

THE EVOLUTION OF CONNECTIVITY: A BRIDGE BEYOND

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Human's seeming lack of empathy both for one another and for other life forms not only threatens human survival but the very web of life on this planet. And the situation looks even grimmer if we take into account the fact that inter-human connection, or what Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam refers to as "social capital," appears to be decreasing at alarming rates. In his book *Bowling Alone*,ⁱ Putnam marshals a mind-numbing array of data that shows that on virtually every conceivable measure, from political participation, to volunteering, to religious affiliation, to union membership, to participation in organized sport (hence the title), even to sharing dinner with friends, civic participation is plummeting to levels not seen for almost 100 years. And we should care, Putnam argues, because connectivity is, on the one hand, inversely related to crime, while, on the other, positively related with economic prosperity, physical health, overall sense of personal well-being and how well education works.

Given this growing concern over dissipating human bonds, it is hardly surprising that many are tempted by Richard Rorty'sⁱⁱ suggestion that we ought to try to ramp up inter-human connectivity by

engaging people in empathy-enhancing literature rather than continuing to desperately stoke the fires of moral connection by advocating a “rational” Kantian approach—an approach whose inadequacy seems empirically obvious. However, given, on the one hand, the problem that literature can divide as easily as it can connect, and, on the other, the fact that Kant’s universalization procedure can be used to legitimize pre-existing biases (e.g., I can will that, if I were like my enemy, I too should be killed), the challenge would seem to be that we need to find entirely new ways of connecting that transcends both sensuous and ethical bonding.

The need for such a new kind of connectivity is suggested in Putnam’s own work when he reminds us that while bonding brings with it all the merits previously mentioned, it likewise tends to reinforce animosity toward those on the outside. Indeed—though Putnam never actually mentions this—it is not improbable to suppose that at least one psychological factor contributing to the dramatic drop in social capital might well be the revulsion of enlightened thinkers toward the inherent, often irrational, conformity and exclusivity that group membership entails.

Putnam goes on to suggest—though virtually in passing—wherein such conformity-free connection might lie. He notes that instead of *bonding* with others—a process that creates what he describes as “a kind of sociological superglue,” it might be preferable to *bridge* towards others in a looser way, thus creating what he describes as “a kind a sociological WD-40,”ⁱⁱⁱ presumably meaning that “**bridging individuals**” are more able to engage in relatively “squeak-free” interaction with a large variety of individuals.

From a philosopher’s point of view, since Putnam’s research (presumably by necessity) focuses on bonded groups, the big question that he leaves untouched is what a **bridging person** would look like.

What kind of communicative style would fuel such bridging social connectivity? How might we articulate its guiding principle?

A potential answer to these questions begins to materialize if we examine interconnectivity as it ideally emerges in a *collage* of Mead's^{iv} depiction of self-consciousness, Rorty's^v plea to enhance empathy through literature, Kant's categorical imperative, Habermas'^{vi} "communicative rationality," Buber's^{vii} "meeting in the in-between," and Kierkegaard's^{viii} "teleological suspension of the ethical."

Specifically, such a *collage* (see figure 1) suggests that connectivity is a *developmental phenomenon* that evolves from a base of pre-reflexive *compassion* (exhibited by animals and young children), to a more imaginatively-based *empathy* (powered by literal and literary experience), to a more rational emotion-sparing *sympathy* (of the sort that emerges through universalizing one's intents), and finally to a powering up of a latent potential to be *at the ready* to hear *foreign* calls of those who reach out in a mirroring effort to likewise grasp the foreignness of what another might have to say.

