

PEACE STUDIES JOURNAL

Vol. 3, Issue 2
August 2010

Normative Dialogue in a Multi-Cultural Community: an Analytical and Practical Model

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NORMATIVE DIALOGUE IN A MULTI-CULTURAL COMMUNITY: AN ANALYTICAL AND PRACTICAL MODEL

Abstract

Communication allows for the transformation from divergence to coexistence, and thus, it is imperative for community building. Furthermore, the unity and potency of every human community hinges upon the quality of communication among the people who compose it: prosperity or decay is stipulated by the members' skills to interact with one another. The concept of community is manifold and various disciplines understand it in different manners. This paper is closer to the sociological approach, which identifies two major criteria for the existence of a viable human community: relationship of reciprocal influence, and commitment which rests on a set of shared values and norms (Etzioni, 1996). This paper heuristically and generically describes community as any kind of human collectivity regardless of size, developmental stage or vitality. The main thesis introduced here is that the future of a human community could be guaranteed only by maintaining a balance between particular volitions and collective responsibility. Such balance is established through *normative dialogue* and discourse based on *constructive communication*. The Israeli society, as a one rifted by ideological and moral conflicts, must develop a culture of dialogue in order to survive.

Communication Patterns: Discourse and Dialogue

Communication is vital to the prosperity and survival of any human community. It is so central to societal life that it can be declared with a high degree of certainty that the value of the community depends for better or worse on the quality of communication among its members. This assertion yields a significant distinction between two types of communication: destructive

and constructive. The former is characterized by noises, fog, discord and other obstacles and difficulties along the interaction channels. Such disturbances may be structural (technical defaults, incompatible means), functional (inaptitude, inexperience) or contextual (cultural disparities, wrong timing). They could be systematic or disorganized, frequent or sporadic, planned or spontaneous. In any case, this kind of communication is restricted and damaging because the transmitted message is not identical to the received one. Thus, a breach of understanding is created followed by an imminent mistrust, which renders cooperation and coexistence arduous indeed. Constructive communication is the opposite model. It is characterized by transparency and fluency, unabated exchange of information and genuine desire on both sides to understand each other. As a result of the successful practice of transmission, trust and confidence are reciprocally attained. This is the cornerstone for the foundation of every human gathering, whether for temporary, short-term objective or a promethean goal of sound and better life.

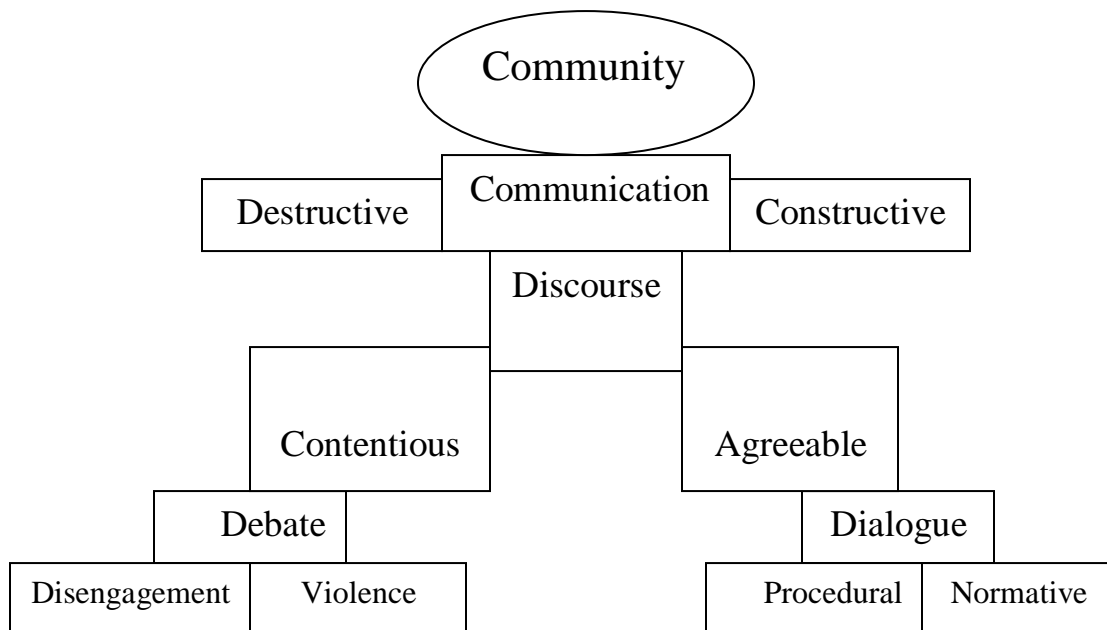
The process of communication in a human community can be achieved in several ways. One of the most challenging and rewarding is interaction through discourse. The definition used here is inspired by Thompson et al. (1990), and relates to discourse as a set of claims and counter-claims which refers to the diagnosis and prognosis of a certain sociopolitical issue. A claim consists of an account, an image or an analogy capable of persuasion by appealing to reasoning, emotion or faith. Every discourse includes packages of contending arguments vying for listeners' support. The elucidation and articulacy of the argumentation process are heightened during conflict and disagreement. A position invigorates a counter position and rival stands galvanize and intensify each other the more polemic they are. Speakers on both sides of the divide endeavor to form dichotomies or fault lines that would establish the discourse field and draw the boundaries. The more successful in this task gains the advantage in setting the agenda and determining the discourse direction.

