Self-Transparency and the Possibility of Deliberative Politics

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ABSTRACT  I argue against the notion of self-transparency which underwrites the politics of presence. This connects situation, identity, and perspective in such a way as to be incompatible with deliberative politics and treats self-understanding as authoritative, rendering it insensitive to the possibility that our self-understandings may be distorted. I propose a hermeneutic, narrative, conception of selfhood on which we relate to our lives as authors, constructing our identities by employing the linguistic and narrative resources which our respective situations make available to us. This admits the possibility that others may provide us with superior interpretations of our lives, which is a precondition of deliberative politics. Given the possibility that our self-understandings may be distorted, deliberative citizens have a duty to challenge problematic self-understandings. Anchoring criticism to public deliberation, together with the hermeneutic premise that a measure of self-opacity is universal, secures such challenges against the charge of authoritarianism levelled at traditional ideology-critique.

I want to focus here on the challenge posed to dialogue-centred politics by a particular discourse connecting situation, identity and politics, which Anne Phillips has termed the 'politics of presence'. While apparently providing a particularly firm basis for arguments for the inclusion of hitherto marginalized groups within the democratic process, this discourse embodies highly problematic views about political dialogue and the nature of the self. I hope to build on an analysis of these flaws to clarify the ontological preconditions of deliberative politics and, furthermore, to draw some conclusions about the nature of the obligations of parties to deliberation.

The politics of presence rests on a model of the self as transparent to itself, but not to others, with the consequence that a person’s self-understanding, at the very least, must be acknowledged to be authoritative, or incorrigible. This model of the self cannot, however, be made to cohere with a plausible account of communication, and consequently it must be discarded in favour of a broadly...
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hermeneutic model of selfhood as situated in and constituted through a network of language and interpretative traditions. While this self is inevitably opaque to itself in certain respects, reflection on this opacity lends a point to dialogue which it cannot have on the assumption of self-transparency. A dialogic politics, which is sensitive to the possibility of distorted self-understanding and aims at facilitating the transformation of perspectives and self-interpretations, must acknowledge as a fundamental premise the provisional character of self-understanding. This, in turn, provides a basis for viewing deliberative citizens as having obligations, in certain circumstances, to challenge rather than defer to the self-understandings of others.

Transparency, authority and the politics of presence

The politics of presence poses a challenge to traditional forms of political representation by denying that the interests of members of marginalized groups can be adequately represented by anyone other than members of those groups themselves. Its proponents point to the way that persons are situated in a variety of different social locations, endowing them with distinct roles, identities and experiences. It is not simply the case that members of different classes, genders, ethnicities, etc., may have distinct and sometimes opposed interests, for this need not be an insuperable obstacle to traditional representation. One might suppose that a male representative may, with a modicum of good will, be brought to recognize the just claims of his female constituents, and press them accordingly. However, the claim here is not simply that this has not been especially common or effective in the past, but rather that the interests and, in particular, the views of the marginalized about their interests cannot, in principle, be properly grasped by differently situated persons. This is because one’s views are formed and grounded by the experiences one is afforded by one’s social location. Those in different locations, belonging to different social groups without the relevant experiences, simply cannot see the world as others see it, and consequently, even if endowed with a lively sense of justice, cannot be in any position to articulate the views of others.

Support for some version of the politics of presence has been particularly strong in feminist circles, where the political implications of personal and shared experiences have long been a subject of theoretical reflection. In particular, support for this network of ontological, epistemic, and normative claims has been adduced from feminist standpoint theory, whose proponents argue that the particular experience of being a woman not only provides the basis for a distinctive women’s perspective on the world, but also for alternative ‘epistemologies’ which constitute a challenge to the dualistic, detached, objectivist, masculinist outlook of male-dominated social sciences. While standpoint theory has been rejected by many feminists, and has become ever more narrowly focused on the methodology of the social sciences rather than on politics, the connections it makes between situation, experience, and authority reflect widely held views about the self which bear directly on the politics of presence.
Experience is the linchpin of this theoretical edifice on account of two features. First, it is transparent, delivering the world to consciousness as it is. Secondly, it is private: I have privileged access to my own experiences, to which no one else can have the same direct, unmediated access.

In its initial formulation, the claim was that all women shared the same, feminist, perspective in virtue of their shared experience of motherhood. As this experience is not available to men, it was claimed that this feminist standpoint was therefore inaccessible to them. Hartsock, modelling her theory on Lukács’s account of class-consciousness, argued that it was not simply the case that women had a special insight into their own experiences but that this insight provided the basis for an alternative and superior understanding of society as a whole and the pattern of interests implicated in its institutions, in virtue of the centrality of reproduction to the social order. As men could not experience the world in the same way, neither could they gain the comprehensive insight into the workings of society which motherhood afforded to women.6

The obvious difficulty here is that if my perspective is necessarily inaccessible to differently situated others, then, by the same token, theirs must be similarly inaccessible to me but, if this is so, then I am deprived of any basis on which to judge that my perspective is more well-founded, or more comprehensive than any other. Our respective situations must simply afford us different perspectives on society. In taking Lukács as her model for conceiving the relationship between perspective and situation, Hartsock had already abandoned any negative, potentially debunking, outlook with respect to the beliefs of situated persons, and instead had taken situation not only to explain but also to ground belief. Problematic as Lukács’s positive concept of ideology is, the explanatory framework of historical materialism still purported to offer a historical narrative against which one might judge one ideology ‘superior’ to another.7 Hartsock’s biologization of situation, however, precludes even this sort of account and consequently her judgement of the superiority of the ‘feminist’ standpoint appears wholly arbitrary.

