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Openness, Commitment, and the Problem of the Archimedean Fulcrum

A response to Marius van Hoogstraten

1. Introduction

It is impossible for me to respond to all of the ideas developed in Van Hoogstraten's very rich paper, and so I will only discuss a few ideas that If found most interesting. First, I will comment on his focus on *openness* as a possible solution to the problem of an Archimedean fulcrum from which we could leverage inter-religious dialogue, and this in turn raises the question of when we can presume shared commitments among participants in such a dialogue. Second, I will raise some difficulties posed by Van Hoogstraten's adoption of the notion of *radical* openness as it appears in Levinas and Derrida. Third, I want to suggest the early 20th century Indian philosopher Krishna Chandra Bhattacharya as a conversation partner when we think about how to talk about religion in an open frame of mind, as I think his presence will enrich the Levinasian discussion. Finally, I will raise some doubts about Van Hoogstraten's suggestion that religious difference precedes religious identity. I raise these questions not in order to refute his views, but in the spirit of dialogical engagement with views I find fascinating and compelling, but also problematic.

2. Neutrality and shared commitments

In some respects, the most compelling part of Van Hoogstraten's paper is the case study he considers at the end in which he examines the use of reason. That case study shows just how fluid any background of shared commitments we might presuppose can be, and how easy it is to convince oneself that one shares a set of commitments with an interlocutor when in fact those very commitments are in dispute. So we might begin by saying, "let's all be committed to the use of reason," and then we discover that you take *reason* to mean *obeying the law of non-contradiction*, while I, as a paraconsistent logician take it to mean *being willing to affirm contradictions when they happen to be true*. When these commitments become explicit in our dialogue, you may say that I've given up reason, and I may say, no, *you've* given up reason. At that point, the hollowness of the presumption of a shared commitment is evident, and we need to start all over to seek what we have in common. This is the character of most real dialogue about important matters: a constant retreat to ground we hope to share and discover to be contested.

That example is so powerful because it demonstrates that the kind of openness that's necessary for dialogue, as well as the kind of shared background, is often something to be *achieved*, not something to be *presupposed*. We enter dialogue with an *anticipation* of a shared background, but we don't always enter dialogue with a legitimate confidence in the *existence* of that background. This means a dialogue can fail because such a shared commitment can't be constructed—but it also means that dialogue can succeed despite not having a shared background in advance.

There's a nice analogy that Aristotle attributes to Plato in the Nicomachean Ethics: we have to always know in a race whether we're heading out towards the finish line or coming back toward the judges.[1] Greek racetracks were horseshoe-shaped. The point isthat we need to know whether we're working towards shared principles, and towards things we can agree about, or whether we've already agreed about those and now we're trying to work towards conclusions. And it is easy to be confused about this: we may think that we share a lot and we're working towards a

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1   "But let it not escape our notice that there is a difference between the arguments that proceed *from* the principles and those that proceed *to* the principles. For Plato too used to raise this perplexity well and investigate it, whether the path is going from the principles or to the principles, just as on a racecourse one can proceed from the judges to the finish line or back again." *Nicomachean Ethics,* Trans. Robert C Bartlett/Susan D. Collins (2011), University of Chicago Press; I.4, 1095a30-1095b1

conclusion, while it may be that we first need to find something that we share, in order to make it possible to talk in the first place. And that quest for shared principles might fail; we have no guarantee in any case that even that is going to succeed. And there is often a real threat in the background when serious dialogue is most necessary: either total breakdown of communication and isolation, or even resort to force. That's something we have to recognize in these discussions. That is why dialogue is so important; the tragedy is just that it is most important when it is most difficult; most difficult when it is most dangerous.

In *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere,* Jürgen Habermas, in conversation with Charles Taylor, discusses some of these issues in the context of the discussion of the relation of religion to public reason. We always enter dialogue with certain sets of presuppositions. Although these presuppositions are contingent, we cannot shed them at will. When, say, researchers at the *Academy of World Religions* enter into dialogue, one of the things that we start with is a commitment to a broadly pluralistic, secular (in some sense), open society. This is the society that we inherit from the *Aufklärung* and from John Stuart Mill (more than is often appreciated). It is that commitment to the free interchange of ideas and to pluralism in the public sphere that we take as a presupposition when we begin. One of the limits of dialogue is that there are people who *don't* take that as a presupposition. In the present global context, this makes the most critical conversations very difficult.