Figure 1

DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL OF CONNECTIVITY

1. Pre-reflexive *compassion* (exhibited by animals and young children, and which fuels the development of self consciousness, i.e., I must care for you in order to care how you judge my behaviour from your point of view (Mead)),
2. A more imaginatively-based *empathy* (powered by literal and literary experience, i.e., I might be less inclined to bully the other either if I myself have been bullied or if I read of the trauma of others who have been bullied (Rorty)),
3. A more rational emotion-sparing *sympathy* (of the sort that emerges through universalizing one's intents, e.g., since I value myself as member of the Kingdom of Ends, I will not bully because I cannot will that indiscriminant victimization of those less powerful become a universal law of nature (Kant)),
4. A *bridging attitude* toward others accompanied by a commitment to follow the path that emerges in the communicative "in-between" (i.e., a willingness to try to hear what others say from *their* point of view, and to accept the risk of being sufficiently self-revealing that others likewise can understand the background that leads me to the position that I myself hold, along with the commitment to "objectively" judge, through a process of falsification, which path forward is most warranted against the background of both perspectives (Kierkegaard, Buber, Habermas)).

To argue that there are multiple levels of connectivity—with each evolving out of the preceding stage—is not in any way to suggest that these modes of connectivity are mutually exclusive either in any one person, or in any one situation. Indeed, one of the foundational assumptions of this developmental model is that the capacity to discern what sort of connectivity-response is appropriate in the ever-changing situations in which we find ourselves must surely be what emotional intelligence^{ix} is all about. As well, since this model advocates that each succeeding level brings with it a potential to connect with ever-larger numbers of *different* individuals, it is theoretically self-affirming in that it is just what one would expect of a developmental paradigm.^x

The most radical suggestion of this developmental model is the claim that there is a step beyond universalizability—what heretofore has been considered by many as the pinnacle of both self-development and inter-human connectivity. This paradigm suggests, by contrast, that we can go further—indeed that we *must* go further in this world of exponentially overlapping interconnections—and challenge ourselves and one another to awaken our potential to reach out to, but *wait for*, entirely new ways of seeing the world—ways that by definition are not pre-describable, but which offer the possibility of mutual self-transformation that can fuel a *transcendent* inter-human connection. An examination of what “this step beyond” might look like is the focus of this paper. We will begin by reiterating the problems with accepting step 3 as the ultimate to which humans can morally aspire.

Problems with universalizability

In his 1965 seminal book, *Freedom and Reason*^{xi}, R. M Hare, then the White Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford University, admitted that, when it comes to a fanatical evildoer, a universalizing moralizer has nothing to say, e.g., in the face of a Nazi who claims that he would wish to be

exterminated if he were a Jew, *reason has no right even to condemn.*^{xii} But, if universalizability is so rational, why does it fail so badly against fanaticism?

The difficulty is anchored in the fact that universalization relies too heavily on the “coherence theory of truth,” e.g., that a creditor comes to believe that s/he ought not to hang, draw, and quarter a debtor because (presumably) the creditor herself would not wish to be hung drawn and quartered were s/he a debtor. Universalization, thus, does not work against a fanatic such as a Nazi who so loathes Jews that he claims that were he a Jew he would wish to be exterminated because *from the agent’s point of view*, there is a no contradiction between his maxim and his principles.^{xiii}

So let’s look closely at what has gone wrong here. What has brought this entire so-called rational discourse to a screeching halt is *not* a problem with *reason*, but rather a problem with *sentiment*. What has gone wrong here is that the Nazi has no *empathy* with his imagined self as a Jew. What has gone wrong here is a lack of what some have referred to as the “ethical imagination.”^{xiv} What has gone wrong here is that the so-called rational universalizing elephant turns out to stand on the back of an empathizing turtle—and its turtles all the way down, i.e., the degree to which a universalizing procedure *ever* works is always a function of the *sentiment* of the universalizer^{xv}.

It’s no wonder, then, that so many are tempted by Rorty’s argument that we would do far better to engage people in sentiment-enhancing literature (something that Hare^{xvi} himself flirts with but discards) than to advocate that they adopt a “rational” Kantian universalization procedure. Such a retreat, however, is counterproductive in that the efficacy of sentiment-enhancing literature depends *even more* heavily on preconceived bias than universalization, i.e., not only would a Nazi be disinclined to access media sympathetic to the Jews, our Nazi would be positively attracted to media

that closely mirrored his own viewpoint, a phenomenon of “like attracting like” that is evident in contemporary website access.^{xvii}

The question then is “how do we move forward from universalizability?”

