And it is precisely for the above reason that Alisdair MacIntyre, in his book *After Virtue* (1984) argues that Kant falls short in comparison to Aristotle. For Aristotle, the *intellectual* virtue of *good judgment* is crucial for knowing when and to what degree one ought to employ a *moral* virtue, i.e., that one cannot simply and easily embrace the routine application of moral rules or moral virtues (p. 150). Thus, MacIntyre argues that knowing how to *apply* a general rule to particular cases is a gift the lack of which is called stupidity (pp. 154-155). “So for Kant, one can be both good and stupid, but for Aristotle, stupidity of a certain kind precludes goodness” (p. 155).

This is a startling conclusion: “one cannot be both stupid and good”—and it flies in the face of modern moral education in precisely the way that MacIntyre suggests. We routinely attempt to indoctrinate children with moral rules and moral virtues and utterly ignore the extensive education in practical reasoning that is needed for

them to decide when, where, and how to employ those rules. And it is this lack of understanding of the basics that has led to the weaponization of those rules.

MacIntyre’s insight leads us to the conclusion that different *descriptions* of the same action or same policy can lead people to diametrically opposed viewpoints with regard to whether an action or policy is or is not moral.³ The flippant saying that “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter”, though common, seems to have failed to alert us to a serious problem, namely that, somehow, we have let “descriptive relativism” (as opposed to the more superficial “moral relativism”) throw us off our moral bearings. And worse, it can lead to the utter inability to consider opposing positions since to do so would be tantamount to agreeing to waltz with the devil, aka “terrorist”, i.e., those *others* who are, after all, utterly immoral. It also makes it dastardly hard for onlookers who are concerned about such intransigence to speak up since the very righteousness that the intransigent person so publicly displays will make it well-nigh impossible to suggest that they reconsider their position. Do I really want to suggest that I believe that terrorism is morally acceptable?

We thus find ourselves in the impossible position of, on the one hand, knowing that refusing to dialogue across difference in a democracy is utterly immoral precisely because it cannot pass the universalizability test, but on the other hand, we are using morality as grounds for convincing ourselves that we are morally required to refrain from engaging in dialogue across difference for fear of contaminating ourselves through contact with those immoral others.

Deliberative Justification

In their book about education for deliberative democracy, Burgh, Field, and Freakley (2006), after exploring the pros and cons of various ethical theories, e.g., utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, etc. (including the sort of problem described above), come to the conclusion that no ethical theory on its own can help us discover the best approach for handling any complex situation. This is so, they suggest, and echoing MacIntyre’s concerns, because an adequate perception of any complex issue can only emerge after engaging in genuine deliberation with others who might view the situation differently. Thus, they quote Mary Midgley (p. 30), “In general the job of enquiry is not to set up a competition and to choose one view as the true one. Instead, it is to build up a composite picture from them all” (Midgley, 1994, p. 45). And they go on to argue that it is only after having engaged in such rigorous deliberative inquiry that one can then deliberate with others about what sort of moral tools or rules might be helpful or appropriate given the new synthesized description of the issue, i.e., one must have an accurate diagnosis before prescribing the medicine. They refer to the ethical decisions that emerge from intersubjective inquiry as having *deliberative justification* (p. 28).

Given this framework, it would thus follow that in the above terrorist/freedom fighter scenario, instead of viewing the person who uses the label “terrorist” as an idiot or a right-wing conspiracist, an individual who sees only a “freedom fighter” but who wants at the same time to react in a genuinely moral way, ought to refrain from the knee-jerk reaction of doubling down on his/her argument as to why “freedom fighter” is the most appropriate label. Instead, s/he ought to take heed of the curious fact that two intelligent beings view exactly the same situation so differently and so be prompted to engage in deliberative inquiry in a genuine attempt to figure out

³ Though some reading of MacIntyre may suggest that we turn away from the Enlightenment altogether and return to the Aristotelian conception of virtues that enable the telos of “the good life”, we suggest that the central issue for MacIntyre is that morality is a kind of *practice*—which, we suggest, requires precisely the sort of objective practical reasoning that Kant advocates.