This in turn raises very difficult questions about what the place of specifically religious positions is in constituting that shared public sphere in which dialogue occurs. This is the question Habermas and Taylor ask. And even posing this question reminds us that the dualism between "religion" and the "secular" requires a very careful deconstruction. So, according to Habermas:

> ...the discursive confrontation with religious citizens endowed with equal rights demands from the secular side a similar reflection on the limits of a secular or postmetaphysical kind of reasoning. The insight that vibrant world religions may be bearers of "truth contents," in the sense of suppressed or untapped moral intuitions, is by no means a given for the secular portion of the population. A genealogical awareness of the religious origins of the morality of equal respect for everybody is helpful in this context. The occidental development has been shaped by the fact that philosophy continuously appropriates semantic contents from the Judeo-Christian tradition; and it is an open question whether this centuries-long learning process can be continued or even remains unfinished.[2]

When we think about our commiment to secularity, to impartiality, to pluralism, or this commitment to reason as it comes out of Van Hoogstraten's paper, we tend to think of that as transcending any particular religious tradition. The very fact that we're willing to use that term "transcending" suggests that we have a kind of transcendental view of the absolute value of secularity and impartiality. But those values are *not* religiously neutral. Calling into question the neutrality of the secular is both profound and disturbing. But it is necessary. When we—citizens of the modern or postmodern West—enter into dialogue, we take for granted this very particular account of a public sphere that comes out of Kant and Mill and we think of that as religiously neutral. But it's not. It's very easy for us to convince ourselves of the kind of disembodied dispassionate reasonable commitment to reason, and not recognize its particularity. When our dialogical partner is somebody whose own religious commitments, or own conception of the public sphere and of the transcendental conditions of dialogue diverges from our own, we have a recipe for disaster.

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2   Jürgen Habermas, „The Political," in: Butler, Habermas, Taylor and West (2011), *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (Columbia University Press), p. 27

All of this connects to a problem that permeates the literature on interreligious dialogue: the problem of the *Archimedean fulcrum*, constituted by the very idea of an objective or neutral standpoint that enables dialogue. Each of the approaches in the tripolar typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism that dominates this literature offers a candidate account of such a kind of fulcrum, and each of those is a kind of one-size-fits-all for dialogue; each constrains our thinking about dialogue. The problem of the neutral public sphere is the problem of the Archimedean fulcrum. And in ost of the literature on interreligious dialogue, the *proton pseudos* is to begin by looking for that fulcrum.

Van Hoogstraten's focus on openness is a recognition that this is a problem in each of the three dominant approaches of "inclusivism," "exclusivism," and "pluralism." But I wonder if a focus on "openness," as an attempt to avoid that, doesn't just offer a new fulcrum when the real challenge in thinking about dialogue, is to think about dialogue *without* a fulcrum. That's much harder. It's a much more complicated project. It requires us instead to focus on the *limitations* of openness, and the *need* for shared commitments, and the *particularity* of dialogical situations, instead of looking for a *theory* of interreligious dialogue. This is because there's no such thing as dialogue, *per se*. There are dialogues, plural, but there isn't a single thing called interreligious dialogue. Dialogues emerge in very particular contexts, between very particular parties, for very particular reasons. When we examine the conditions that make those possible I think we're going to find different conditions in different cases.

I think that this requires a shift in our level of analysis: we should not think in terms of openness but in terms of "epistemological humility," a term Van Hoogstraten cites from Catherine Cornille (Cornille 2013, 21–24). This requires us to bracket the question of whether there are multiple, equally true positions—whatever that would mean. I think that's incoherent, in the end—we should just say that when we enter dialogue. Dialogue requires us not to take seriously the idea of multiple, incompatible truths, but rather to take seriously the possibility—at once more modest and more radical—that we are simply wrong. But it also requires us to take seriously the possibility that the other person is wrong. Dialogue requires a hermeneutic of suspicion, but the suspicion needs to be directed towards ourselves as well as to our dialogical partner. That means that a precondition of dialogue is not that we raise a question about truth, but a question about infallibility.

