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The view from everywhere

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In *The Transformation of Political Community* Andrew Linklater has given us a most impressive synthesis of critical normative thinking about international relations theory, and I might as well begin by emphasizing that I will not be able to do justice to the rich detail of its content in the space here allotted to me, and so I shall not try. I offer just an individual response to Linklater's book, addressed to its core theoretical assumptions. I shall propose a critique of it in two particulars. These relate to a central ambiguity in its underwriting of discourse ethics on the one hand, and to a certain too ready levelling, so to say, vis-à-vis modes of social oppression and exclusion on the other.

Because in the very nature of this sort of compressed exercise I am obliged, for the purpose of taking things forward, thus to concentrate on matters where I have doubts about Linklater's standpoint, I want also to say at the outset that my agreements with him are at least as important as my doubts. Linklater situates his book squarely within what he calls 'the reformist project in the writings of Kant and Marx' (38), and these two great thinkers of modernity hover over his whole enterprise as joint guiding spirits (cf. 40, 216). If 'the unfinished project of modernity' (41, 220) is one that he insists needs to be broadened through the critical absorption of more contemporary sensibilities and insights, he remains attached to the project nonetheless and he never loses sight of those two sage spirits and the indispensable message of each: first, humankind 'as co-legislators in a universal kingdom of ends' (84, 219–20); second, critique of the social structures that block this ideal, 'the Marxian critique of the realms of alienation, exploitation and estrangement which obstruct the development of universal freedom' (79; cf. 106, 211–12). Since I defend for my own part a quasi-Kantian version of Marx's thought, seeing there—because it is there, cheek by jowl with historical materialism—a universalist conception of justice in which human beings are not to be treated as the mere means towards the ends of others, I find the broad aim of Linklater's book congenial.

A third, more contemporary presence hovers over *The Transformation of Political Community*, and this is Jürgen Habermas. If there is one theme Linklater wants to persuade us of, a single goal for him by which at once to remain true to Kantian and Marxian ideals and to do what is necessary to update and extend them, that goal is 'the universal communication community'. Or it is the 'universal dialogic community in which the justice of all modes of exclusion is tested in open dialogue' (40–41, 220). At the limit this may be, he concedes, an unattainable goal. But it serves as a standard of social criticism, something to aspire to and to approach as nearly as we can. In and for the transnational domain it is the goal of 'global arrangements which rest upon the consent of each and every member of the human

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race' (93, 123). As will be evident by now Linklater's is more than an argument in international relations theory only. It commands a much wider literature of political thought. My engagement with it will take the following form. While I endorse the general spirit of its key dialogic theme, this for well-known rationalist and pluralist reasons already understood by John Stuart Mill, in one point each I enter a reservation concerning Linklater's criticisms of Kant and Marx.

First Kant. '[H]is belief in immutable and universal laws of reason clashes with modern sensibilities which emphasize the social construction of knowledge and the diverse, and changing, cultural conceptions of moral truth' (38). Linklater goes along with the idea that 'there is no transcultural standpoint, no view from nowhere, which allows the knowing subject to establish moral principles which are transculturally valid'. Adopting a formula of Rorty's, he accepts that we have 'to start from where *we* are' (77). This is one side of the matter. However, it does not lead to the conclusion that, morally, anything goes. For another side is the conception of 'thin universality'. Thin universality encompasses two linked claims. The first is the claim that open dialogue is the means to be employed by those of radically different moral and cultural outlooks in seeking agreement on principles of coexistence, with every human being having an equal right to participate in the dialogue (96, 107). The second is the claim that there are duties of simple humanity—like assisting the vulnerable; or the obligation itself to 'engage the other in dialogue on equal terms'—duties which apply even across the boundaries of national and other particularist communities and which arise in respect of nothing but 'an appeal to common humanity', 'a commitment to regard insiders and outsiders as moral equals' (78, 84, 87, 201, 219). Such a thin universality Linklater also sees as entailed by the contemporary defence of difference and exposure of 'pernicious forms of exclusion', postmodern and anti-foundationalist as these efforts may purport to be. An appeal to universality, as he rightly observes, is 'inherent' in them (72, 75, 109).