The subsequent career of standpoint theory reflects a continued faith in the grounding function of situation, combined with an increasing sensitivity to the plurality of different situations and perspectives available, as the standpoints of lesbians, black women, latinas, etc., came to be recognized as distinct perspectives, resting on particular experiences not shared by all women. The decomposition of the universal feminist standpoint into those of a plurality of subgroups was inevitable, as was the conclusion that even these must give way to the recognition of the unique experiences and perspectives of individual women once experience was made the ground of belief.8

This radically individualist and relativist turn also involves an attempt to limit the scope of the authority of one’s views from the claim that one’s understanding of society at large is guaranteed by one’s experience, to the more modest claim that one’s understanding of oneself, at most, is what is so grounded. Whether the authority of one’s experience can be preserved by such a move is unclear, for if this authority is taken to cover more than simply the fact that one has certain
experiences, but is also supposed to extend to one’s assessment of one’s interests, then it cannot be saved by this tactical retreat. One’s understanding of one’s interests, while reliant on a certain description of oneself, i.e. as a person belonging to this class or that gender, with the corresponding interests, cannot simply be deduced from one’s self-description but also depends on one’s understanding of the pattern of interests and institutional context within which one interacts with others. I will typically have no direct experience of this larger context and consequently the retreat to special insight into myself must either involve a renunciation of any special insight into my interests, which must rob it of moral or political significance, or alternatively, must involve an invalid extension of the authority of my self-understanding, even where the transparency of experience is granted.9

The inaccessibility of experience, however, was an attractive weapon in the struggle to have women’s lives and their understandings of them taken seriously in the social sciences and in politics, and it played a significant role in the identity politics of the 1980s and ‘90s. There are indications that this tide of anti-universalist thought may now be receding on account of doubts about its political efficacy, and perhaps through the pervasive influence of post-structuralist critiques of subjectivity.10 Nonetheless, if the stock of feminist standpoint theory has fallen, the ideas about experience and authoritative self-understanding which were reflected in its concerns continue to influence thought about political inclusion and dialogue.11 We have already noted the apparent political efficacy of such arguments, but we should also note that these arguments themselves find support in a larger discourse concerning subjectivity, reflected not only in the concerns of the epistemological tradition of modern philosophy, but also in the ideas and products of modern culture at large, from the interior monologues of the novel form, for example, to ideas about individuality and authenticity more generally.12 How can I doubt that I must know myself better than anyone else can know me, that I must be my own best interpreter? Surely to deny such claims is to overturn the moral status of the individual by disallowing my capacity to assess what is in my best interest and to direct my life accordingly?

This view is, however, not only philosophically suspect, but it also presents insuperable difficulties for a specifically deliberative politics. This is not immediately apparent when we focus simply on the issue of representation, but only when we turn our attention to the point of a more inclusive style of politics. While including the marginalized may affect decision-making simply by altering the parliamentary arithmetic, at least some of those who argue for inclusion also think that inclusion is a precondition of a communicative, or deliberative politics.13 The hope is not simply that the bargaining power of the marginalized groups may be increased, but that if they are present to articulate their interests, then others may reassess the accuracy and legitimacy of their own policy preferences in the light of these exchanges. Even assuming that those wielding power are committed to formulating policies which are aimed at benefitting the marginalized, if these policies are constructed without talking to those at whom they are directed, but only by talking about them to various experts, etc., then
crucial information may be overlooked. Inclusion is not, therefore an end in itself: we are not concerned simply with the equal opportunity of members of marginalized groups to become parliamentary representatives, but with improving the quality and, crucially, the legitimacy of decisions by promoting dialogue between all of those potentially affected.

How can such a dialogue, involving not only articulation of views, but also their modification, get off the ground on the assumption of self-transparency and authority? If differently situated others cannot become properly acquainted with my standpoint, how can I communicate with them? The argument for representation exploits the inaccessibility of experience at the cost of communication and deliberation. On the one hand, the experience and self-interpretation of group members is unique and inviolable, but on the other hand it is also the case that this assumption traps each of us within the circle of our own subjectivity. Even if the claim is weakened to allow for communicability, as long as it retains incorrigibility then we must still fall short of genuine dialogue, substituting for it the mere exchange of testimony. This is not to say that testimony has no place in deliberation, but it cannot supplant the mutual adjustment of conversation, which does not require passive listening to the other but an active engagement with their views and the exposure of one’s own certainties to potential revision in the light of this engagement. A genuine dialogue, as Gadamer points out, is premised not simply on the authority of the speaker but on the assumption that one may have something to learn from one’s interlocutor, and that through engaging in dialogue one enlarges one’s own understanding. On this view, the possibility of dialogue is premised on the recognition of the limited, incomplete nature of one’s own understanding, including one’s understanding of oneself. What is required here is not authority, but rather a measure of humility in the light of one’s own finite nature.

If we are to have a deliberative politics, we shall have to surrender the idea of authoritative self-interpretation which must prevent genuine dialogue from taking place through removing my understanding of myself and my interests from the agenda. Surrendering this idea does not require us to surrender the idea that we are situated beings, who may view the world in different ways, depending on our particular situations. The pluralizing significance of situation and the demand for inclusive politics to which it gives rise can be retained, even if it must be re-conceptualized. In place of the idea that experience necessarily renders my situation transparent to me, we would do better to adopt the hermeneutic view that my situation and myself must be to some extent opaque to me, as deliberative politics cannot be made to cohere with the former view. The need to adopt such a view is not explained, of course, by the fact that such a view just happens to fit better with a preference for deliberative politics. Once we frankly acknowledge the imperfect nature of our self-understandings, then we will be sensitive to the possibility that these understandings may be distorted or deficient in significant ways, and it is our interest in acting autonomously and escaping the influence of those aspects of our situation which threaten our
autonomy which drives our concern to engage in potentially transformative dialogue and to participate in a politics which fosters such exchanges.18

Meaning: public and private

I propose to approach this alternative model of the self and its situation by reconsidering the intuitions about meaning and understanding which underlie authoritative self-understanding. These present meaning as essentially private, and understanding as a matter of gaining access to these private mental contents. At the same time, it is denied that we can ever have access to the mind of another, leaving us with the poor second-best of the imaginative projection of our understandings onto others.19 The alternative to this is a public, rule-based conception of meaning which places self-understanding on the same level as understanding others, thus dismissing the problem of the accessibility of others’ perspectives. This account will, however, preserve the plurality of perspectives and the idea that these are linked to social situations, while at the same time offering a motive to communicate with differently situated others. This should enable us to advance beyond demands for inclusion grounded in the simple recognition of group difference.