3. Radical Openness

Van Hoogstraten's discussion of Levinas is this focuses on the "Other", where the "other" gets this capital O in English. Capitalizing nouns in English is dangerous: it tends to reflect reification. The idea here is that there's a *radical Other*—and this designation effectively forecloses the possibility of serious dialogue. Gadamer teaches us that dialogue presupposes difference. But he also correctly emphasizes that it also presupposes a deal of similarity, what I have here called a shared background. Without a shared background, there can be no shared vocabulary, no shared understanding, nor a shared set of commitments. The last may be the most important, but all are preconditions for dialogue.

When we enter into a discussion or a dialogue, we enter it for a purpose. We don't just find ourselves in a discussion. Even if we're sitting on a bus and we've never met each other and we begin talking, we begin talking for a reason. I want directions, or you look like somebody who would be interesting to me, or you're wearing a scarf from a football club that I think is the work of the devil. Suppose I begin a conversation. If you're not committed to the dialogue, it ends very quickly. You say, "leave me alone," or you don't answer, or you answer only in monosyllables. And then the dialogue is over. You've basically said, "we're not in this together."

Dialogue starts when we're "in it together.".And being "in it together" requires a very rich web of shared purposes. So I think this supposition of radical Otherness that Levinas entertains, and Van Hoogstraten takes seriously as a possibility in dialogue, isn't a *facilitator* but an *obstacle* to dialogue. This problem is exacerbated, I think, when Van Hoogstraten moves to Derrida, where he prescribes what he calls a "radical sense of openness," an openness not only to the familiar but to the completely alien; an openness to anything and anybody. That sounds like a wonderful stance. To adopt it sounds really laudable. But when we examine it in detail, we see that it does not have the kind of content that enables dialogue.

Let me start hyperbolically. To whom am I supposed to be radically open, as a radical other? To a person who is completely insane? Someone who doesn't even share a commitment to rationality? To a person who comes in armed with a gun, and tells me that only one of us is coming out of this conversation alive? Really—when you start looking at this kind of radical othreness, you see that there have to be constraints on doctrine to which we're "open."

Van Hoogstraten (personal correspondence) replies that neither he nor Derrida sees radial openness as a "policy proposal," bur rather as a "regulative ideal." That is, he argues, it is the pinnacle of being-for-the-other, an unattainable ideal to which ethical life must aim. He quotes Derrida:

> [Discernment and discrimination] is indispensable, no doubt, but it is a way of limiting hospitality. ... if we want to understand what hospitality means, we have to think of unconditional hospitality, that is, openness to whomever, to any newcomer." (Manoussakis (ed.), After God, p.306)

I have my doubts even about this limited role. A regulative ideal—even if acknowledged to be unattainable—must be something we would take to be *desirable* to attain, admirable. If it is not, approximating it cannot determine the content of ethical life. The kind of hospitality or openness that Van Hoogstraten follows Levinas and Derrida in valorizing is not desirable in this sense; it is not an extrapolation, but a hypertrophy of the more critical, or selective hospitality or openness that makes human ethical life and dialogue possible, an instance of what Wittgenstein warned against as "the easy transition from some to all." Openness requires constraints in order even to have content, to function as openness.

So what are those constraints? How far does "openness" go? It can't go all the way, or it's not genuine openness to conversation. We can't just imagine openness to *any* kind of interaction, *whatever* it is. The closest approximation might be the attitude of self-defense a warrior adopts in battle. That is neither openness to dialogue nor a facilitator of dialogue. Genuine dialogical openess has to be an openness to somebody who shares at least my broad reasons for engaging in dialogue, who shares my broad commitment and a willingness to hear what I say. Samdong Rimpoche quotes Jiddu Krishnamurti: "Before we can talk, you have to listen to me." The radical openness that Van Hoogstraten suggests as a kind of regulative ideal suggests an obligation to listen to someone who is not willing to listen to me. That's not an openness to *dialogue,* that's an openness to a shouting match.