In any case, thin universality is expressly contrasted with universality of a thicker and less defensible kind: what Linklater generally refers to as an Archimedean moral standpoint. This might be a belief in a 'fixed and final vision of the future', or in 'a single universalizable conception of the good life'. It is a belief that individual reason can arrive at an ethic 'transcend[ing] . . . the limitations of time and place' (48–9, 99–100, 107). Against that Linklater commends to us a discourse ethics in which people may not assume transcultural validity for the moral norms and assumptions of their own culture. They must submit them, rather, to open dialogue with others—a dialogue where no outcome can be taken for granted—in the hope of 'separating merely local truths from those with wider acclaim' (79, 86). This is the sole route to transcultural validity (101–2): 'norms cannot be valid unless they can command the consent of everyone whose interests stand to be affected by them'; or again, validity in this matter 'can only be determined through a dialogue which is in principle open to all human beings' (91).

Now, there is an obvious difficulty about this ensemble of themes, but I have found that when it is put to them, proponents and interpreters of a putative discourse ethics tend, figuratively speaking, to shift from one foot to another and mumble, or else they just confess themselves at a loss. I shall attempt to lay out the difficulty as clearly as I can, with the aim of finding a resolution of it. In doing so I attend exclusively to Andrew Linklater's version of the themes in question, as presented in *The Transformation of Political Community*.

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The problem may be stated in more than one way, but here is a first formulation. Conceding to those of anti-foundationalist persuasion that a culturally 'unbounded' moral viewpoint is unavailable, one may take one's stand on open dialogue and what it yields. However, going into that dialogue, a certain ethical position is *already presupposed* before it occurs; it is not an outcome of the dialogue itself. An ethical principle concerning the proper constituency of the procedure (*prima facie* all human beings) undergirds the procedure. This fact vitiates the strict argument for discourse ethics, since the objection that can be made against a non-discourse-ethical position can be made also against the principle undergirding discourse ethics. Conversely, if you can go with that principle in order to get your discursive procedure but without the principle's validation by it, you can also go with other commitments without that validation, provided only they are thin enough. Put another way: Linklater embraces both a substantive moral principle and a procedure. But without the principle the procedure is not worth as much as it is with it. For the discourse could be, merely, that of an exclusive group, that of people of privilege, a conversation amongst those of a particular identity or interest or motivating idea. Even with the principle initially, if the procedure generates an outcome incompatible with it—as a genuinely open procedure always may—then we are soon back to the procedure without the principle, a procedure consequently worth less and indeed, on occasion, worthless. So there is a choice to be made here.

Practically, this problem may be less grave than it first appears and this is why I have said above that the *strict* argument for discourse ethics is vitiated. A looser argument goes through anyway. If you inhabit a culture in which universalist notions are already widely accepted and a world in which cultures like this are, *de facto*, politically weighty internationally, and if you are mindful of well-known secular, liberal, rationalist, wisdoms concerning the value of open discussion and criticism and the dangers of intellectual absolutism, of narrowness, intolerance, dogma, cultural blinkers and so forth, then the ideal of a universal communication community, of multiple structures of negotiation and dialogue at all levels of the global population, is an attractive one. The minutiae of theoretical debate may be put aside and we simply get on with trying to achieve or to extend that ideal. However, this is not to the present philosophical point. At the level of argument at which Linklater offers it to us, discourse ethics is commended as superior to other possible platforms of a universalizing moral outlook, when it either needs such another platform itself or, without one, will not in fact *be* superior because its procedures will be too restrictive and, therefore, bad.

