



Kai Alhanen

**DIALOGUE
IN
DEMOCRACY**

Gaudeamus

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DIALOGUE IN DEMOCRACY

Translated by Helena Lehti



Gaudeamus

Dedicated to my colleagues
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INTRODUCTION

We have to make a choice. It concerns the future of democracy, perhaps even its entire existence. As a way of life that pursues equality and freedom for all people, democracy ultimately relies on citizens promoting its central values within everyday situations. Choices to promote these values must be made in every kind of community and group: in families, neighbourhoods, schools, work places, leisure activities, businesses, associations, and governmental institutions. These choices become crucial when tensions in society escalate and crises intensify. We must decide between persistent effort and cynical inaction.

Right now, the state of democracies is strained to an unprecedented extent. The issues that require solutions are more complicated than ever before. Political communities all over the world are struggling with interconnected political, economical, social, and ecological crises. At the same time, people living in these communities have increasingly differing experiences of the world; being separated by many different factors, such as ethnic background, religion, profession, wealth, social class, gender and sexual orientation. Sharing knowledge and skills has become difficult at a time when citizens would greatly benefit from doing so. Instability, bred by complex issues and the disagreements between different groups of people, offers a matrix for many anti-democratic forces. Extremist ideologies are rising, authoritarian governments are gaining power, and solutions to conflicts are

sought through violence. Under the pressure of these difficult times it seems that democracy has lost its vigour as an ideal for communal life.

What then is a vigorous democracy? Many consider the following characteristics to be illustrative: Citizens actively influence local and national issues important to them and have a voice in addressing global questions. Public discussion is lively and supported by knowledge that is reliable, understandable and easily available. Differences in opinion are managed peacefully and solved through discussion and negotiation. The politicians and civil servants chosen to tend to common affairs are competent and feel responsible for their use of power. With clear boundaries to the use of public power, citizens can freely pursue diverse private lives. Every individual – including those belonging to minorities – can trust that their encompassing basic rights are ensured and they are able to lead a good life based on their own decision-making. When wrongdoings and conflicts are serious, they are processed through a fair and efficient legal system. In times of crisis, citizens can combine their strengths in creative cooperation and are able to recognise mutual interests. Fighting for societal justice, a thriving civilisation, and an ecologically sustainable way of life are considered important goals for political action.

These aspects are still apparent to an extent in certain democratic societies, but they are seriously threatened in an increasing number of others. In some countries, however, they have entirely disappeared and in others they have never even existed. It is impossible for a strong democracy to emerge in any community without the efforts of a great number of people over generations.

Should these efforts cease, democracy will not survive. If we wish to ensure the existence of democracy and pass it on to forthcoming generations, we must alter the current destructive trends.

Powerful tools are required to defend, revitalise, and develop democracy. This book discusses one such tool: *dialogue*. The main idea is that dialogical discussions help communities sustain one of democracy's most important requirements: *people's ability to learn from one another*. The kind of learning that occurs in dialogue is a constantly developing understanding of the world's phenomena, other people, and oneself. This sort of shared learning is able to generate the mutual trust between people that is crucial for the functioning of democracy. Dialogue is also a creative way to develop the new ideas required to solve the complex issues that beset modern societies. Moreover, dialogical discussions uphold the ideals of equality and freedom. In this book I wish to show how dialogue renews democracy and how it can help solve its current problems.

When we examine the significance of dialogue for democracy, it is important to note that democracy has many meanings. The most well-known of these being democracy as a *system of government* by which citizens govern themselves. However, comprehensive democracy has never yet been realised entirely anywhere in the world. Citizens have not, in fact, governed themselves fully. Instead, rule by the people has always been mixed with other elements: efforts of a powerful elite to govern, political pressure from various interest groups, the repression of politics to the demands of financial actors, and the interference of other countries in national affairs.

Nevertheless, despite their imperfections, many democratic states have proven to be relatively stable and capable of thriving. They have been able to guarantee their citizens broad individual rights and to lay the grounds for many types of free cooperation. In such cases, even the imperfect implementation of democratic government has benefitted citizens greatly. Even so, this is not a state of affairs we should be content with. When decision-making becomes more difficult and opportunities to affect change become fewer for citizens, it is increasingly tempting to resort to political means outside of democracy. The events of the twentieth century revealed that the road from democratic government to dictatorship and ultimately to totalitarianism is shorter than imagined. There is no reason to assume that democracy should be in a significantly safer state in this century than it was in the last.

Since its origins, democracy has meant something more than merely a political system. It has meant a moral *way of life*. This notion of democracy, however, is much broader and more difficult to define than the notion of democracy as a system of government. While also being less well known, it has nonetheless been a part of the long history of democracy since antiquity. Primarily, democracy as a way of life has meant cultivating opportunities provided by the equality and freedom in people's lives. This means that democracy is seen as a key to communities thriving in culture, prosperity, and well-being. In modern times it has become increasingly common to view this way of life as within the reach of everyone, no matter her background and situation in society. A way of life that embraces equality and freedom has long been

recognised as a solution to one of the biggest challenges of democracy, namely, how people can set aside their own selfish interests in pursuit of the common good. According to this notion, the desire to promote a highly valued shared way of life leads individuals to seek the common good.