how that is possible⁴. The resulting more comprehensive understanding that emerges can be viewed as having moved the situation from a state of disparate subjective viewpoints (subjectivity being inevitable because “observations come out of what the observer selects to see and chooses to note” (p. 59)) to one that is more complex, adequate, and objective, which is another way of saying that, with genuine deliberation, the moral community, like the scientific community, moves towards truth together. Burgh et al. go on to suggest that such deliberative inquiry might be insightfully described as a process of *unlearning*, i.e., moving individuals off their pedestals of certainty towards a habit of systematically questioning their own beliefs to the point of discovering their own ignorance (p. 41).

Moral Health

To suggest that to deserve the epithet of “moral”, a decision must emerge from genuine deliberation with those who think differently is to suggest that it might be helpful if we view *moral health* in a manner similar to that of *physical health*, i.e., that it is in constant need of attention and that it is something which, with continuous effort, can be achieved, and then achieved again, and then achieved again, but only with on-going effort.

In congruence with this viewpoint, Iris Murdoch, in her book *The Sovereignty of the Good* (1970/2001), argues that we ought not to view moral decision-making as the sudden jumping of the isolated will in and out of an impersonal logical complex, but, rather, as a function of the progressive attempt to *see clearly*—and that this is a process that is infinitely perfectible (p. 23). She argues that we must recognize that we are not free in the sense of being able to suddenly alter ourselves since we cannot suddenly alter what we can *see* and, ergo, what we desire and are compelled by (p. 38). Nonetheless, we can become *moral achievers* if we focus our energies on trying to *see justly* (p. 38) by ensuring that our vision is unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention (p. 64). That outcome, however, requires that we recognize that just by opening our eyes, we do not necessarily see what confronts us. Since we are anxiety-ridden animals, our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying veil which partially conceals the world (p. 82). We thus need to undertake active attempts to “unself” (p. 82) our perception by communicating and properly seeing others as they are within their own contexts (p. 31). Murdoch thus anticipates Habermas (1992) who argues that you cannot judge the adequacy of an agent’s reasoned support of her assertions and/or actions unless you first understand the larger context from which assertions and/or actions make sense to that agent, i.e., seem rational (p. 125), a point also emphasized by MacIntyre.

Murdoch emphasizes that we need to keep forever in mind that, in moral life, the enemy is the fat relentless ego (p. 51) and that, since goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true, this simultaneously requires a suppression of the self (p. 64).

Since moral *achievement* is slow (p. 38) and since continuous input from others is the only sure way to quiet the fat relentless ego, it follows that the “food for thought” of continuously hearing the *reasoned* position of others is as essential and important for maintaining a *healthy moral self* as continuously eating nutritious food is important for maintaining a *healthy physical self*. This analogy, however, confronts us with yet another important issue, and that is that it would be prudent to alert ourselves to the dangers of excessive intake of “junk food” and so avoid excessive ingestion of that Harry Frankfurt refers to as “bullshit”.

⁴ This is not dissimilar to Piaget’s conservation experiments in which one child estimates the amount of liquid by focusing solely on the width of a beaker, while another child estimates the amount of liquid by focusing solely on the height, but that, with dialogue, they may both come to estimate the amount of liquid by focusing on the volume.

Avoid Ingesting or Regurgitating “Bullshit”

In his essay “On Bullshit” (1986), Harry Frankfurt argues that we ought to be alert to the characteristics of bullshit so that we can avoid being swayed by it. He characterizes a bullshitter as someone who is utterly unconcerned with truth. Frankfurt emphasizes that bullshit is not the same as lying since to lie, one has to at least know the truth. Thus, while bullshit is similar to a lie in that it is a deceptive misrepresentation (p. 82), the intention of the bullshitter is not to deceive. The intention of the bullshitter, rather, is to pump up his own self-image (p. 86).