Speakers are players who create or participate in written or spoken dialogue. They can be individuals as well as collectives. Speakers develop a variety of strategies to set up expedient positions in their quest to dominate the dialogue. Such techniques can be, for example, shifting from the specific and practical to the principal and general, and thereby, acquiring broader sympathy and understanding; adjusting the scope and emphases of the discussion to the needs and interests of the attentive audience; or attempting to be congenial and consenting regarding traditional values, symbols or behavior and thus, isolating the other side in a non-consensus position. An effective discourse hinges upon a delicate balance between the accurate analysis and identification of the issue (diagnosis) and the supply of a suitable solution (prognosis). In other words, adjusting claims to audience's volitions will render the entire discourse efficient and resonant with the environment (Snow & Benford 1988).

Discourse can be contentious or agreeable: it can be conducted as a debate or as a dialogue. In the former, the participants promote a confrontational attitude and they aspire to win over the dispute in order to prove themselves right. Communication would be deficient and hostile, where each side attempts to fool, outsmart and outrage the other in order to set him off balance and score more points. This is a typical zero-sum situation, in which the advantage of one is automatically at the expense of the other. At times, harsh debates might deteriorate to violence

and even to curtailment of communication and disengagement. Dialogue, on the other hand, encourages constructive communication of transparency and trust. This enables a win-win scenario where all sides can gain. Debates and dialogues differ in more than one sense: debaters strive to uphold their side and downplay the other's while dialogue attempts to listen and understand the other; debate juxtaposes established and prearranged countering arguments whereas dialogue is based on flexibility and openness toward the other; debate is declaratory and unidirectional while dialogue is interactive. Finally, debate is ostensibly resolute and unyielding on each side whereas dialogue does not shy away from hesitation, doubts and re-evaluation (Pearce & Littlejohn 1997).

Ultimately, dialogue can be either procedural or normative but not necessarily in a mutually-exclusive way. The normative one, however, is essential to sustain a human community. These trends of interactions in a human community are summarized in the "Lego-Monster" model below:



The "Lego-Monster" model: Interactions in a Human Community

Dialogue as an agreeable discourse stems from constructive communication, which is characteristic of conflict resolution processes. This is an adverse orientation to destructive communication which is typical during conflict. The leading purpose in conflict is to win and get what ever is in dispute on the expense of the opponent. Conflict resolution becomes an option once the rivaling sides recognize the futility of confrontation and their inability to materialize their interests through quarrelling. While communication in conflict is based on defective channels, noises and disturbances, misconceptions, cultural differences and lingual disparities, communication during conflict resolution represents the opposite of all these obstructions. It tries to secure flowing and translucent back and forth message exchange. Unlike conflict, where the name of the game is deluding and pulling the rug under a rival's feet in order to obtain

advantage, in conflict resolution there is a totally different end result: aiming to understand the other and thus attenuating the comprehension gaps and verifying an authentic and honest flow of information.