If meaning turns out to be public rather than private, then the idea that situation in different contexts entails barriers to communication will have to be rejected. The experience-centred model has fostered the belief that language is essentially private and that our public language is a patchwork constructed from these idiolects. This is because, on this view, words have meaning in virtue of their referring to our private mental representations. Our public language rests rather precariously on regulative conventions that serve to co-ordinate our uses of already meaningful signs.20 The alternative, broadly Wittgensteinian, view, treats meaning as constituted by such public practices. The basic difficulty with the idea that meaning is private is that it cannot show how mutual understanding is possible. Of course, this model did not originate as an attempt to account for meaning or intersubjectivity in the first place, the seventeenth-century ‘way of ideas’ from which this view developed being concerned primarily with the relation of mind to world, rather than mind to mind.21

If words were meaningful in virtue of their representing ideas, mental representations to which a subject has privileged access, an individual could mean whatever he or she liked by an expression, as its meaning would derive solely from that person’s idiosyncratic association between the sign and the idea before his or her mind. Communication might be thought possible to the extent that agreement can be reached concerning the use of privately meaningful words, but this cannot surmount the problem, for understanding could only be truly said to be achieved if one could be certain that another had the same ideas before his mind as oneself. This, of course, is denied, for one can only be certain of one’s own mental representations. The conventions themselves provide no solid foundation for meaning, for how could one be sure that all had agreed to use the signs in the same way? Here ‘the same way’ refers not to a public practice, but
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There are in effect, no criteria by which to judge whether a sign has been used correctly or not. I could mean whatever I liked by a sign, depending on the image I had before my mind whenever I used it. There would not even be any need for me to maintain any regularity in the associations I make: ‘hot’ might mean ‘cold’, or even ‘blue’ or ‘soft’ and back again whenever I chose. This is Humpty Dumpty’s view of language: that one can simply decide the meaning of one’s utterances. This view cannot account for intersubjective understanding, and resting as it does on the assumption of the subject of classical epistemology, it confuses understanding with access to another’s consciousness, which is to say, to confuse it with having another’s experiences.

The alternative is to conceive of meaning as essentially public, so that it is not to be found in the heads of speakers, but found in the existence of a body of rules shared by a community of language users. On this view meaning is made possible by our following rules which serve to fix the meaning of our words, ensuring that we can attach a sense to the idea that they are, over time, being used in the same way. When we say that language must be rule-governed we do not mean that it must simply exhibit a certain regularity in the use of words, although this is necessary if we are to have any basis for attributing meaning to particular communicative performances. The existence of a collection of settled patterns of sign usage is what enables language users to employ these patterns as criteria for the attribution of meaning. To follow such rules is not merely to behave predictably, but to be in possession of criteria which one can apply to oneself and others. They enable us to check another’s usage, for example, so that we may say that they are misusing a term, e.g. that ‘hot’ simply does not mean ‘cold’. As such, these rules, exhibited in the linguistic practices of the speech community, are constitutive of meaning and not merely regulative of it, for without their existence we could attach no sense to the distinction between using a world correctly or incorrectly. The knowledge required for understanding is not propositional knowledge of the contents of another’s mind, i.e. that they have meaning x in mind when they issue an utterance, but rather practical knowledge: knowing how to apply the rules of a given community of speakers. The most significant features of this new picture of language is that it treats language as primarily public, rather than derivatively so, for only where our use of a sign can be checked by an interlocutor can this sign be said to have any meaning whatsoever.

What are the implications of the move from a private to a public account of meaning? In the first place it disposes of the suggestion that understanding another person is a matter of gaining access to their private mental world, a suggestion which is incoherent in that this is said, at the same time, to be impossible. Instead of fruitlessly hoping to unlock the door to another’s subjective world through empathetic projection, a procedure which confuses interpretation with mimicry, understanding is now thought of as a matter of reaching an understanding in dialogue, i.e. as an intersubjective achievement. Here language is constitutive of the possibility of understanding rather than functioning as a
clumsy impediment to the communion of minds and it is the publicity of language that serves to constitute a common world ‘for us’ about which we can deliberate.

Crucially, this world can only exist for me, i.e. have a meaning for me, if I can participate in a language which will enable me to form beliefs about it. Without the check provided by this body of norms nothing can be meaningful for me in the first place. Only through participation in a public language can I be a thinking being able to form beliefs and desires. Consequently, it cannot be the case that something could be meaningful for me and at the same time incommunicable to another, or meaningful for the group to which I may belong and incommunicable to non-members. To suppose otherwise would be to fall into the mistake of supposing that meaning is essentially private.

This is not to say that the lives of others are never opaque to us; that their projects may not appear alien and incomprehensible. Nor is it to say that communication with others will be effortless, i.e. that in virtue of the publicity of meaning the inner lives of others are therefore simply open books waiting to be taken up and read. The publicity of meaning does not guarantee frictionless communication. The explanation for our communicative difficulties is not, however, to be provided by an appeal to the privacy of meaning, for if meaning were truly private we could never communicate at all. On the contrary, we are normally successful in communicating with others, and explicit interpretation is the exception rather than the rule. Where communication goes awry we may initially trace its failures to contingencies such as asymmetrical distributions of information and, ironically, to certain features of language itself, which may disrupt communication through the plurality of possibilities of meaning which they offer.

In principle, however, anything that is meaningful for me is communicable to another and this is a condition of anything’s being meaningful for me. We may, of course, find that something has a meaning, value, or significance for us which we cannot clearly articulate but this isn’t a case in which I have clear grasp of something which I cannot communicate, but rather a case in which I do not as yet have a clear understanding myself, hence my inability to articulate it to another. Cases such as this reveal an important feature of this linguistically mediated self-understanding, for they reveal the possibility that another, may, in principle, be able to offer me a better formulation of such intimations than I have hitherto achieved, a formulation that I can accept as bringing to light the true significance for me of that which I had only dimly grasped previously. This may not simply be true of my beliefs about some complex social process like globalization, but also of thoughts about more personal concerns, such as my relations with members of my family, etc., which may play a central role in my understanding of myself. We are familiar with instances in which our views are corrected by dialogue about the former class of affairs, but perhaps less familiar with instances of the latter. This may be explained by the infrequency with which we openly discuss such concerns and the social constraints which prevent us from doing so, but not, I think, by any supposing that these have some
special, privileged, character which renders them inaccessible to others. In each case, we may, in principle, encounter others who can formulate our own concerns better than we can ourselves. Of course, their interpretations of us are no more secure than our own are, but granting this, and the fact that such encounters are not common, we must recognize that they are possible.