Moving forward

Perhaps the most obvious place to start is with the philosopher who advocated moving beyond universalizability over 150 years ago. Though his target was the development of an authentic connection with the divine, nonetheless Kierkegaard has a lot to teach us through his notion of the “teleological suspension of the ethical.” In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard outlines three “modes of living” that are related to one another in a developmental order: the esthete, the ethical, and the Knight of Faith. If one imagines decision-making as being more or less “individually-” as opposed to “group-focused,” these three stages can be depicted as representing the mirror image of an hourglass; a person is an individual at the esthete level in the sense of being driven by her unique sensuous nature; she becomes representative of a community (either actual or imaginative) at the ethical^{xviii} or universalizing level and in so doing becomes indistinguishable from others who adopt similar rules; while at the third level, s/he comes back to herself when s/he takes the leap of faith by making a personal passionate commitment, over and over again, to engage in actions s/he believes will define her as the person s/he believes s/he ought to strive to become. From Kierkegaard’s point of view, this last stage is important because it is *as an individual* that we are judged by God. However, if we rewrap Kierkegaard’s Knight in the folds of Martin Buber’s notion of “meeting in the in-between,” it gives birth to the more secular suggestion that the way to move beyond the limitations of the universalizability lies in moving beyond the comfort of the socially-accepted and the predictably-

praised and, instead, embark on the lonely road of walking out to the other “as one truly is” in the confidence that one will meet the other in his/her authenticity.

In his famous and lovely book, *I and Thou*, Buber describes this “meeting in the in-between” against the background of the world divided in two, in accordance with humanity’s twofold attitude. These attitudes can be characterized by the primary words of *I-Thou* and *I-It* (where *He* or *She* can replace *It*). The primary word *I-Thou* can only be spoken with the whole being,^{xix} and relationship within *I-Thou* must always be direct; it cannot be mediated by a system of ideas, or foreknowledge, or fancy, or aim, or lust.^{xx} I cannot approach the other as a problem to be solved or as a person to be fixed. In an *I-Thou* relationship, I become *present* to the other. And since, through our honesty, I *see* you and you *see* me, hate becomes impossible because “hate is by nature blind. Only a part of a being can be hated”^{xxi}. To meet another in the in-between is to see the exclusiveness of the other^{xxii} —an exclusiveness that one cannot explain to anyone else; one is alone with it.^{xxiii}

Within the schema outlined in Figure 1, this “meeting in the in-between” can be conceptualized as a connection that differs *in kind* from all three of the earlier developmental stages of connection (i.e., primitive compassion, empathy, and connection through universalization techniques) in that *it cannot be managed from one side or by one person*. You can only meet the other in the in between *if the other comes out to meet you*, and since you must meet somewhere in the metaphorical middle, you inevitably meet here as “subjects” rather than “objects.” What lives here is what Kierkegaard referred to as the “subjective truth” of participatory agents in relation, i.e., each is truthfully who they are, as opposed to “objective truth” that emerges through the contemplative stance of the disengaged observer.^{xxiv}

This unique characteristic of the *I-Thou* relation, and its distinction from *I-It* relations, finds a reflection in Jurgen Habermas’ description of “communicative” as opposed to “strategic” action.

According to Habermas, the former strives toward reaching understanding, while the latter strives toward exerting influence.^{xxv} And like Buber, Habermas emphasizes that success in communicative action is always a function of both the speaker *and the hearer*^{xxvi}. Specifically, he says of communicative action that:

The independent performances that are here demanded from the subjects consist of something *different* than rational choices steered by one's own preferences; what these subjects must perform is the kind of moral and existential self-reflection that is not possible without the one taking up the perspective of the other. Only thus can there emerge a new kind of social integration among individuals who are individualized and not merely manipulated. The participants must themselves generate their socially integrated forms of life by recognizing each other as autonomous subjects capable of action and, beyond this, as individuated beings for which they have taken responsibility^{xxvii}.