Moving from conflict to conflict resolution requires several adjustments and modifications to enable a situation whereby dialogue can commence (Peleg 1997). First, it is essential to change the attitude toward the other from hostility and derision to dignity, tolerance and caring. The negative approach toward our opponents is a corollary of the *strategy of conflict* (Schelling 1968), which states that the prospect of winning grows with defiance, solidarity and commitment to the cause. The most efficient and rapid way for such cohesion processes is the denigration and de-legitimizing of the rival. This is the cognitive-psychological dimension of conflict, where all the negative images, labeling and prejudice are accumulated (Mitchell 1981; Burton 1990; Kriesberg 1998). When the opponents decide to embark on the conflict resolution path and embrace constructive communication, they first must endeavor to cultivate positive images of one another instead of the disparagement and slander they advocated earlier. This is not a simple assignment especially when the conflict was ongoing and protracted, in which negative images were inculcated for an extended period of time. Hence, the first mission on hand is to build trust. Infamously, the crux of all reconciliation is mutual mistrust (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall 2006; Pruitt & Kim 2004). Perceiving the other as a partner rather than as an evil schemer, recognizing his fears, sensitivities and desires and then aligning them with our interests is a major challenge which necessitates dignity, tolerance and caring towards the prior enemy. Such a shift in attitude demands listening to the other which is the ultimate precondition for dialogue.

Another venue to approach dialogue is the realization that every conflict is a form of interdependence, where the protagonists are jointly entrapped and only together can they escape their common predicament (Lewicki & Saunders 2000). The sense of shared destiny in conflict is turning into a shared purpose, which is a promising basis for a cooperative and good willed dialogue. Acknowledging interdependence as a setting for conflict ushers in one of the salient catalysts of conflict resolution, namely separating the people from the problem (Fisher & Ury, 1981). This principle emerges from the observation that each side blames its rival for the dispute; conflict would have never erupted had not the other existed. In such a view, a total identification is forged between the other and the problem, and responsibility is altogether attributed to the enemy. Awareness of interdependence contributes to the effort of severing the actors from the problem and neutralizes the trap of dodging accountability. Then, the rivals of old can isolate the problem and unite in tackling it. Consequently, the ground for dialogue is set.

The successful transformation from conflict to conflict resolution entails getting rid of old habits. Confrontation relies on incentives which prod the belligerents on and inspire their courage and commitment. These characteristics are inappropriate to conflict termination, but still, they are very difficult to forego. Notwithstanding, they must be given up to allow for dialogue to commence. They are the urge to subjugate the opponent, the desire to prove ourselves right or superior, the insistence on revenge and the temptation to outwit the enemy. It is highly recommended to feel secured and content and not cheated, exploited or duped to the negotiation table. Such concessions trigger a self reflection process, which can be incredibly useful to

warrant a fruitful dialogue. During such practice, the actor asks himself or herself, “What do I actually want? What is my interest? How would dialogue benefit me more than conflict?”

The main features that distinguish between conflict and dialogue are summarized in the following table:

Dialogue	Conflict
<p>Constructive Communication Purpose: to understand and interpret messages of other. Attitude of dignity, caring and tolerance to other. Attentive and open to other. Trust. Conflict as interdependence: nobody to blame. All suffer, thus we will salvage each other. The means: Cooperation (win-win game). Positive images of other: partner, reliable, responsible. The problem is isolated. Incentives: urge to compromise, search for just solution, self reflection.</p>	<p>Destructive Communication Purpose: to disturb and thwart the messages of other. Attitude of intolerance, uncaring and apathy to other. Inattentive and suspicious to other. Mistrust. Conflict as dependence: the other is to blame, we suffer. Thus, we will salvage ourselves. The means: vanquishing the other (zero-sum game) Negative images of other: demon, evil, schemer, threat. The problem is the other. Incentives: urge to win, prove our point, revenge, frustration, insecurity.</p>

Normative Dialogue: The Key to a Substantial Community

A community which aspires for substantiality must develop a shared understanding of the good and a normative system to support such agreement. This is the ultimate premise upon which a substantive community can and should cultivate its existence and growth. The significance of the good as the quintessence of coexistence may be variously perceived in a heterogenic context such as an immigrant society. To confer meaning on the abstract ideal called the virtue (the extent of the good), establishing an agreed and respected set of norms and values, shared by the majority in the community is imperative. This is an entirely different basis for community building than other motivations for assembling together, such as social contract, economic calculations or political and administrative coercion. The latter are models of rational consent which are based on practical assessments and tactical procedures whether to join or exit a community¹.

¹ Many writers are affiliated with the Social Contract school, albeit with major differences in emphasis and nuance. From Locke, Rousseau and Hobbes to Olson, Habermas and Rawls and many others between them, the notion of amassing into a civil society as a result of rational accord was and remained popular not as an actual historic event but as a theoretical concept. The principles and merits of the social contract were changing from writer to writer according to the time and socio-political context of each thinker.