This is where resistance to the publicity of meaning is likely to be strongest, and where it directly challenges the thesis of authoritative self-understanding. After all, who can know me better than I can know myself? If self-understanding is linguistically mediated, then my special authority over the interpretation of my life may rest on no more than the fact that I may happen to be in possession of more of the facts than anyone else. Some have argued that behaviour, including linguistic behaviour, is all there is to the mental, and that consequently there is absolutely no asymmetry between knowledge of myself and knowledge of others, but we need not go as far as this, for it seems to deny that there is anything special about my personal perspective on the world whatsoever, that its ‘mineness’ is illusory, and this does not seem to do justice to our intuitions about our own subjectivity.29 Fortunately, we can allow that others can offer us insights into ourselves, without abandoning the personal point of view altogether. We would not want to say, for example, that our grasp of what we believe is no different to our grasp of what others believe. For the latter we require evidence, while there would be something odd about someone who wanted evidence for the fact that he held a particular belief. We might allow then that there is an asymmetry between my acquaintance with my beliefs and my possible acquaintance with the fact that you hold certain beliefs. Publicity of meaning disposes of the view that our grasp of our mental contents is incorrigible, but not, as Davidson argues, of this more limited sort of first person authority.30

All we are interested in here is the denial of incorrigibility: it would be ridiculous to pursue this argument to the point where we were forced to conclude that we never know what we believe. It is the case, however, that we may in some respects be opaque to ourselves, and may gain in self-understanding through dialogue with others on account of the linguistically mediated character of understanding. We can never be assured that our self-understandings are complete. On the contrary, they are exposed to the infelicities to which any understanding or interpretation is exposed by the nature of language itself. Although language is rule-governed, this does not mean that it is perfectly orderly, or that meanings are therefore univocal and unambiguous.31 If a language is nothing more than a complex network of practices in which words may have multiple and sometimes contestable uses, then my achievement of accurate and insightful self-interpretations must be limited not only by my own level of interpretative skill, but also by the ambiguities of language itself.32 Where this consists of an ever shifting patchwork of uses, then even with a measure of interpretative virtuosity on my part I can never be assured that my self-interpretations can be insulated from challenge. To this extent I can never achieve complete self-transparency because the conceptual apparatus which enables me to understand myself at all does not permit such transparency, or
finality, but exposes me to the vicissitudes of context. Where I may be happy to describe myself as ‘proud’ in a context in which pride is considered the queen of the virtues, to persist in this self-understanding amongst others for whom pride is a deadly sin, must inevitably problematize that understanding.

In addition to the plurality and mutability of meanings, there is also the limitless nature of interpretation to be considered: the number of true things that may be said about any object, whether as simple as a table or as complex as the United Nations, is virtually limitless, and this fact poses a significant challenge for any interpretative project. We can proceed from simple physical descriptions of size, shape, colour and weight, through historical, economic, sociological and aesthetic categories (‘this table is typically Victorian in style’, ‘it is a signifier of wealth and status’, ‘a product of changing labour patterns, from artisan production to manufacturing’), to statements like ‘this table is the only piece of furniture in this room’, ‘the first piece of furniture I purchased’, or ‘the same table which I observed one hour ago’, and so on. The possibilities are endless, suggesting that we can never arrive at a complete account of the object in question and, consequently, that our interpretations will necessarily be incomplete.33 This is not to say that we cannot say true or perspicuous things about anything just because our accounts will not be complete: the business of interpreter is not simply to include true rather than false statements in her interpretations, but also to determine which of the possible true characterizations is relevant and which irrelevant. Our accounts of ourselves cannot arrive at completeness, then, on account of the productivity of language, i.e. its capacity to generate an indefinite number of true statements about anything. It must always be possible that someone else may offer us true characterizations of ourselves which we may have overlooked.

It is notable that we can generate this vast array of information about an object by relating it to a variety of different things: whether to physical or temporal categories, historical, sociological, political, etc. Each relation which we pick out draws our attention to another aspect of the object concerned, increasing our appreciation of its complexity. While knowledge of my self may appear to have an immediate character on account of the inescapability of the personal standpoint, it must be clear that the self turns out to be as complex as anything else in the world. Indeed, it is inherently relational: I am at once the subject and object of any statements which I happen to make about myself. To have a self, a reflective awareness, I must stand at some distance from myself, considering my relationship to myself. More than this, to know myself, I must consider the various relationships between myself and the world in which I act. As Hume pointed out, if we look within for the self, we find nothing but a chaos of desires and impressions. To have a self, we must construct an order from this chaos, so that we may say that I persist over time, and do not simply dissolve into a succession of fleeting impressions. The construction of this order is plausibly thought of as the construction of a narrative of my life, a story about myself which orders the various impressions, events, and relationships as episodes of my existence in such a way as to permit me to refer to myself over time.34 My
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capacity to understand myself relies not on my ability to look within and locate the mysterious entity that is myself, but rather on my capacity to handle the interpretative devices of narrative, so that I may trace my relations to the world and people in it, over time. Only by means of the detour through narrative and the whole world of characters, events, and actions, which any narrative requires can I come to know myself. Reflection upon the episodes that make up my narrative and my part in them is what enables me to form an assessment of my character, my strengths and weaknesses.

However, while self-understanding is achieved through the medium of narrative, the narrative of my life story, it is also that case that, as one of Philip Roth’s narrators claims, it does not follow from the fact that one is the central character of one’s own life story that one knows all there is to know about this story. If we only know ourselves through reflecting on our lives, which are entangled in a host of relationships the bulk of which we are only dimly aware of, it may well be that though we must be the authors of our own lives in order to have a reflective consciousness, we may not always tell our stories as well as we might. Any one of the characters whose life intersects with my own may challenge my account of the episodes in which we both figure, or a third person may offer still another version of the events. A person’s life story is never simply their own, and their self-understanding is correspondingly enmeshed in relations which may never be wholly clear to them.

We might say, then, that we have authorship over our lives, but not total authority over them in the sense that we can be certain that we are in possession of all of the facts and have achieved the best account of them. I am not simply the agent whose projects, advances, and setbacks form the material of the narrative but also the author of this narrative. While as agent I cannot re-run the events of my life, as author I am continually drafting and redrafting my life, repositioning episodes and characters in the light of new information and changes in my projects. Where I abandon a set of commitments, relinquishing religious beliefs perhaps, or switching my political allegiances, I will want to tell my story differently to reflect my new self-understanding. Sometimes I may want to narrate such events as Pauline conversions, while at other times I may want to reinterpret earlier episodes in order to present a change of direction as the discovery of a more authentic version of myself. Acts and declarations which I once thought admirable may come, on reflection, to appear to exhibit foolishness or bad faith. This sort of reflection and reconsideration of one’s life and, through it, oneself, should be familiar to us all. We hope to gain perspective on our lives, and improve our interpretative skills over time, so that we may grow wiser and not merely older, although this project is always uncertain to the extent that what may at one time seem to represent a gain in self-understanding may later appear to be shallow and mistaken.