As an analogy for the absence of bullshit, Frankfurt references craftsmen of the days of yore who took pride in their work and who did not relax their thoughtful self-discipline even with respect to features of their work which would ordinarily not be visible (p. 86). He argues that this analogy suggests that it is fitting to construe carelessly made, shoddy goods as analogues to bullshit. After all, excrement is not designed or crafted at all; it is merely emitted or dumped (p. 87). The bullshitter is speaking mindlessly without regard for how things really are (p. 89). This indifference to how things really are is, according to Frankfurt, the essence of bullshit (p. 90). Excrement, after all, is substance from which everything nutritive has been removed (p. 93).

Frankfurt goes on to make the interesting claim that bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what s/he is talking about (p. 99). From this we can assume, according to Frankfurt, that the ubiquitous production of bullshit in a democracy should not be surprising, given the widespread conviction that it is the responsibility of democratic citizens to have opinions on just about everything (p. 99). This is particularly true for someone who believes it her *moral duty* to evaluate events and conditions in all parts of the world (p. 99). Given that this is her moral duty, such a person will deliver bullshit with the utmost sincerity, suggesting, in Frankfurt’s words, that she has decided that since it makes no sense to try to be true to the facts, she must therefore try instead to be true to herself (p. 100).

So again, we return to the theme of the *misuse of morality* in the sense that people are using morality as an effective delivery system of bullshit; they are, in other words, packaging excrement so that it appears nutritious. And, according to Kurt Gray, in his book entitled *Outraged* (2025), the most common packaging practice is not just making moral claims but displaying moral outrage. Thus, Gray argues that the political gridlock that has become common in many democracies⁵ is almost solely a function of the misuse of moral thinking, i.e., members of Congress are outraged at the idea of compromising with the “evil” people on the other side (p. 6). And in a manner similar to Murdoch, Gray argues that this outrage emerges out of deficient perception in the sense that, in an effort to figure out how to react to complex situations, we often fall back on simplifying what we see and so resort to moral typecasting—seeing one side as 100% righteous victims and the other side as 100% blameworthy villains (p. 14). Gray warns us that this “outrage habit” is being amplified by social media since outrage solicits attention and attention is the currency of social media. And like Frankfurt, Gray suggests that outrage is more about one’s self-image than the issue at hand, since outrage, aka, bullshit, is like a peacock’s tail—it looks good to others (p. 107). It is for that reason, Gray suggests, that people so often use outrage to help them compete in the Victim Olympics (p. 244) of social media since playing the victim so easily typecasts others as villains (pp. 236-237).

This misuse of morality that emerges out of simplistic thinking, this outrage, this bullshit, that leads a citizenry into busily dividing their neighbours into friends and foes, this anti-pluralistic tendency (p. 30) is disastrous, according to Gray, since modern democracies were founded on political pluralism, i.e., the coexistence of different ideas and ideologies within a society.

⁵ Gridlock having moved in the American Congress from 30% of issues of public concern in the 1930s to 75% today (p. 6).

On the other hand, Gray does recognize that it is mentally taxing and emotionally uncomfortable to recognize that those who disagree with us might also be good people (p. 36). It is for that very reason that, like Burgh et al., Gray argues that we must make a concerted effort to ensure that all democratic citizens have extensive educative experience in facilitated dialogue. He stresses that such dialogue must have expert facilitation (p. 279) given the often-entrenched habits of deficient perception that prompts the tendency to regurgitate bullshit.

Educating for “Just” Reasoning

Since proceedings in a courtroom are symbolic of “justice being served”, it is hardly a stretch to assume that those whose work is fundamental to that system, i.e., legal advocates, are themselves paragons of “judicious thinking”, in the sense of being capable of adjudicating fairly between competing claims. It is in this light that “critical thinking” courses have become the darling in educational circles. After all, if all our youngsters are “lawyers-in-waiting”, our capacity to communicate well with one another would be exceptional, no?