The guiding principle for members of such communities is how their individual interests are best incorporated with the interests of the group. This is a stipulated approach of joining a community pending upon certain beneficial circumstances and conditions at a certain point in time. In such a model of community formation, groups and individuals cohere due to procedural or technical processes that can range from uniformly enforced rules to voting or deliberating regulations. Eventually, such a community survives owing to the meticulous and delicate synergy of *individual interpretations* to the idea of the good. What takes place is an intricate process of accumulated individual priorities adding up into one single collective scale. This arrangement endures as long as its particular adherents feel that their interests are rewarded². Dialogue administered in similar conditions and understanding is called a *procedural dialogue*.

In a substantive community, where affiliation hinges on collective identity rather than on a temporal convergence of needs, members are guided by normative precepts by which they are abided and obligated. The more the overall value system is credible and acceptable, the less necessity there is to establish rules and regulations in order to maintain communal allegiance. But this logic entails an elementary dilemma: how can such a normative order be successfully crafted in order to resonate with all the various groups that make up a society? How can divergent belief systems be reconciled into one solid framework encompassing all members? Surely, each group would rather practice its own familiar set of values and let other groups undergo a transition and adjust. The answer to this genuine concern is twofold: a) Constituting a *normative core*, a kind of basic moral platform consisting of essential values that each founding member group can agree on without sacrificing any of its original principles. b) Such a community must develop skills of a *normative dialogue* to sustain itself.

A normative core: values are mostly abstract and subjective. They are also by their nature *essentially contested concepts* (Connolly, 1983), or in other words, highly ambivalent and potentially divisive and conflict-ridden. For example, one's notion of justice is another's injustice and my understanding of equality may disturb yours, whereas others' perceptions of freedom might spell suppression to me. Conceivably, these are culture and circumstance-bound ideas. They are shaped and stipulated by contingencies and transient needs. When a new community is established, each member group approaches the newly formed assembly with its existing and familiar normative package hoping to maintain and cultivate them under the new arrangement. If the moral dowry blends well with other normative legacies of founding members, the community is up to a smooth start and the convergence process will be relatively uncomplicated. However, such a scenario is rare because values form identities and create unique and exclusive meaning to each group and thus, compromising them or adjusting to others' moral principles becomes incredibly unlikely.

² This approach is drastically shaken by the Arrow Paradox, in which Nobel Prize winner, economist Kenneth Arrow mathematically demonstrates that priorities of disparate individuals cannot linearly add up even though these priorities may be totally consistent and rational. Thus, in public decision-making, it is impossible to ordinarily tally the interests and volitions of all the people into a coherent *general will*. Arrow's conclusions are still controversial in part but were pioneers in topics such as voting behavior, decision-making and welfare policy. For more details see Arrow (1970).

This complexity is augmented even further in an immigrant society, which is by definition a multi-cleavages society (Hurwitz & Lissak, 1991), coalescing under a single roof disparate groups with dissimilar characteristics and incompatible interests. Each group endeavors to uphold its original values as safe-guards to preserve its authentic distinctiveness in the face of the impending merger. The process of blending a divergence of value-systems into a coherent unity can hardly be harmonious. Any attempt to force them together or coerce some under the authority of others ventures the creation of irremediable hostilities and rendering divergent values outright contradictory. The most viable remedy to such predicament is to establish a normative core: a narrow but solid nucleus, which will include only the basic values contiguous to the normative standards of all participants. A normative core is the mechanism which enables the construction of a multi-cultural society (Nachtomy 2003; Mautner et al. 1998).

Multiculturalism can be understood in two dimensions: the objective-descriptive, which underlines the existence of more than one culture within the jurisdiction of a unified sociopolitical entity, and the subjective-normative, which depicts attitude and reference toward the other and the different. The former is of lesser significance: it merely supplies analytical distinctions and perhaps some illustrations of putative dilemmas and tight spots. The latter is more noteworthy since cultural frictions which escalate to conflicts express themselves mainly on the symbolic and ritualistic levels (Kurzer 1988). Accordingly, the major contention in a multicultural setting is usually grappling with the question: which of the contending cultures would ultimately prevail over all others and transform its individual tradition, routines and life-style to those adopted by the entire community? Which group would obtain superiority at the expense of all others? The normative dimension suggests a *modus vivendi* for tension reduction and attenuating hostilities. It presents recognition of ethical and moral parity between all cultures regardless of historical heritage, size or duration as the only viable foundation for multiculturalism. Such acknowledgment of the legitimacy of each culture involves also the realization that culture is self defined and accordingly, every group feeling affinity and cohesion with certain symbols, rituals or customs may proclaim itself a separate cultural entity (Laitin 1988).