If we were truly transparent to ourselves and our self-interpretations final and incorrigible, then this process of drafting and redrafting could never take place: we should be compelled to accept the correctness of the various views of our lives which we formed as we lived through the episodes concerned. My childish
reaction to the apparent arbitrariness of my parent’s discipline would be the only correct view I could ever take of it, and the adolescent’s contempt for the middle-aged compromises of their parents could never give way to an enlarged understanding of them. Denying self-transparency seems unappealing because it seems intuitively wrong to suppose that we may be wholly mistaken about ourselves; however, it would appear that the assumption of self-transparency is problematic insofar as it cannot account for the fact that we can gain perspective on our lives. Not only do we revise our self-interpretations over the course of our lives, our possession of reflective consciousness depends directly on this possibility, for this is only possible where we can take a view of ourselves, and in so doing become more than the subjects of experience. This is to say, that we can only make sense of our capacity for reflection on the assumption of a measure of opacity, for without opacity there can be no revelation and revaluation.

We hope, of course, that our lives are going pretty much as we think they are and that there is not normally too much of a gap between the person that we think we are and the person that others think us to be. We certainly hope that we are not going to have dramatically to rewrite our lives, as we might in the light of the failure of a central project. Few of us will want to tear up draft after draft in order to lead a life of perpetual self-overcoming, although this cannot be excluded. To deny the possibility of revision however, would be to render these concerns senseless when they are all too familiar: we should always be what we seemed, at least, to ourselves. This would effectively collapse the role of agent and author into one, and simply annul reflective awareness, which relies, paradoxically, on the finite, provisional, character of reflection itself.

This view of the self as a narrative, told in a public language, provides the basis for an alternative model of what it means to be a situated being to that which we reviewed at the outset. The politics of presence relies on the idea that my situation is transparent to me, but opaque to others, whereas on this model it may in some respects be opaque to me also. But if it is opaque to me, I can, however, call on the help of others to render it clearer, for though I lose my authority over the interpretation of my situation, I gain insofar as the business of interpretation can now take on a co-operative aspect. Dialogue now has a point which it lacked on the assumption that speakers could not learn about themselves from discussion with others. We can, I think, say that as reflective beings we have a fundamental interest in achieving the best available understanding of ourselves, and further, that if the foregoing analysis is correct, this then gives us an interest in dialogue with others to the extent that this may lead to gains in our own self-understanding. In denying that we are wholly self-transparent, I have not been suggesting that we should not value gains in self-understanding nor that such advances are impossible, but rather specifying the conditions under which they may take place.

To be situated, on this view, is not simply to be exposed to a class of experiences in virtue of one’s particular social location, but to have one’s very understanding of oneself inescapably shaped by one’s situation. If self-understanding is mediated by language, then insofar as language is a social institution
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varying in its contours and conceptual repertoire from culture to culture and era
to era, the social and historical may be said to reach right into one’s being. To be situated is not simply to have a role assigned to you, but to interpret oneself through the traditions, discourses, and narratives circulating in a given society. To the extent that these devices are more or less sophisticated, one will have a greater or lesser range of tools for self-understanding at one’s disposal: they constrain our possibilities for being.

There are two points we should note here. First, although the discursive architecture of a particular era or culture structures the possibilities of being of the individuals situated within it, we should not want to go so far as to say that this renders the self simply a fiction, i.e. a mere construct of discourse and power, nor yet that we are simply ‘interpellated’ by the ideological state apparatus as Althusser claimed. Although the self cannot be regarded as an inviolable citadel, because language allows the social to run through it, we are not simply assigned an identity or subjectivity by forces outside our control. Although we are always already interpreted and come to self-awareness in a network of social and political relations narrativized by others, we take up and carry on the work of interpretation ourselves and may contest interpretations thrust upon us by the institutions and traditions within which we come to understand ourselves. In this we may be more or less successful, but if we cannot exert complete control over our identities, this does not mean that we have no authorship whatsoever. We should not ignore the possibility of ideological distortion, as the politics of presence does, but neither should we fall into the traditional error of ideology critics, which is to oscillate between the extremes of supposing we are wholly the creatures of discourse or ideology on the one hand, or that we may achieve complete self-transparency on the other hand. We may never be wholly self-transparent, for reasons connected with the linguistic character of self-understanding, but we can achieve better and worse understandings of ourselves and our interests nonetheless.

Secondly, if self-understanding relies on the interpretative tools current in a given society, then it must also be the case that just as some are more adept at bringing these to bear upon artefacts like novels, films, plays, etc., we may expect to find a similar range of abilities when it comes to interpreting persons. Having a self does not mean I am necessarily the most skilled interpreter of myself, although my relation to myself is unlike my relation to yourself, and even though my interest in improving my understanding of myself is more pressing that any interest I may have in interpreting others. Just as I may gain in my understanding of a novel by exploring another’s reading of it, so too I may gain in self-understanding by considering another’s version of my own life. The interpretations I am offered may vary in quality but through dialogue an interpretation may be improved as I supply additional information, challenge what appear to me to be misconstruals, or come to alter my own view of myself. My authorship of my own life is not thereby diminished through this co-operative endeavour, but rather enriched, for at the end of the day it is still I who must
choose whether, or in what respect, to rework my narrative in the light of such exchanges.

Dialogue and politics

I have suggested that we need to attend to the ontological assumptions underpinning a dialogic conception of politics and I have argued that as a model of selfhood and situation the experience-based model is deeply flawed. In its place we now have a hermeneutic account of the self on which we are never wholly self-transparent, but which allows for the possibility that we may gain in self-understanding through dialogue with others, and I have suggested that our interest in acting autonomously underlies our interest in achieving better self-understandings, whether these turn out to be pleasing or not. No doubt it is true that some are more willing than others to expose themselves to scrutiny, and we cannot ignore the possibility that such scrutiny may not always be a dialogue of equals, but may, in certain discursive contexts, instead take the form of manipulation through wilful and strategic misreadings.39

Nonetheless, if the structure of the self and our interest, as self-interpreting animals, in ever better interpretations gives us an interest in dialogue with others, then it seems to follow that a deliberative style of politics should be best suited to beings such as we are. However, while our understanding of selfhood and situation does have a central bearing on how public deliberation may be conducted, we should not move too quickly from the ontological to the political.40 We should distinguish between the various ends of dialogue and, in particular, we should be wary of simply projecting the model of a dialogue aimed at deepening self-understanding directly onto the political. This is a mistake which can be made by those who take philosophical hermeneutics to require a communitarian politics, with the consequence that political dialogue is thought to be an exact analogue of the individual project of self-discovery. Where one aims at deepening or correcting an individual’s self-understanding the former must aim correspondingly at collective learning about a community’s values and traditions.41 However, as the more interesting neo-republicans urge, we should give up the fiction of the unified demos and recognize that although our selves are inextricably social, it does not follow that the social or political has the form of a homely Gemeinschaft, but is instead characterized by ongoing struggles for hegemony by various political entrepreneurs and their constituencies.42