No! This deduction, that since lawyers serve in the justice system, they themselves must be able to think justly is faulty; something referred to as a “fallacy of division”, i.e., assuming that something that is true for a whole is also true of all or some of its parts. The mandate of legal advocates is not “just thinking”; on the contrary, the mandate of legal advocates is to advocate for one side only and to demolish as far as is humanly possible the arguments of the opponent. Lawyers alone, without a jury or a judge, would not produce justice. Lawyers alone would create a stalemate: each arguing to the death that their side ought to prevail.

And that is what happens when we assume that democracy is all about “the marketplace of ideas”. We are educating youngsters to be expert advocates of their own ideas, i.e., their clients, and then we are surprised when intransigence becomes the norm in public discourse.

Such surprise is hypocritical. If we are training our youngsters to be lawyers-in-waiting, intransigence is precisely what they are being trained for. How could it not be? Do you really want a lawyer to say in mid-trial: “Well, maybe my client is guilty after all?” Even the opposing team would view this as outrageous.

And that is how most people view changing their minds in mid-discourse: outrageous. If we want to test the mettle of ideas, they need forceful and unwavering advocacy.

At the heart of this conundrum is the faulty metaphor. Reasons are reified as active agents, while reasoning people are viewed as merely passive observers—as if ideas themselves do battle and that reasonable people need only look on to see which side wins. There is an advantage to this viewpoint, of course, and that is that no human needs to take responsibility for the final outcome. It’s all about reasons.

But, of course, it is not all about—or at least not only about—the reasons. Ultimately the final adjudication between competing reasons and competing perceptions must take place in the minds of reasoning beings, and for that adjudication to take place, those minds must have the *capacity* to hold a number of differing viewpoints at any one time, and the *will* to judge the merits of competing arguments on the basis of the strength of the reasons alone, i.e., getting their fat relentless egos out of the way. Both the *capacity* and *will* to engage in such *responsibilizing* activity requires nurturing.

This vision that “just reasoning requires that we reasonably reflect on the merits of opposing viewpoints” helps us create a more nuanced understanding of Kant’s claim that “*Immaturity* is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another”. Clearly Kant’s edict that one ought to avoid “guidance from another” does *not* mean “*not listening* to the other”. This is so because, as long as one evaluates the merits of the other’s viewpoint as a function of the strength of the reasons alone, rather than as a function of authority or tribal

membership of the other, then one is being guided by reasons, not reasoners. And so, to that degree, one can claim the heroism of having the courage to use one’s own understanding.

Those for whom the claim that “just reasoning requires that one reasonably reflect on opposing viewpoints” has merit, must, on second thought, find it stupefying that educational establishments in a democracy do not have educational practices such as constantly engaging young people in Communities of Philosophical Inquiry (CPIs) (which is the pedagogical touchstone of Philosophy for Children⁶) as its core mandate. As Burgh et al. note (2006) the habit of systematically attempting to engage in deliberative justification is essential for the preparation of citizens of a democracy (p. 46) and is one that ought to be cultivated through serious and extensive educational practices (p. 47). This is essential so that students recognize that (in Bertrand Russell’s words) “the finding of arguments for a conclusion given in advance is not philosophy, but special pleading” (p. 51), and indeed, it does not even deserve the label of “reasoning”, let alone “just reasoning”.

We all of us need to refrain from deciding a conclusion before engaging in deliberation with those of differing viewpoints. And we need to recognize, along with Gray, that this is extremely difficult in the age of social media, when the lack of instantaneous agreement is often interpreted as disagreement, and in the context of binary thinking, such disagreement can result in one being labeled a villain.

It is for that reason that we suggest that, aside from engaging young people in Communities of Philosophical Inquiry, participants need to hear over and over again, that a “healthy moral self” requires that one get one’s fat relentless egos out of the way, and that the only way to “unself” one’s perception is to seriously reflect on the merits of opposing visions, which, importantly, is altogether different from being guided by the opinions of others. They also need reminding again and again that the only way to truth is through falsification (Peirce, 1955; Popper, 1985) and that in order to ensure that they have available all potential candidates for truth and, also, that their falsification process is done “justly”, they need to deliberate with those who see the situation differently.