Accepting multiculturalism as such might be painful to a dominant culture, that aspires to expand authority and influence throughout its sovereign territory. Recognizing multiculturalism is translated under these circumstances as openness, tolerance and approval of foreigners as partners to a common destiny. To the assertive-realist actor of the nationalistic age, who painstakingly forged a coherent national identity around well crafted mythologies and recycled historical narratives, this option would be hard to swallow. Societies which achieved nationhood at a relatively late stage would find the multicultural model even less palatable. If those societies happen to be immigrant societies, an internal growing strain might develop as a contrast between the desire of the forefathers to ascertain superiority and the necessity to absorb newcomers as equal members of the community. Liberal democracy's greatest challenge is to overcome this strain that might, if not attended, debilitate the community and expedite its demise.

There are several reasons why the importance of equality as the kernel of the multiculturalism model cannot be underestimated. First, a heterogenic community which boasts ethnic, religious or national variety would not function effectively and would not last without a sense of

affiliation, solidarity and reciprocal commitment. Such characteristics cannot prosper on spurious camaraderie; they flourish on mutual respect, the appreciation of difference and the equal opportunity for each group to autonomously thrive. Any minority to be unfairly treated by the political center would become hostile and non-cooperative and its affiliation with the community would weaken. Second, the general political culture in such community would be based on intolerance, hostility and unsettled tensions. Such climate would inevitably result in violence and self destruction. The fundamental service each administration is bound to give its citizenry—existential security—would be irreparably damaged and consequently, the government's reputation and legitimacy. Third, in the 21st century reality in which migration and relocation are the most prevalent demographic phenomena, every community on earth consists of more than a single culture. In other words, *all* societies today are multicultural and hence, value-based appreciation and preparedness toward multiculturalism are of an essence. Normative assessment of multiculturalism means understanding the impending situation and preempting potential complications in due time. One such preemptive move is to construct a *decentralized* power system. A multi-ripped community that aspires to be multicultural should develop a decentralized structure with a small but potent center containing a joint normative core encircled by several thriving and culturally autonomous peripheries. Such a model would be an abomination for the centralistic nation-state, but hopefully, as the nationalistic paradigm wanes and its grip on the various minorities within its jurisdiction diminish, the decentralized model of multiculturalism would become more viable. The advent of the model and its normative core can be expedited by normative dialogue.

Earlier, normative dialogue was introduced and defined. The following is a depiction of how it might work. A normative core composed of key moral concepts of its constitutive cultures, is not formed instantly or automatically; it requires a long-term scrupulous and rigorous effort. Every group clings to its own values and beliefs for they epitomize the unique identity of the congregation which is, therefore, reluctant to forego any of them. However, the gist of the normative core idea is that no faction would be able to include *all* of its principles at the core, and even those which are incorporated into the nucleus would surely be integrated or 'contaminated' by values of other factions. A facilitating factor in trying to cope with the demanding task of establishing a normative core might be to change the unit of analysis in understanding the process of community building from the *individual to the collective*. The classical theories of integration and community formation are based mostly on individual calculations: is it worthwhile for *me* to join or will *I* get along in the new environment. This logic leads to contractual commitment of each individual to the group and every new member is provisional: once an individual contravenes the rules of the community he or she might be ostracized, or if the community reneges on its promise, there is a pretext for the individual to leave. Even the most liberal thinker of the social contract theorists, John Rawls (1921-2002), advocated community building according to the principles of justice and fairness, and in order to protect them he suggested that the representatives of each faction should wrap themselves up with a 'veil of ignorance' toward the socio-economic disparities around them. He believed that eventually the contract with the community is individual (1971; 1993). But relying solidly on individual judgments as vouching for unison and concord, rational and prudent as they might be, and entrusting community moral strength on ad-hoc consent for this or that cause would lead to a situation whereby "half the society would be lawyers drafting contracts (or trying to wriggle out

of them)” (Etzioni 1996, p 94). Social stability and order, which also guarantee fairness must therefore be based on communal norms shared by all or by the majority, and commitment of individuals rests not on the validity of contract or fear of sanction but on the power of identifying with collective values.