The distinguishing feature of this Habermasian model is that, unlike Buber, Habermas stresses that rationality lives—*in fact can only be actualized*—in the in-between. According to Habermas, I must recognize that whenever I speak, I raise what he refers to as a “criticizable validity claim for the proposition *p*, a claim that the hearer can accept or reject *with good reason*.”^{xxviii} Thus, in order to claim the dignity and autonomy that Kant argued adhered to rationality, I must, according to Habermas, reflect on whether what I have said is vulnerable to the sort of falsification that my hearer suggests. I cannot, in other words, assert that my claim is true merely by referring to some a priori metaphysic (hence the penetrating title of one of Habermas' book, *Postmetaphysical Thinking*); I must, rather, remain constantly open to the challenge that my claim may turn out to be inadequate from the other's point of view. Specifically, he says:

Anyone participating in argumentation shows his rationality or lack of it by the manner in which he handles and responds to the offering of reasons for or against claims. If he is “open to argument,” he will either acknowledge the force of those reasons or seek to reply to them, either way he will deal with them in a “rational” manner. If he is “deaf to argument,” by contrast, he may either ignore contrary reasons or reply to them with dogmatic assertions, and either way he fails to deal with the issues rationally.^{xxix}

Habermas goes to say (quoting Robin Horton who, in studying Evans-Pritchard's observations of the justificatory practices of the Azande, observed) that:

Here then we have two basic predicaments: the "closed"—characterized by lack of awareness of alternatives, sacredness of beliefs, and anxiety about threats to them; and the "open"—characterized by awareness of alternatives, diminished sacredness of beliefs and diminished anxiety about threats to them.^{xxx}

Thus, in other words, according to Habermas, if I am prepared to open any and all of my beliefs, judgements, and opinions (as opposed to, importantly, my character as a person) to the critical gaze of the other, who likewise comes out to meet me with the same openness, and since neither of us can ever predict in advance what might emerge in the ensuing conversation, we can redefine Buber's notion of speaking "with the whole being" as being prepared to lay bare whatever is called to the table in this meeting: I leave nothing behind. It is in this sense that I am truly present.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, then, if we take Kierkegaard's mirror image of an hourglass as a model, we can hypothesize that the contemporary massive decrease in social "bonding" is not necessarily a bad thing—though we need to be sure that the momentum toward "individualization" is *forward* toward bridging, rather than backward toward self-indulgence. And in order to do that, a collage of the theoretical frameworks touched on here suggests that that we ought to embrace both **educational** and, (a la Rorty) **literary** initiatives that reinforce a *post metaphysical* portrait of the best to which humans can aspire.

This new hero will not be an individual who gallantly hangs on to sacred beliefs, who believes that "if you are not with us, you are against us," or who is prepared to make great sacrifices to ensure that what s/he and her gang *know* to be right wins the day; nor will s/he be of the arrogantly confident sort who takes pleasure in dismissing others with a withering look or delight in ridiculing her opponent; nor,

even, will s/he be one who is self-deprecating and self-sacrificing in the name of martyring herself to the good that others require.

Indeed, this new hero will understand that attempting to “altruistically” connect *solely for the sake of the other* is both arrogant and de-humanizing in that it assumes that only she has anything of worth to give. She understands that since all our actions are self-defining, we cannot help but treat others as “means,” but that we can refrain from treating others as “means only” by reaching out in the confident expectation that both of us will grow should genuine meeting transpire, but that that growth will be contingent on the degree to which both of us are committed to unobstructed unmediated rational communicative discourse. This new hero, then, will be an individual who is compassionate, rational, non-ideological, eager to engage opposing views, and swift to change positions that do not withstand falsification. She will be an individual who, because she changes according to what she estimates to be the best that she can glean through discourse to which she is always open, is almost impossible to describe, and hence whose actualization will inevitably be a challenge to measure, as she walks her unique road in the faith^{xxx} that there may always be a better way, and that therefore there may always be a better day.

ⁱ Putnam, R. D. Bowling Alone. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

ⁱⁱ Rorty, Richard. *Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality*. In Shute, S. and Hurley, S. (eds.). On Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures. New York: Harper Collins, 1993. Also in Truth and Progress. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

ⁱⁱⁱ Putnam. 23.