To show that more is involved in this than a minor quibble about the rationalist chicken and the discourse ethics egg, I offer a quick thought experiment. Having identified, prior to some dialogic process, the constituency of those likely to be affected by it, I find that some of them are so extremely famished, and others suffering so badly from the sequelae of torture, as to be unable to participate in what looks likely to be a long and complex deliberation. Am I thereby forbidden from holding that they have rights to adequate nourishment and against torture, just as much as they do a right to be discursively engaged on equal terms? Forbidden because this claim is yet to be validated in a dialogue that involves them? More generally, if thin universality can encompass the moral equality of a general right to be included in dialogic processes, why not also the moral equality of rights against torture and to the most basic requirements of life: not only adequate nourishment,

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but protection against the elements, some minimum of health care, then rights also against exhausting toil through enslavement or other forms of coercion; and so on? We surely want a sense of proportion in this. Rights to eat and against having one's eyes gouged out seem as significant as being able to take part in the discussion. Not to let it get too overbearingly plump, but thin universality begins to look, in that case, reasonably substantial. In words Linklater himself quotes from Michael Walzer, 'the thin morality is already very thick' (230).

For it should be noted that Linklater is not only aware of this line of thought; he insists on it. It relates to the Marxian point earlier touched on. He speaks, for instance, of the social and economic resources people need for their 'effective' participation in an open society, and of 'the need to create the social and economic preconditions of an effective universal communication community', and of a 'duty to create the social and economic conditions which will ensure that participation within appropriate communicative frameworks is meaningful for the largest possible number of the world's population' (99, 106, 205–6). As well as an assumption about the discourse procedure's proper constituency then, all these preconditions *too* subtend it as a moral presupposition. So are they, or are they not—the assumption, the preconditions—theoretically more fundamental than the procedure itself? To me Linklater's answer is not clear. At one place (85) he writes that membership of wider communication communities does not presume shared cultural orientations, and he goes on:

> All that has to be assumed is that cultural differences are no barrier to equal rights of participation within a dialogic community. The duty to associate with others as co-legislators . . . rests on the fact that there are no compelling differences between human beings which can legitimate their prima facie exclusion from dialogic interaction.

I shall take it, in view of Linklater's overall commitments in this matter, that what the second of these propositions characterizes as a fact is more accurately characterized by the first of them as an assumption, since they both make the same claim and it is a normative rather than empirical one. In any event, they offer the thin ethical universalism as *presupposed by* the dialogic procedure, supporting it as an independent premise, its own ethical platform. On the following page (86), on the other hand, the same sort of thing seems itself to be offered up for adjudication, as the test of its 'transcultural validity', *within* the dialogic procedure:

> Societies . . . which believe that moral progress revolves around the recognition that specific cultural differences lack ethical force, will seek to win others to their cause. But by entering dialogue they accept that the logic of their beliefs may fail to persuade their interlocutors.

On my reading of him Linklater never satisfactorily resolves this question. I now go on to attempt a resolution of it myself. I explore four possible bases, on the terrain as Linklater maps it, of a thin universality. Two of these bases he himself seemingly allows us, one he forbids us, and one he perhaps ambiguously allows us. This last, I will contend, is the best of the four, but it leads back from discourse ethics—taken strictly not loosely, as earlier explained—back, not to Kant exactly but, in the way I shall argue for it, to a semi-rationalist rather than proceduralist universalism and in that limited sense one defensive of Kant.

First, Linklater might be wanting to suggest that the thin universality that supports discourse ethics just comes, in Rortian spirit, from 'where *we* are'. It comes,

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in other words, from trends in our culture and, as it happens, in some other cultures. This is what he sometimes appears to say (100, 101, 102–3). But it is no good; it is just a way of speaking. It is no good because where we are is never only one place. As well as thin universality, from where we are I can get also obscene polarities of wealth and social marginalization or destitution; or I can get that the relatively affluent and contented of the world look on more or less inactively at the most appalling hardships and tragedies for much of the rest of its population; I can get residual and not so residual strands of racism and other poisonous social forms. And this is certainly not what Linklater means by 'where we are'. What he means is something like 'where we have good reasons for being'. Hence his usages in this connection: 'one of the most advanced moral themes', 'spurious reasons for the exclusion of outsiders', 'more advanced moral codes', 'the highest normative ideal' (90, 104, 123, 176). He plainly means something along these lines, too, because taking into a dialogue with others a bare where-we-are, to be met with an equally bare where-*they*-are, isn't going to make for much of a dialogue when one is looking, as Linklater indicates we should be, for 'the force of the better argument' (92, 97, 99).