Our account of selfhood is a precondition of deliberation, and structures the field of possibilities on which deliberative politics may be conducted. While individual self-discovery cannot simply be projected onto the political sphere, we can reasonably expect that our assessment of the ontological preconditions of dialogue should influence our understanding of the rights and obligations of parties to deliberation. In conditions of pluralism public deliberation directed at collective decision-making must, in order to respect the status of citizens as free and equal, be constrained by a conception of public reason, rather than being
conducted as an ethical inquiry into the good. Here we do not engage in public deliberation because we hope to learn about ourselves or about our community, but because equal citizenship obliges us to offer reasons to others for the employment of the common, coercive force of the state. This deontological account of deliberation, while not inimical to the idea that deliberation may improve the quality of decision-making through pooling relevant information, does not make deliberation purely instrumental to this aim; instead, we have a duty to try to offer our fellow citizens reasons which they may not reasonably reject for the adoption of policy preferences. This duty holds even where we do not expect fresh information to come to light in the course of the ensuing dialogue. If the views of the marginalized were merely a ‘resource’ it is not clear why they should be parties to dialogue where this resource might be more efficiently tapped through the use of traditional social scientific research methods. Evidently, the demand for inclusive deliberation rests rather on the idea that equal citizenship implies a duty to deliberate about matters of public concern.

It would be curiously narcissistic to engage in political deliberation with the aim of learning about oneself, and inefficient to do so as nothing more than an information-gathering exercise. However, these may be by-products of deliberation, not least because it is practically difficult to disentangle discussions framed by the right, from those oriented to the good and questions of authenticity. This is because the substance of such deliberation must be constituted by the articulation of the various views of goods and interests held by the various parties to deliberation. While dialogue is constrained by public reason, the aim of the dialogue is to seek to disentangle the legitimate, generalizable interests, from the illegitimate, or non-public interests of the parties concerned, and this co-operative task of disentangling must be premised on the initial articulation of relatively unrefined claims. Here public reason expresses a commitment on the part of citizens to respond in a certain way to the arguments of their fellows, and does not entail that discussion itself is limited to claims which have undergone a pre-deliberative filtering process. In the course of this dialogic disentangling, we may expect that we may come to reassess our sense of our own interests and their potential for generalizability by exposing them to public scrutiny, and in so doing may find that we must amend our self-understandings in the light of whatever reinterpretations of relationships may result.

In view of the complex relationships between selfhood, interest, and my relations to others which deliberation may reveal, we should view with some scepticism Rorty’s suggestion that we should confine the business of personal redescription to the private sphere, on the grounds that it may be cruel to redescribe others. If deliberation may legitimately pose challenges to the self-interpretations of those party to it, then, by contrast, we may find that we have an obligation to redescribe others, and expose ourselves to redescription in turn. This may appear to conflict with the apparently consensual implications which seem to flow from the view that deliberative citizens must recognize that they owe what Rawls terms a ‘duty of civility’ to others. However, the ground
of this duty, which in Rawls’s view amounts to no more than acceptance of the constraints of public reason, is the more general obligation to respect others as free and equal. Given that self-understandings are not authoritative and may be distorted in certain ways, this duty should be expanded to include the duty to challenge the self-understandings of others where they appear to be problematic. This element of the duty of civility flows, as does the obligation to employ public reason in political deliberation, from the more general obligation to respect the autonomy of one’s fellow citizens.

There are two cases in which this is clearly necessary. Consider first those whose identity depends on the maintenance of a pattern of unequal social relationships—a racist, for example, whose sense of self-worth is dependent on viewing others as inferior, dirty, lazy, etc. Challenging this person’s claim to have a legitimate interest in the adoption of policies which will create a pattern of social relations which affirm his understanding of himself, must involve offering him unwelcome redescriptions of himself and his relations to others. This may be psychologically burdensome for the racist, but scarcely illegitimate (nor, I think, ‘cruel’). Secondly, we must have an obligation to challenge the self-interpretations of those who have formed these interpretations as a way to cope with unequal circumstances by adapting to them. Confronted with a woman who believes she deserves her ill-treatment at the hands of her husband, are we bound to defer to her self-interpretation, or, on the contrary, do we not have a positive obligation to offer her an alternative account of herself and her circumstances?

Of course, we should not disregard the importance of recognition to a person’s sense of self-worth and equal status. We want to be recognized by others and we reasonably aim for a certain coherence between our self-understandings and the understandings which others have of us. Where these drift too far apart, the world will take on an alien aspect and our dealings with others will be fraught with uncertainty and frustrated expectations. However, we should not interpret the demand for recognition in such a way as to impose a duty of deference upon others.

This would fail to do justice to the logic of recognition itself. This is because recognition is itself premised upon our interest as reflective beings in achieving the best available understanding of ourselves. While we want coherence between our self-understandings and those which others have of us, we do not want this at any price, for coherence alone can be achieved by engaging in the sort of adaptation of self to circumstance noted above. Rather, the demand for recognition is a demand for a certain sort of coherence, one which is premised on one’s self-identification being accurate. ‘Recognition’ which guarantees frictionless but false interactions with others is no recognition at all.

Of course, redescription has traditionally been the stock in trade of vanguard politicians, whether of a Leninist or nationalist stamp, who make it their business to disregard the self-interpretations of those who fail to see where their objective class interests lie, or that their present way of life is ‘inauthentic’. We may fear that imposing a duty to redescribe in the name of exposing accomodationist
preferences and hegemonic identities is just the short road to political authoritarianism, and that it fails to recognize our interests in interpreting ourselves and in having these interpretations recognized by others, including by institutions such as the state. These are not trivial concerns. Making redescription a legitimate part of public deliberation should not mean that the state must have a free hand to assign identities to its citizens. As long as redescription plays a role in a democratic, dialogic politics, this can be regarded rather as a safeguard against the ideological imposition of identity by powerful social actors and institutions, rather than as facilitating this.