What would the negotiation on the normative core look like? What sort of discussion is suitable for the representatives of the various factions to engage in to plan together a common future? In the last three decades the most popular democratic discourse (at least in the eyes of academics and intellectuals) has been the *deliberative* one, marked by a free and rational discussion on the principle of community coexistence (Habermas 1976, 1990, 1993; Selznick 1992; Elster 1998). But deliberative discourse is problematic and basically incapable of forming a normative core due to several reasons: 1) It is difficult to find anyone who is endowed with pure analytic and rational thinking with abundant knowledge and unlimited access to sources of information; 2) In many instances where a deliberative discourse does take place, delegates do not espouse their own autonomous stands but they speak for those who sent them, and thus they are bounded by a particular agenda without much discretion or personal judgment, and 3) A large portion of the issues discussed are irrational to begin with; they are emotional, moral and, as such, not necessarily logical. The assertion that an objective, poised, and controlled discourse on the nature and rules of the community is possible, is pretentious and incredible. Could a discussion on gay rights, abortion or child abuse really be calmly and judiciously handled?

The opposite pole to the astute and considerate dialogue is the frontal confrontation between contending cultures and the attempt of each side to brutally take over the shared public space. The highest and most intense level of such hostile interaction is cultural war (a calque use of the German *Kulturkampf*) (Mansbridge 1980; Hunter 1991; Peleg 2002). In such a collision there are hardly any winners, and coexistence between rivaling faction is implacably ruined. The motivation to salvage the community diminishes and each faction is preoccupied with its own survival at the expense of the other. Communication becomes destructive and unreliable and animosity replaces cooperation. In between those two extremities stands the possibility of normative dialogue. This is the option that inspires coexistence as a top priority; an option that recognizes the dignity and needs of the other, and that endeavors to solve disagreements graciously and sensibly and translate them into a better shared future.

The Rules of Normative Dialogue

Normative dialogue is not erratic or arbitrary. It has very distinct and persistent rules-of-the-game, but they assume the procedural, protocol-type guise of contractual bargaining. One of these rules is to employ a *super-ordinate value* to reconcile between incompatible values of each group. It is of essence especially when the negotiating sides are stuck in a cyclical argumentation of value versus value. Goodin (1989) demonstrates how super-ordinate value can work in a normative dialogue in his study of disagreement on smoking in a community. At first it seems that the conflict is insolvable: each group is entrenched in its position for and against smoking. But when the value of liberty is introduced into the equation and the principle that the freedom of one cannot supersede the freedom of another, the quarrel subsides. Agreeing on liberty as an overarching value enables the negotiators to move from the abstract to the practical and save

their community. This is akin to switching from position (yes smoking, no smoking) to interests (we respect each other's freedom of choice, let's think of where and when smoking could be possible without infringing on anyone's indulgence). Goodin is of course influenced John Stewart Mill's classic work *On Liberty* (1859) in modern attire and a clear revalidation of his conclusion and recommendations.

Another vital rule in normative dialogue is the a-priori recognition that all the discussants belong to the same community regardless of the severity and scope of disagreement or the consequences of the resolution. The ultimate point that all must agree upon is the reaffirmation of the community's existence and that its disintegration is not an option. If this stipulation is clarified in advance, it affects not only the possible results but also the atmosphere and the process leading to the outcome. From this, other rules follow: to refrain from assailing the central values and beliefs of any other group and to avoid demonizing or disparaging others' positions or opinions. These are two sides of the same coin: the former is direct interaction with the other, whereas the latter is the dissemination of negative attitude about the other among our people. Both rules necessitate a lot of forbearance and patience to uphold, especially amid the fervor and vehemence value-laden issues often invoke.