Therefore, second, let us take seriously the possibility that Linklater means the procedure itself, the dialogic outcome, to be authoritative. But this leads straight to a contradiction. For if outcomes are truly open, then we could get outcomes in which some people are henceforth permanently excluded from the discussion, irrespective of whether it affects their interests or not, and it goes against the whole tenor of Linklater's book that he could accept that: that, let us say, the blind, or the Belgians, might no longer be permitted to take part. One could just hope here against such outcomes and for thin universalist ones, as being the only kind that are to be recognized as fully valid. But then it is clear the validity comes from somewhere else than the unalloyed procedure, since this only confers its moral stamp on what we (universalists) already favour. There are further problems. For example, the procedure's social and economic preconditions, needed for it to be an adequate one, a dialogue on equal terms—are these judged outside the dialogue in order to legitimate it, or only within the dialogue by the discussants themselves? In the first case, the procedure is, again, not self-validating and comprehensively authoritative; in the second case it is, but uselessly so from a thin universalist point of view, since it can validate conditions of enslavement in a discourse that is not—as it is required to be—'domination-free' (220). Moreover, when Linklater contrasts to its disadvantage a Kantian-style test of universality through individual reason with a Habermasian one based on open dialogue (91–2), the distinction is overdrawn. Granted, there is no individual reason without social identity and social interaction, no sound private judgement without benefit of a broader interpersonal, and at bottom long historical, dialectic. In any given dialogic process, however, since I do not know its outcome for certain when I make my own contribution to it, I cannot, *in deciding how to try and influence the outcome*, take this outcome as already-authoritative for me. What else could I rely on here but my personal powers of judgement? Why indeed regard a dialogic outcome as carrying any authority if the individual judgements composing it have no authority of their own?

Are we thrown back then, third, upon an Archimedean moral standpoint? No, we are not. Linklater is right that this is unavailable to us. It is unavailable, as I see it, for at least two reasons. One is that when it comes to fully elaborated conceptions of the good, in all their detail and specificity, all their thickness, there is indeed a rich

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plurality of them. The other is that within this plurality of conceptions of the good there is an ineradicably subjective component, in that the axiomatic values at the heart of each one, and their inter-relationship there, their ordering, are not matters of objective confirmation, of demonstration or proof; they are matters of a variable choice. So there can be no singular, much less any absolute, certainties in this domain.

We are driven back, consequently, on what Linklater may sometimes speak as though he thinks to reject, but which I believe the logic of his own case compels him to retain and which is there in his text, if only ambiguously, whenever he makes appeal to the thin universalist presuppositions of discourse ethics itself. We are driven back on the resources of reason, plain *universal* human reason, that faculty which socialized members of our species share even across the cultures which differentiate them. It is a faculty which never operates unencumbered, pure or simple. It operates always within a body of belief, a set of cultural assumptions, distinctions, blockages and so forth. Nevertheless, this no more rules out all common content to it, across cultures, than does the fact of wide social and cultural difference more generally tell against the existence of some shared human traits: some common needs, capacities and values. The very idea, in fact, of discursive engagement, of communication communities reaching across the division lines of culture and moral outlook, presupposes at least a rough inter-translatability between the considerations and arguments, the logics of persuasion and contestation, to be exchanged.