^{iv} Mead, G. H. On Social Psychology. A. Strauss (ed.) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934.

^vRorty, Richard. Ibid.

^{vi} Habermas, J. The Theory of Communicative Action. (TCA) Vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society. Trans. Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992. (German text: 1981.) 22, 25, and Habermas, J. Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays.(PMT) Trans. William Mark Hohengarten. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1992.

^{vii} Buber, M. I and Thou. 2nd Ed. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958.

^{viii} Kierkegaard, S. Fear and Trembling (FT). Trans: Walter Lowrie. In A Kierkegaard Anthology. Ed. Robert Bretall. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1946 and Concluding Unscientific Postscript. (CUP) Trans: D. Swenson and W. Lowrie. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1941

^{ix} Goleman, D. Emotional Intelligence. New York: Bantam Books, 1995.

^x This “evolution of movement” finds parallel empirical support in the work of developmental psychologists such as: Kohlberg, L. “Stages and Sequences: the Cognitive-developmental Approach to Socialization,” in D. Gaslin (ed.), in Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research. New York: Rand-McNally, 1969, and Loevenger, J. Ego Development. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1976.

^{xi} Hare, R. M. Freedom and Reason. (F&R) New York: Oxford University Press, 1965.

^{xii} Hare. 181-183.

^{xiii} It of interest to note that in his introduction to Hannah Arendt’s Responsibility and Judgement (New York, Schocken, 2003), Jerome Kohn notes that Adolf Eichmann believed that his action under the Nazi regime were consistent with Kant’s categorical imperative. xvi.

^{xiv} Somerville, Margaret. Ethical Imagination. Toronto: House of Anansi, 2006.

^{xv} In F&R (5), Hare suggests that “to universalize *is* to give a reason,” but in so doing, he collapses this so-called reason into a statement of sentiment, i.e., a statement of what I would want to have happen in a certain situation, which is a far cry from requiring, as Hare does in The Language of Morals (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964. 57-58) that the minor premise of any practical syllogism be falsifiable statements of fact.

^{xvi} Hare, F & R.181-183.

^{xvii} Studies show, for example, that the Internet is not increasing perspective-taking since people tend only to access those websites that mirror their already well-entrenched biases.

^{xviii} It should be noted that Kierkegaard uses a different notion of “ethical” in his Concluding Unscientific Postscript where he defines it as “becoming subjective” (141, 142). He says there that “true ethical enthusiasm consists in willing to the utmost limits of one’s powers, but at the same time being so uplifted in divine jest as never to think about the accomplishment” (121).

^{xix} Buber. 3.

^{xx} Buber. 11.

^{xxi} Buber.16

^{xxii} Buber. 30

^{xxiii} Buber.33.

^{xxiv} When the question of truth is raised in an objective manner, reflection is directed objectively to the truth, as an object to which the knower is related. . . If only the object to which he is related is the truth, the subject is accounted to be in the truth. When the question of truth is raised subjectively, reflection is directed subjectively to the nature of the individual’s relationship; if only the mode of this relationship is in the truth, the individual is in the truth even if he should happen to be thus related to what is not true. (Kierkegaard. CUP. 178).

^{xxv} Habermas. PMT. 79.

^{xxvi} Habermas. PMT. 80.

^{xxvii} Habermas. PMT. 199.

^{xxviii} Habermas. TCA. 11

^{xxix} Habermas. TCA. 18.

^{xxx} Habermas. TCA.61

^{xxxi} This is reminiscent of Kant’s notion of faith as the moral attitude of pure practical reason. In his discussion of “The Boundary Between Faith and Knowledge” (in Between Naturalism and Religion, trans. Ciaran Cronin. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008), Habermas notes that Kant views faith as a form rather than content. He quotes from Kant’s Critique of the Power of Judgment (trans. Paul Geyer and Eric Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 336) as follows: “Faith (simply so-called [*hence not just religious faith but also rational faith*]) is trust in the attainment of an aim the promotion of which is the duty but the possibility of the realization of which it is not possible for us to have insight into.”