In principle, the simplistic black-and-white vision and arguments formed in absolute terms are mitigated in normative dialogue. More complicated attitudes are expressed and more sophisticated perspectives are employed when a keen desire to reach out and know the other exists. Participants of the normative dialogue cease thinking in dichotomies of 'we' versus 'them', 'good' versus 'bad' or 'right' versus 'wrong' and begin considering relative viewpoints which weigh some values in relation to other values (Tannen 1999). This is a shift which involves kindness and openness to others and leads to one more rule of normative dialogue: at times, it is advisable to leave certain topics outside of the discussion. They might be too tender and too painful to discuss and their mentioning might adversely affect the proceedings. It would be more advantageous to accentuate commonalities and shared goals than to dwell on the divisible. The congenial atmosphere of the normative dialogue inspires terminology and images as well. They are less belligerent and antagonistic and more sympathetic to grievances and concerns (Glendon 1991). One more important feature inside the normative dialogue toolbox is persuasion, whereby people, who never thought much of a specific value and certainly never embraced it, learn to appreciate and accept it. Such a change of attitude is aided by education and leadership, two communication channels which exert immeasurable non-violent and non-coercive influence. Education for values and normative leadership are two regulatory systems which ought to be recognized in a community that allows normative dialogue. This is where the pool of apt mediators and facilitators are to be located when dialogue hits a snag. The contents of education for the normative dialogue community and the quality of leadership should be based on participatory and pluralism, and imposition of ideas, texts and thoughts must be forbidden (Daft 1999; Goleman et al. 2002).

Within the normative dialogue, Etzioni (1996, p 228) distinguishes between *process* normative and *value* normative. The former, much like procedural dialogue, focuses on the way the parties congregate and how they communicate with one another in their attempts to reach a common ground. But unlike the procedural models of the social contract vein which are rational and

individual in their nature, the normative process dialogue is about moral principles that underline means, not goals. Habermas, like other philosophers who for ages explored and debated the meaning of virtue—the quality of the good—the quintessential normative precept of the community, defines it as the *normative rightness*. To reach an agreement on the full meaning of this term participants of the deliberation should abide by several rules: nobody is excluded from partaking; every argument is refutable; any value-laden issue can be raised provided that the speaker honestly believes in that value, and none of these rules can be arbitrarily annulled (Habermas 1990, p 24). This is, therefore, a dialogue which concerns normative ends, but its essence is the techniques employed to accomplish those objectives. Similarly, Ackerman (1989) advocates normative accommodation by calling for conversational restraint in practicing normative dialogue. By that he means that it is more important to underscore style and attitude in discourse rather than content. Furthermore, he suggests that what is not said is far more valuable than what is verbally expressed because in sensitive matters of value or creed, people might get hurt and relationships severed simply due to miscommunication.

However, since normative dialogue is supposed to bring about a valid and reliable setting for a shared communal basis and in order to harness the commitment and loyalty of all factions to a long-standing normative core, dialogue must encompass not only dynamics and procedures but also substance and implications of the discussed values in the eyes of the various parties involved. A community aspiring to become substantial is one which develops tools for value normative dialogue, or dialogue of conviction, whereby all factions bind not by the burden of procedure but by the passion and conviction of beliefs (Barber 1984). A dialogue of conviction—the most fitting and worthy of substantial community—flourishes in a sustaining and cultivating cultural environment. A cultural milieu that does not encourage listening to and caring for the other and does not believe in the principle of fairness and equity between different value-systems would be adverse and obdurate to normative dialogue.

The merit of normative dialogue becomes salient when principal matters are in dispute. If a chair happens to be in contention, there is not much sense in having its future be determined by normative dialogue unless it is a throne. In that case, functional, mechanical and occupational arguments are substituted by symbolic, historic and prestigious claims, hence rendering it amenable to principal-normative discussion, at least in the eyes of the contenders. Yet, not too many chairs have been the kernel of protracted conflicts. Normative dialogue requires patience, forbearance and broadmindedness due to the intangible and ambivalent nature of the issues at odds. The perfunctory, business-like approach of professional discourse does not serve the normative dialogue well. The latter relies upon the power of love rather than the power of exchange or the power of coercion (Boulding 1990), whereby participants trust and value each other's contribution and genuine reciprocity emerges.

The distinction between normative dialogue and procedural dialogue is in many ways akin to physicist and dialogue scholar David Bohm's (1992) dichotomy between discussion and dialogue. In the former, deliberators gather and try in various ways to influence and steer the process toward a specific favored outcome. The deliberation is only a means to accomplish that pre-planned objective. Dialogue, in Bohm's innovative analysis suspends all partisan interests, motivations, impulses, and judgments to enable an open and uninhibited space for collaborative

and unbiased thinking. This clean slate approach of dialogue allows inspecting and isolating the detrimental effect of prejudice, conformism and unshaken beliefs. The emphasis is on *the process* of musing together and being candid with one another rather than on reaching a certain final result. Hence the 'Bohmenian' dialogue is a propitious environment for examining values, principles and beliefs. But in order to become a more meaningful gateway to improved life, normative dialogue must be practiced along open and constructive communication channels and realized in the context of substantial human communities.