Unlike traditional ideology critique, which sought to find for itself an unassailable vantage point from which to launch its critique, our premise is that no-one is wholly self-transparent, and no interpretation can be regarded as final. The thesis of self-opacity is universalized as the basis for a more democratic, fallibilist social criticism. As these are general premises, we offer our reinterpretations of others in the knowledge that we too may be exposed to reinterpretation ourselves. Furthermore, the obligation to challenge adaptive self-understandings, where they appear to hinder the articulations of the true interests of an individual or group, should provide a check on the potentially damaging effects of the major institutional sites of identity formation. As all such interpretations must be tested in public dialogue fears of authoritarianism can be deemed ill-founded, at least with respect to the ideal. Clearly, we cannot rule out the possibility that any actual dialogue may be prey to authoritarian influences.

The obligation to challenge others’ self-understandings does not entail that one can demand that one’s interlocutor accept one’s reading of them. While we can demand policies which may undermine their self-interpretation, they are free to respond to this as they choose. They may reject outright our interpretation of them, or choose to incorporate aspects of it within their own understanding. That is their right as authors of their own lives. It would be wrong to suppose that by offering alternative readings of someone’s life we are therefore denying their authorship, for to be author of one’s life is to be engaged in the ongoing drafting and redrafting of one’s life story, not to have a right to have one’s version of it accepted as final. In fact we can say that to withhold an alternative reading from someone may in some circumstances amount to treating them without due respect as equally authors of their lives, for it denotes that we do not think them capable of the work of reinterpretation which is essential to authorship. While we may often withhold an alternative reading for reasons of tact and civility, withholding our interpretation of the facts as we see them, refusing dialogue, can also be a mark of disrespect, indicating that a person has the status of an object of discourse (the ‘patient’, for example) rather than that of equal participant. As a participant in discourse, an individual is owed any interpretation which may improve their assessment of their interests. To accept this from others does not entail substituting their judgement for another’s, for we can no more compel belief in an interpretation of this sort than we can compel religious belief: any such interpretation must be made one’s own through the work of interpretation.
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While we cannot but be sympathetic to the motivations lying behind the politics of presence, and to the idea that public deliberation must be maximally inclusive, arguments for inclusion which try to exploit notions of self-transparency and authoritative self-description should be rejected. It is not simply the case that this model of the self is, in itself, incoherent, but also that it is incompatible with a genuinely deliberative style of politics, being unable to account for the possibility of communication nor for our vital interest in dialogues which may enlarge our self-understandings and our appreciation of our wider interests. A dialogue-centred politics, by contrast, must rely on a basically hermeneutic model of the self as situated in a network of historical languages and interpretative schemes and which must, in consequence, fall short of complete transparency. While the goal of deliberation is not that of enhancing our self-understandings, deliberation framed by public reason may legitimately have this as a consequence, and furthermore it imposes a duty on participants to question the self-understandings of others where these are deemed problematic from the point of view of autonomy. Such challenges do not deny, but on the contrary affirm, our equal status as the authors of our lives.

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Notes and references

2. Phillips herself rejects the pure politics of presence, allowing for just this possibility: *ibid.*, p. 75.
3. Clearly the causes and justifications for holding a belief are distinct, yet this distinction is frequently blurred by exponents of the politics of presence.
4. Nancy Hartsock argues that while masculinist thought is dualistic and hierarchical, women’s experience, by contrast, ‘leads in the opposite direction—toward opposition to dualisms of any sort; valuation of concrete everyday life; a sense of a variety of connectedness and continuities with other persons and with the natural world’: *Money, Sex and Power* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1985 [1983]), p. 242. Patricia Hill Collins also condemns the ‘either/or dichotomous thinking of Eurocentric, masculinist thought’, by contrast with the non-dualist thought of ‘Afrocentrist, feminist thought’: *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Unwin Hyman, 1990), p. 225. The dualist and hierarchical nature of standpoint theory itself is overlooked.
6. Hartsock claims that women, in virtue of their position in the order of things, have a ‘deeper and more thoroughgoing’ grasp of reality than that available to the capitalist or the worker, but that there are also different ‘levels of reality’, in which the ‘real material ground of human existence’ is not the reality of class society as experienced by the capitalist or the worker, but is that of ‘a ground constituted by women’s experience and life activity’: *op. cit.*, Ref. 4, p. 10.
[1922]). Both positive and negative aspects of ideology are present in Marx’ and Engels’s classic statement: ‘If in all ideology men and their relations appear upside down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process’: Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology, Collected Works, Vol. 5* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976), p. 36. Ideology is not only distorting, but also the product of one’s situation. For the contrast between ‘negative’ conceptions of ideology which treat ideology primarily as a distorting influence on understanding, and the ‘positive’ conception in which it simply denotes a body of belief tied to a particular social location, see Jorge Larrain, *The Concept of Ideology* (London: Hutchinson, 1986).

8. Sue Stanley and Liz Wise claim that ‘none of us can ever convey to other people exactly what is in our minds, nor convey exactly what our feelings consist of and feel like’. They go on to suggest that while we may pretend there is such a thing as ‘intersubjectivity’, this is really just pieced together out of our several private representations of the world: *Breaking Out Again* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 11–12.


11. Melissa Williams oscillates between the view that our embeddedness in our respective situations is such that we cannot escape our particularities and gain access to the perspectives of others, and the view that we must have a deliberative politics which requires an exchange of perspectives: *Voice, Trust and Memory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 138–140. Alison Jaggar argues that a multicultural democracy must embody ‘moral deference’ to the marginalized: ‘Multicultural democracy’, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 7 (1999), pp. 308–329.


14. In Sandra Harding’s weak version of standpoint theory, the lives and experiences of women are not philosophical foundations but are rather ‘the site, the activities from which scientific questions arise’. These perspectives are not inaccessible to others, as ‘the activities of those at the bottom of… social hierarchies can provide starting points for thought—for everyone’s research and scholarship’. As ‘starting points’ they are evidently not incorrigible, although objectivity is threatened where any perspective is left unconsidered: ‘Rethinking standpoint epistemology: what is “strong objectivity”?’, in Alcoff and Potter, *op. cit.*, Ref. 5, pp. 49–82.

15. James Fishkin argues that deliberation may improve the quality of decisions, yet also acknowledges an obligation to deliberate even where such improvements may not be expected: *Democracy and Deliberation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991).