The realisation of democracy as both a political system and as a way of life is achieved through discussion. When people want to decide with equanimity upon common concerns, they must be able to converse such matters collectively. Accordingly, democracy cherishes different forms of rhetoric and discussion, such as giving speeches, persuading, debating, and negotiating. Finding out people's opinion, seeking the best solutions, persuading individuals with varying opinions, and making diverse interests compatible are constant touchstones for democratic discussions. When discussions in democratic societies reach a dead end, the crucial connections between the governmental system and democracy as a way of life reveal themselves. Resolving challenging discussions is only possible between citizens who are well versed in the ways of equal and free coexistence. Such people appreciate this kind of cooperation despite its demands and do not strive to manipulate others to achieve their own desired goals.

It must be clarified that dialogue does not simply mean any type of discussion. While the term dialogue is often used vaguely to describe simple conversation, it is also used to refer to argumentative debate. In this book, however, the term dialogue refers to a discussion in which people examine what kinds of *meanings* they give to the issues at hand. People interpret their experiences

constantly, and because of this they inevitably give some sort of meaning to the phenomena they encounter in the world: events, physical circumstances, objects, and other living beings. This designation of meanings happens as a matter of course within our every experience of the world.

The meanings we give to things are shaped within our mutual interactions. Meanings established in a community are transferred as cultural heritage from generation to generation. Despite the shared nature of meanings, each individual sees the world in their own way, and thus frames their community's meanings with their own individual *experiences*. Because of this, meanings are simultaneously both shared and individual. The aim of dialogue is to discover what those experiences are via which individuals give meaning to the world.

Dialogical discussions have integral significance in democracy because they have profound effects on the lives of communities and individuals. When we discuss together how we experience our shared world, we obtain a broader and more versatile picture of the issues at hand. Dialogue also enables us to notice and to respect each other's differences and helps us to realise how differences in experience can enrich our shared life. Thus, dialogues bind individuals and communities together without seeking to remove the differences that shape individuality. In addition, dialogue helps human communities to transfer the intellectual and cultural heritage of previous generations in a significant way. The cultural heritage of humanity can be renewed sustainably only by people fixing, enhancing, and developing the meanings that steer their life and by trying to employ as vast an

experiential understanding of the world as possible. By examining beliefs, values, and conceptions through different individuals' experiences, communities can evaluate which meanings are still pertinent and which need to be renewed.

Dialogue becomes crucial in situations where the discussed issues are complex or emotionally charged and where individuals' experiences of them are very different. When citizens become distanced from one another, trust diminishes and misunderstandings grow. Whenever this occurs, it becomes difficult to hold on to democratic values and to efficiently solve societal issues. Furthermore, the world's current crises are so broad, complex and unpredictable, that solving them comprehensively cannot be done without a form of broad civic action that would entirely reshape politics. Dialogue is needed, therefore, on all levels of society, from local communities to global political decision-making

I examine the role of dialogue in democracy by combining different views from philosophical and scientific discussions and from my own practical work with dialogue. The most central premise comes from the tradition of Western political philosophy. This tradition includes many important insights about the relations between a democratic system of government, a democratic way of life, and dialogue. The significance of dialogue in modern democracies has been profoundly examined by the American philosopher John Dewey and the German-born political theorist Hannah Arendt. Dewey was concerned with the crumbling of democracy in the

United States at the turn of the twentieth century, a time when citizens were politically apathetic and the capitalist economy was gaining power. Arendt, on the other hand, who had fled from Europe to the United States, witnessed the collapse of many European democracies and the rise of totalitarian systems between the world wars. Events on both continents palpably demonstrated how fundamentally democratic nations rely on the equal cooperation of ordinary citizens. As this kind of action fades or is destroyed, democratic government withers and is exposed to the threat of ruthless economic actors or political extremists.

Dewey and Arendt's philosophies have important roles in this book because their views offer conceptual tools for analysing the relations between dialogue and a democratic way of life. Both of these philosophers argue that, at its core, dialogue is a discussion which ideally is strengthened by the different experiences of individuals. Both also emphasise the significance of the free cooperation of citizens as a basis for democratic government. According to Dewey and Arendt, democracy cannot properly function if citizens do not practice their abilities and skills in cooperation and discussion. However, these two thinkers did not describe the nature of dialogical discussion in any detail. We must, therefore, try to follow the road they have paved and aim to develop a comprehensive description of the features of a dialogical discussion. We must also examine how dialogue responds to those issues that are still current in modern democracies that Dewey and Arendt addressed.

In analysing democratic coexistence and the abilities required for dialogue, I rely on the *capabilities approach*

Under pressure from global economic instability, ecological crises and growing authoritarianism, democracy is critically endangered. In order to secure the future of democracy, we need a new kind of civic activity with dialogue at its core.

Dialogue is crucial for enhancing communication and for cultivating democratic coexistence in our multi-cultural world. Aiming for a better understanding of the world's phenomena, of other people and ourselves, dialogue helps communities to sustain one of democracy's most important requirements: people's ability to learn from one another.

Combining perspectives from political philosophy and the author's extensive practical work with dialogue, this book affirms the power of dialogue for defending, revitalising, and developing democratic societies. It aims to clarify the meaning of democracy not only as a system of government but also as a moral way of life.

Dialogue in Democracy highlights the vital significance of dialogue for strengthening and maintaining democracy, not just as a political goal but essentially as an ideal to be realised on an everyday basis. The book appeals to a broad diversity of citizens working in different areas of society: in education, business, politics and public services, as well as religious communities, scientists, athletes, and artists.