We would like to add, as well, that facilitators themselves need extensive preparation as well as encouragement to have sympathy for the participants who live in a capitalist context that ramps up their fat relentless egos and in which bullshit is more the norm than the exception. They need to recognize that “unselfed” thinking is a difficult “acquired” habit. It is for that reason that facilitators need to work hard to try to understand the context from which comments are offered to the community and then help the community weave disparate perspectives into a more complex composite understanding of the issue. Facilitators need to help participants, in other words, *connect* across divides, as opposed to merely hearing the other’s words (Gardner, 2011). This view of facilitation interestingly challenges the not uncommon assumption in P4C circles that the efficacy of communal inquiry is self-fulfilling and self-regulating⁷, and suggests, by contrast, that facilitators ought to be far more prepared to engage in *questioning to hesitation* rather than *hesitating to question* (Gardner, 2011). Thus, aside from being keenly focused on what participants are saying, the facilitator needs to heed the words of Habermas and so keep supplying the right kind of questions so that the rationality of what the other is saying is born.⁸

⁶ <https://www.icpic.org/>.

⁷ Thus, in his article “The Role of a Facilitator in a Community of Philosophical Inquiry” (2004) Kennedy uses phrases that suggest a fairly minimalized role for the facilitator. For example. “To the extent that community of inquiry models itself on open systems, it signifies a trust in human ‘nature’ and the implicit meliorative orientation and self-organizing tendencies of human processes both individual and collective” (p. 750). “The goal of the facilitator is to distribute his or her function and thereby become just another member of the group” (p. 753) and that s/he should “distribute his or her function and thereby become just another member of the group” (p. 744).

⁸ See reference to Habermas above.

And to add to all of the above, facilitators must also work toward having, in Foucault’s words, a “critical ontology of themselves” and so be alert to the possibility that bias might creep into their way of questioning or even their tone (e.g., if their tribal members are pro- or anti-Trump). As Gadamer (1975) reminds us, a genuine sense of fallibilism has difficulty surviving in a sea of “received opinion” (p. 359)⁹. And in his book entitled *On Being Certain: On Believing That You Are Right Even When You Are Not* (2008), Robert Burton (Associate Chief of the Department of Neurosciences at Mt. Zion hospital at the University of California, San Francisco), outlines in detail studies that show that the *feeling of certainty* has an addictive power similar to that of cocaine (p. 24). And Burton refers to Leon Festinger whose work on “cognitive dissonance” has demonstrated that dissonance is a cognitive condition that we all abhor and his studies show that the more committed we are to a belief, the harder it is to relinquish, even in the face of overwhelming contradictory evidence (p. 12). As an example, Festinger cites a group of committed cult members who, when confronted with a flood that they predicted but that did not happen, reinterpreted the evidence to show that they were right all along, but that the earth was not destroyed because of their faithfulness (p. 12).

Of course, facilitators are people too, and so it is important to recognize that promoting intersubjective “just reasoning” is not opinion gathering or just having a conversation: It is hard work (Gardner, 1995). If facilitators are able to “keep their heads when all others are losing theirs”, if facilitators are able to be guided by reason alone and not be swayed or discouraged by the lackadaisical mindless bullshit of wolves dressed up in the morality of sheep’s clothing, and through it all, forge ahead in an attempt to move the inquiry toward an ever deeper understanding all around, they ought indeed, in Foucault’s words, view themselves as heroes.

If Connecting Across Difference Is So Difficult, Why Do it?