16. Lynn M. Sanders criticizes deliberative democracy on the grounds that it privileges the educated and articulate who are best placed to engage in argumentative discourse. She proposes to supplement this with ‘testimony’, on the grounds that this at least ensures the articulation of the perspectives of those who may not otherwise be able to ensure a hearing for their views. This proposal has some merit: Sanders does not propose to replace argument with testimony, and anything that can serve to enrich deliberation should be welcomed. The danger lies in an exclusive politics of testimony that displaces argumentation and would claim an authoritative status for such testimony based on standpoint theory assumptions about self-transparency, and claims to epistemic authority. See Lynn M. Sanders, ‘Against deliberation’, *Political Theory*, 25 (1997), pp. 347–376. One aspect of this bias in favour of testimonial discourse is reflected in the way that standpoint theory problematizes the credibility of speakers, rather than the truth and complexity of their accounts. Patricia Hill Collins advocates the evaluation of a person’s ‘credibility as an ethical human being’ as a prerequisite of judging that person’s ideas: *op. cit.*, Ref. 4, p. 218.

17. ‘To reach an understanding with one’s partner in dialogue is not merely a matter of total self-expression and the successful assertion of one’s own point of view, but a transformation into a communion, in which we do not remain what we were’: Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1979), p. 341.


22. Wittgenstein sets out his anti-private language argument in the sections following §43 of the *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953). While some, like Kripke, take the private language argument to imply that without an actual community of speakers, we have no way of knowing what we mean, others are content to argue that the publicity of meaning is satisfied simply by the caveat that a language must be capable of being learned by another, i.e. this suffices to guarantee its rule-governed character. This view entails a distinction between the public, i.e. learnable, character of language, and the actual social forms which natural languages happen to take. For the former view, see Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), while the latter is defended by Simon Blackburn, ‘The individual strikes back’, *Synthese*, 58 (1984), pp. 281–301. On the need to distinguish public and social aspects of language, see Margaret Gilbert, ‘On the question whether language has a social nature: some aspects of Winch and others on Wittgenstein’, *Synthese*, 56 (1983), pp. 301–318.

23. ‘For a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word “meaning” it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in language’: Wittgenstein, *op. cit.*, Ref. 22, §43, p. 20.


25. ‘As a start, we might say that regulative rules regulate antecedently or independently existing forms of behaviour; for example, many rules of etiquette regulate interpersonal relationships which exist independently of the rules. But constitutive rules do not merely regulate, they create or define new forms of behaviour. The rules of football or chess, for example, do not merely regulate playing football of chess, but as it were they create the very possibility of such games’: John Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 33.

26. ‘To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique’: Wittgenstein, *op. cit.*, Ref. 22, §199, p. 81.

27. Iris Young, for example, does not clearly distinguish between the thesis that we cannot be transparent to differently situated others, because they are differently situated, and the thesis that we are never wholly transparent to others because we are never wholly transparent to ourselves. The former supposes that transparency is possible for those on the inside, whereas the latter does not. Compare: ‘when class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and age difference define different social locations, one subject cannot fully empathise with another in a different social location, adopt her point of view; if that were possible then the social locations would not be different’ (Young, *op. cit.*, Ref. 5, p. 105), with, ‘If the subject is heterogeneous process, never fully present to itself, then it follows that subjects cannot make themselves transparent, wholly present to one another’ (*ibid.*, p. 232).

28. As Gadamer notes, ‘Understanding becomes a special task only when this natural life in which each means and understands the same thing, is disturbed’: *op. cit.*, Ref. 17, p. 158.

29. Thomas Nagel points out that the fact that the personal point of view is part of the contents of the world, viewed objectively serves to prevent us from forming a comprehensive view of the world from a wholly objective standpoint: *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).


33. It is precisely this indeterminacy of reference which undermines the naïve empiricist faith in the transparency of experience, for once it is clear that ‘impressions’ or ‘sense data’ do not interpret themselves, it is evident that they cannot serve a foundational role for our beliefs.


35. ‘Of course it should not be too surprising to find out that your life story has included an event, something
importantly, that you have known nothing about–your life story is in and of itself something that you know very little about.’ In this particular instance the narrator has discovered that his life took a particular turn at one stage, on account of decision about which he had remained unaware for decades. This seems to suggest that the average person’s life proceeds like a Victorian melodrama. Perhaps this is so. We may not often have the experience of finding ourselves to be heirs to fabulous fortunes brought up in poverty by strangers, but people do discover that they have been adopted, and that they have relations of whom they knew nothing: Philip Roth, *I Married a Communist* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 15.

36. This is not to say, of course, that we are necessarily conscious of our role as authors. Many people will relate to the story of their lives as if it is in fact authored by God rather than by themselves. Self-conscious authorship is evidently a view which is culturally and historically specific. My thanks to John Gray for this point.


44. Iris Young argues that difference is a ‘resource’, although for whom is not clear, nor is it explained why this ‘resource’ is typically accorded such a low value: Young, op. cit., Ref. 5.


46. Rawls and Habermas are typically contrasted with reference to this issue: whether public reason should be essentially dialogical or monological. However, this is a false dichotomy to the extent that even following dialogue, the individual citizen must judge for herself whether objections raised in dialogue should count as reasonable or unreasonable disagreement. There should be a dynamic interplay between what Bob Goodin has usefully termed the ‘internal reflective’ and ‘external collective’ aspects of deliberation: ‘Democratic deliberation within’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 29 (2000), pp. 81–109. On the role of actual dialogue in Habermas, see Christopher McMahon, ‘Discourse and morality’, *Ethics*, 110 (2000), pp. 514–536.


49. While they are deliberately formed, accommodationist preferences represent psychological adjustments to conditions of subordination in which individuals are not recognized as having the capacity for self-government. Consider Stoic slaves, who deliberately shape their desires to match their powers, with a view to minimizing frustration. Since the existing relations of power make slavery the only possibility, they cultivate desires to be slaves, and then act on those desires. While those motives are deliberately formed, and they act on their desires, the Stoic slaves do not act autonomously when they seek to be good slaves’: Cohen, op. cit., Ref. 18, p. 77. Adam Przeworski may be right, however, to suspect that many deliberative democrats are insufficiently attentive to this problem: ‘Deliberation and ideological manipulation’, in Jon Elster (Ed.), *Deliberative Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 140–160.

50. This example is inspired by Stanley and Wise: ‘If a housebound, depressed mother of six with an errant spouse says she’s not oppressed, there’s little point in us telling her she’s got it wrong because of the objective reality of her situation … what she sees as the facts of her life is the truth for her as much as any alternative account is truth for the onlooker’. They conclude that to disagree with women’s assessments of their situations would simply amount to ‘attempting to impose our reality on them when they don’t want us to’: op. cit., Ref. 8, p. 117. This echoes Michael Walzer’s worries about universalist
morality acting as a cover for the imposition of local values on other cultures: Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1994).