Epilogue: The Experiencing of Coexistence

An individual who is incapable of becoming or doesn't need to become a part of society is either a beast or a god writes Aristotle in *Politics*. Assuming that no one fancies being a beast and nobody is competent enough to play god, the only cogent alternative to live a fulfilling and gratifying life is to immerse oneself in a human community, albeit with intermittent escapes for individual relief and soul-searching. But it needs to be remembered that entering and assimilating in a human community, let alone taking root and prospering are not natural or automatic. They require a thorough mental preparation and adjustment and a profound shift of priorities. A person must get used to the idea that some of his or her precedences must give way to accommodate those of the community. This might be a rude realization in an individualistic and aggressive culture of a post-modern world. William Shakespeare writes in his play *Cymbeline* (1611) that "Society is no comfort to one not sociable". A sociable man is he who adopts a social orientation; a person that is willing to invest in constructive communication with colleagues and is aware that she should participate in a multicultural normative dialogue to create something new, beyond what she previously knew or got used to.

The adjustment process or the shift from solitary to sociable is not necessarily from noble and admirable living in nature as fantasized by the likes of Rousseau in *the Social Contract*, Whitman in *Leaves of Grass* or Thoreau in *Walden*. The conversion is not naïve and idealistic as was depicted by so many romanticists and transcendentalists from Byron and Shelley to Lowell and Emerson. It is not moving from the vast open spaces of "life in the woods" to the choking metropolitan scene nor is it a leap from the exhilarating experience of '*le bon sauvage*' to the savagery of urban estrangement. More aptly, it is a change from the elemental phase into which we are born and from the first unchosen affiliation circle (immediate family, relatives and neighbors) to the affiliation-of-choice in which we come of age (friends, colleagues and lovers). It is the road from exclusive distinctiveness to merging with the collective, from the specific conscience to the togetherness conscience, from ego to super-ego, from dependence (careless and unaware as it might be) to independence (careless and unaware as it equally might be). Although by no means, a shift from fantasyland to sober reality, it is nevertheless a potentially traumatic reassignment of mindset and demeanor.

In his solemn and compelling film *Into the Wild* (2007), actor-director Sean Penn tells the story of Christopher McCandless, a talented young student who decides to depart from human society and flee to the wild. He despises the competitive materialism of modern life and the relentless striving for social status symbolized by his parents' perpetual struggle for economic stability. The morning after his college graduation, he sells all his possessions, burns his money and sets

out for the great outdoors. His ultimate destination is the enormous uncharted territories of Alaska. When he finally made it to a deserted bus in the middle of the vast Alaskan nowhere, he is elated. He has reached his dreamland: roaming around with deer and rabbits, gathering wild berries and exploring the infinite kingdom of bare snow with no humans in sight. But after several months of staggering isolation amidst awe-inspiring sceneries, his enthusiasm begins to evaporate. Hunger and boredom take over and he starts hallucinating and conversing with imaginary figures. Finally his health deteriorates as a result of the many poisonous mushrooms he had eaten. As he lies dying he writes in his diary that there is no meaning to happiness in seclusion and the only way to experience it is by sharing it with other human-beings.

But to arrive at such a conclusion does not oblige long-drawn-out torment and affliction. We all occasionally daydream about roving the nomadic distances with a knapsack, a book and a knife. We imagine the call of nature and we rush home to pack some sandwiches, box of matches, and of course, the obligatory cell phone. We often mistake the psychological inclination for spouts of freedom for an actual urge to a solitary excursion to the out-of-doors. However for most people, several days as noble savages are sufficient before mosquito bites, pressureless showers and paucity of wireless access would hurry us back to civilization. But when we're back from our self-imposed solitude in the wilderness, we realize that what we missed the most was the company of other freedom-searchers like us who misinterpreted footloose and fancy free as being liberated. Our retreat home does not mean that we gave up on the ambition of freedom, which is and should be a permanent aspiration. But our return to the community heralds the understanding and the endeavor to accomplish, cultivate and preserve our freedom within and together with our community members. Communication is the golden path to freedom within the community and communication skills prolong and endure the experience of coexistence.

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