In his book *What Makes Life Worth Living* (2017), French philosopher, Bernard Stiegler, argues that the “spirit of capitalism” has become a drug that is poisonous for the human spirit (p. 51) in that it has created an addictogenic society (p. 27) whereby the telos of humans has become a frenzy to keep up with the obsolescence of things (p. 53) and in so doing, we have become “becomings” without a future (p. 53). And Stiegler claims, echoing MacIntyre, that we are thus suffering from systematic stupidity (p. 55) in the sense that, though as humans, we are essentially relational (p. 71), we nonetheless spend our time chasing objects. And worse, this deformity goes largely unnoticed due to the massive *destruction of attention* due to psychotechnologies that have developed with radio (1920), television (1950), and digital technologies (1990) (p. 81, emphasis added). It is only by reactivating our reasoning powers in the service of caring for ourselves, Stiegler argues, that we can restructure our motives for living so that it makes life worth the blow and pain of being lived (p. 41). And caring for ourselves requires that we take “reasonable hold” of our attention and so not be distracted by worthless glitter.

Kant, of course, made virtually the same claims centuries ago (1785/1964) when he argued that overfocusing on our sensuous desires (including, of course, the desire to *appear* moral) was self-destructive in that it short-circuited the path to dignity that could only be achieved by following the dictates of reason for reason’s sake. When we add the caveat that following the dictates of reason requires deliberating with those who think differently, it follows that we ought to connect across divides because it opens the door to human dignity, to the possibility of “maturity”, and to become genuinely healthy moral self.

⁹ “It is the power of opinion against which it is so hard to obtain an admission of ignorance. It is opinion that suppresses questions. Opinion has a curious tendency to propagate itself. It would always like to be the general opinion” (p. 359).

On the other hand, the simplest and quickest answer to the question of why we should try hard to connect across difference is that, aside from being profoundly stupid, you are ethically sick if you do not.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been to try and make sense of the diminishing light of the Enlightenment Project and so discover what might be done to help bolster our faltering democracies. Having evolved in the “security” of tribal warfare (Greene, 2014), we humans are naturally programmed to distrust and destroy those who are not “of us”. In this sense, then, the message of the Enlightenment Project was quite miraculous in that it convinced so many that reason, aka morality, required that we learn to live with difference and that that goal was genuinely worthy of human aspiration. With time and complacency, however, this message has been warped to such an extent that “counterfeit morality” is now used to *create* rather than dissolve difference. Though most humans still strive to be “moral”, our deficiency has been in knowing *how* to be moral and this “stupidity” has led many to use “morality” as a weapon to damn “the evil other”.

On a more positive note, that this is “stupidity” suggests that education might come to our rescue, at least insofar as educators consistently promote the message that, given the inevitable subjectivity of any one individual or homogenous group, no one individual or homogeneous group can possibly know what morally ought to be done in any given situation unless they are prepared to nudge their perception toward objectivity by seriously reflecting on opposing viewpoints. Since seriously reflecting on opposing viewpoints is so hard and so “unnatural”, it is a moral imperative for all educational establishments in a democracy to ensure that their students have extensive *experience* in expertly facilitated Communities of Philosophical Inquiry on relevant and contentious issues. Educators also need to create a context so that this experience is genuinely transformative by not only explaining *why* this experience is fundamental to their own well-being, i.e., they will be both stupid and ethically sick otherwise, but also warning students, on the one hand, about the individualizing dangers of Capitalism (despite its enormous advantages), and on the other, about the sea of bullshit through which we all constantly swim—a contamination that is amplified by the “likes” on social media—as a result of the faulty assumption that democratic citizens are required to have an opinion on everything.

Ultimately all democratic citizens need to recognize that our democratic way of life depends on citizens being able to connect across divides, but that being able to connect across divides requires *healthy moral selves* that evolve only with a consistent nutritious *diet* of engaging in objective practical reasoning with those who think differently. Such a *diet*, however, is rarely present without the enthusiastic commitment of educators at all levels and all ages. In the final analysis, then, it turns out that the health of our democracy depends on whether our educators provide abundant and sufficiently nutritious food, not just for enhancing our economy (their present overarching goal), but also for our way of life.

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