I repeat, this does not mean the possibility of reasoning towards a single, definite moral truth. However, it does mean the possibility of reasoning together on the basis of shared human experiences and of certain shared values within these, whether having to do with mortality, illness, grief, pain or other suffering, with well-being, love, dignity, integrity or flourishing. There is not a view from nowhere. But there is, speaking broadly, a view from everywhere. There is a view we can argue for in any language, and by laying out reasons and values that can be made sensible in the terms of other cultures as well as in those of our own. This is the basis, the best that we have, for a thin universality, and it is worth more than an open-ended procedure that could conclude against it. And *this*, to be as clear as can be on the point, is not a matter of claiming intellectual certainty by the back door. It is—thin universality—just a moderately persuasive hypothesis on the historical evidence we have, when conjoined with certain values to which very large numbers of our species have shown themselves to be attached one way and another.

I turn now, much more briefly, to Marx. Some of what Linklater has to say positively about Marx and Marxism I have already noted, and the rest of what he has to say, both positively and negatively, is familiar enough that it can be rapidly sketched. Marxism's strength, he thinks, was its insight into systems of class exclusion and its analysis of the role of production in historical development. But it neglected other modes of exclusion, ones grounded in representations of ethnicity, gender and race, and it neglected also the important role in history of state-building, geopolitics and war. Marxism 'paid a high price for its preoccupation with the transformation of capitalist relations of production' (42, 43, 111).

There is obviously something in this, though it is fashionable today to exaggerate the extent of it by adverting to highly simplified models of what Marxism was and is instead of to the practice of its most able thinkers. Of interest to me here, however,

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is where the criticism leads, and in *The Transformation of Political Community* where it leads is to a sort of general levelling in which, as Linklater puts the point, 'What Marx and Marxism regarded as the central axis of exclusion was therefore *just one instance* of a broader phenomenon' (115–18 at 116; emphasis added). I would venture to suggest that, in terms of the author's own declared moral and political objectives, the choice he by implication offers us in saying this—a choice between inflating the importance of the axis of class differentiation, and just seeing this as on a level with other axes of exclusion—is not an exhaustive one. Class and related economic differentials might simply rank, for some purposes, as strategically more germane, and I contend that, in terms of the aim of a universal communication community, this is precisely the case. It is desperately unfashionable to say it at the moment, but if and where liberal forms of capitalism have a future, as they do appear to have a long one, the movements against gender, ethnic and racial inequality and exclusion are now virtually unstoppable. I do not mean to understate the resilience of any of these phenomena, nor the danger of their sudden resurgence, with ugly and sometimes lethal consequences, in conditions of ever-recurring social crisis. Nor do I underestimate how much there is still to be done to remedy them. Nor do I overlook the way in which they often interlock with, and reinforce, differentials of class. Nevertheless, there are powerful tendencies generated by the dominant socio-economic ensemble itself—identified with breathtaking clarity and prescience already in the *Communist Manifesto*—tendencies working against all 'fixed' relations, all 'ancient . . . prejudices and opinions', in favour of a pervasive marketization and monetarization. They work thereby to some degree *with* the social movements fighting for the recognition of identities and differences that do not threaten that pervasive trend. It is not so, on the other hand, with respect to the exclusions resulting from class and related differentials. These are endemic, integral. They are themselves produced and constantly reproduced by the same aforesaid 'capitalist relations of production' with which Marxism has been preoccupied.

There is also, in this, a dialogical issue, if I may so put it. Who, today, of all the excluded, has least of a voice? Who, that is, in the major places and spaces of intellectual discourse? At the seminars, the national and international conferences, in the journals, the departments and faculties, and at the dinner parties and other social gatherings of the discursively busy communities of academics and intellectuals all over the world, it is not on the whole women or ethnic minorities or people as they are sometimes called of colour, and it is not gays or lesbians or those of an unconventional sexuality, who are the most absent. It is people in the 'lower' economic categories, the economically marginalized, the impoverished, manual workers, the homeless, the chronically and the permanently unemployed, and all the wretched of the earth. Taken seriously, a truly dialogic perspective leads straight back into the social theory inaugurated by Marx.

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