It is a precondition of dialogue not just that I listen, but that my interlocutor is also willing to listen. This precondition sets tight constraints on the possibility of dialogue. This is why, I fear, we should be less optimistic about the universality of dialogue than the tradition of Levinas suggests we should be.

4. Bhattacharya

In a very important section of his paper, Van Hoogstraten introduces the relationship between

justice and the representation of the third person. The early twentieth-century Indian philosopher Krishna Chandra Bhattacharya discussed interreligious dialogue in the context of colonial India.[3] As Paul Griffiths would argue seven decades later in *An Apology for Apologetics*[4], Bhattacharyya argues that to be willing to take another's religious doctrine seriously—as possibly true—is to relinquish a religious attitude towards one's own tradition, to adopt a merely aesthetic attitude towards it. That is surely too strong a claim, and underestimates the importance of the epistemic humility I recommended above. Nonetheless, it is an interesting position to consider, because it forces us to ask what genuine religious commitment requires.

According to Bhattacharya, interreligious dialogue is not a conversation *about* religion *by* people who aren't committed to religious views. That's easy—a few non-religious philosophers could do that, or for that matter, a few lawyers, or accountants. Dialogue presupposes participants who are actually *committed* to their views. This is what Griffiths emphasizes in his *Apology*. No matter how challenging and disturbing this is, dialogue doesn't make sense without commitment. This point again derives from ideas of Gadamer, which in turn depend on insights of Heidegger, who emphasized that human Being and human interactions depend critically on *care* (*Sorge*). That is, for dialogue to be meaningful, there has to be a certain commitment to the process, and this commitment to a process demands commitment towards one's own position. Otherwise what might look like dialogue a kind of game, a competitive debate, a disinterested investigation or an aesthetic treatment of a set of issues.

There is another reason to introduce Bhattacharya into this debate. He has, I think, a more sophisticated view of subjectivity and language than does Levinas, and one that would be more useful for thinking about the conditions of dialogue. Bhattacharya argues against a first-person-centric view of subjectivity. He argues in his *magnum opus, The Subject as Freedom,* that individual first-person subjectivity always depends upon a second person: the use of the word 'I', which is central to the notion of subjectivity, requires that when I speak, I take myself to be addressing somebody, somebody I take to think of herself as an 'I'. Telling my coffee cup "listen, I want to tell you about my day." isn't actual dialogue and discussion, because I don't anticipate that it has its own subjectivity. But when I talk to you, I'm assuming that you have a subjectivity as well. So the very use of the first-person pronoun presupposes the use of a second-person pronoun. It doesn't even make sense without it.

But then he points out—and this is the point that connects to what Van Hoogstraten is doing, but I think it takes Levinas' analysis a step deeper—that the use of a second-person pronoun and the first-person pronoun each presuppose a background of third persons. This is because they presuppose that the terms in which I address you, or in which you address me, have *meaning*. And meaning is something that's constituted independently by a community of language-users and a set of rules. "Meaning" here doesn't just mean linguistic meaning— a dimension of meaning that Wittgenstein was to bring into view a few years later—but also rules of dialogue, reasons that are constituted by a culture that we inhabit and that we share, that require that we think of ourselves as engaging in a practice among practices. Thus, Bhattacharyya emphasizes, our own individual subjectivity, presupposes the possibility of dialogue, and insofar as it presupposes dialogue, presupposes a whole set of rules and concerns.

Van Hoogstraten puts this in terms of justice. This is a very important insight, because at some point, when we talk about the limits on dialogue, we have to talk about legal limits. There are important boundaries even in the most liberal public sphere, but also in private dialogue if human relationships are to be maintained, the relationships that themselves condition the possibility of

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[3] KC Bhattacharyya, "The Concept of Philosophy," in Bhushan and Garfield (2011), *Indian Philosophy in English from Renaissance to Independence.* (New York: Oxford University Press)

4   Paul Griffiths (1991), *An Apology for Apologetics* (Orbis)

dialogue. And at the limit, the consideration of these boundaries brings us to questions of justice. But we must also consider cultural limits. And legal and cultural limits function differently from one another.

The reality of legal limits on dialogue reveal that sometimes the background of dialogue has coercion. Oftentimes, there has to be a reason for dialogue. Very often, the reason for dialogue is because one party for the dialogue is doing something that the other finds not just incomprehensible, but impermissible. As I have emphasized, we always engage in dialogue for a purpose. An easy purpose might be that I believe in the transubstantiation of the host and you don't. It is nice that in the present century we can discuss that over tea(though remember—there were times in the history of Europe when this was a serious legal matter).

But there is dialogue of another kind: suppose that you believe in genital mutilation, and I don't. And you think that religious freedom allows you to do that in our country, and I don't. Now we have interreligious dialogue where the issues aren't quite so pleasant. In these cases, at the end, we can't just agree to disagree. Transubstantiation, no transubstantiation—we can still be friends. But in a discussion of the permissibility of genital mutilation, the force of law is going to come down on one side or the other. There is coercion behind this dialogue, and that takes us to the limits of the third person, because the third person here is the state, or more broadly speaking the culture.

It is nonetheless important to bear in mind that the point when justice enters the dialogue is a point on a continuum; the earlier points on the continuum are just circumstances in which it makes sense for us to discuss more informal ground rules. What's *polite* for us to discuss? What's a permissible challenge, what's an impermissible challenge? What counts as a shared presupposition and what doesn't count? These questions require a rich thinking through of the third person context in which dialogue occurs, and the issues raised by this kind of thinking are often themselves profound, requiring further dialogue, more search for shared presuppositions.

And again, these considerations set limits on openness. I don't want to be open to the possibility of doctrines that I regard as seriously dangerous. I don't want to be open to a cult that decides child sacrifice is a good thing. These positions are too radical for dialogical engagement. If I am open to such others, then I am not engaged in dialogue, I am engaged in being steamrolled.

5. The Relevance of Genealogy

I conclude with two brief comments. In the second half of his paper, Van Hoogstraten characterizes religion as constituted by differentiation and difference. This discussion follows Derrida's influential account of *différance*. There's a respect in which Van Hoogstraten is obviously correct: new religions often emerge by distinguishing themselves from their matrices. Buddhism emerges as a distinct tradition by distinguishing itself from certain Brahmanical traditions, as does Jainism; Christianity is originally a Jewish sect, and then distinguishes itself from Judaism, per se; the Reformation is a distinguishing of Protestantism from Catholicism. In the context of emergence, such differentiation occurs.

Nonetheless, it is a genetic fallacy to conclude from this fact about origins that religions, as they exist at a particular later historical point, confront each other simply as differentiations as opposed to as integral positions. So, whether or not Protestantism emerged by differentiating itself from Catholicism, and whether or not Reform Judaism emerged by differentiating itself from the Conservative movement—when a reformed Jew and a Lutheran are talking about how to interpret the impact of the New Testament on the significance of the Old Testament, the fact of their emergence as differentiation is utterly irrelevant. They confront each other as existing systems. So I think it's really easy to overplay the differentiation issue and commit a genetic fallacy—to think that because religions emerged in this way, they confront each other in dialogue

through this same differentiation. To do so is to take dialogue simply to be a further differentiation.

This brings us to the second point. Dialogue isn't a further differentiation. It is a quest for unity, for the discovery and creation of joint membership in a community *despite* difference. Dialogue is a type of interaction between fellows that presupposes both a set of shared commitments and commitments that aren't shared, commitments that define difference at the outset. But the goal of dialogue is, if not to reduce that difference, to find the solidarity and unity between parties that transcends it. That's a very different thing.

This brings us back to where we started. No dialogue begins in a neutral space; parties to dialogues come to dialogue not only with distinct positions, but often with distinct presuppositions about the very preconditions of dialogue. This requires us to approach each other not with unbounded openness, but with serious commitment tempered by genuine humility. But how these considerations work out in particular cases is itself a matter to be settled by dialogue. The dialogical predicament is unbounded and ungrounded. Success is never guaranteed, but neither is failure. Van Hoogstraten properly reminds us that there is always room for hope.