

Listening, Democracy and the Environment¹

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Theories of democracy deal extensively with speech – e.g., with the inclusion of appropriate voices and their inclusion in a just decision-making process. Yet discussion of the nature and role of listening is noticeably scarce in such discussions, and often altogether absent. This article considers possible sources of this deficit, and argues that it represents a serious shortcoming in mainstream political theory. This applies to all models of democracy, in so far as they are concerned with how different voices contribute to the making of decisions – and especially in the case of deliberative accounts, prioritising as these do the value of reflexivity and participation. I suggest, too, that listening takes on particular significance in the case of green political theory. Drawing on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and John Dryzek among others, I consider various aspects of the centrality of listening to democracy, and suggest that Dryzek’s ‘discursive democracy’ is particularly well-placed among contemporary accounts both to accommodate the significance of listening and allow it due normative space. Environmentalists have their own pressing reasons to enhance this space. As I also argue, there are strong reasons to suggest that better environmental democracy is just plain better democracy.

In practice of course we are often very imperfect proxies for those whose disablement has deprived them of a voice of their own. But the kind of character that we have to acquire in order to be a friend or to act as a proxy, the virtues that we need for those relationships, are the same virtues that we need in general. (MacIntyre, 1999: 150)

Recognition of agency in nature ... means that we should listen to signals emanating from the natural world with the same kind of respect we accord communication emanating from human subjects, and as requiring equally careful interpretation. (Dryzek, 2000: 149)

It is curious and significant that accounts of democracy spend such little time considering what it is to listen, whether for individuals or for institutions – and how listening might politically be provided for. All the more so, given that so much of recent democratic theory has become tightly focused on the contours and dynamics of deliberation. Yet listening – as a practice itself, or in terms of its preconditions or impacts – features barely even there. As Andrew Dobson has

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pointed out, one might have expected that “the moments prior to deliberation... at which potential participants are heard... would have come in for sustained examination. But they haven’t done so” (Dobson, forthcoming: 11). Taking part of its cue from Dobson’s own discussion, this article offers some preliminary reflections both on listening’s absence from political theory, and its importance there. In doing so I seek to unpack the separate ‘gists’ of the quotes from MacIntyre and Dryzek above. The first stresses the inevitability of the proxy relationship if diverse voices are to be heard and included. The second serves to highlight a certain kind of limitation on what, in democratic theory, has ‘counted’ as a voice *per se*. Both seem to me to shed helpful, indeed vital light on the scope of an adequate theory of democracy – and to highlight important shortcomings with mainstream contributions. These shortcomings are better addressed, as I shall argue, via the general orientations provided by environmental political theory – with a particularly strong candidate being Dryzek’s own conception of discursive democracy.

In the next section I say a little more about just why it’s so curious that listening is neglected in democratic theory. In the following one, I consider possible reasons for this neglect. I then consider the relationship between participation, deliberation, and the inclusion in democratic processes of those without, as MacIntyre puts it, a voice of their own. Turning to green political theory, I then relate these themes to particular debates between consequentialist and principle-based approaches therein – and suggest that from either angle, if participation has political importance, then the role of listening is crucial to this. The final section, before concluding, develops this point in relation to Dryzek’s approach.

Dobson himself, in considering similar terrain via reflections on Bruno Latour’s *The Politics of Nature* (2004), concludes (*inter alia*) that (i) democratic theory would benefit from further exploring listening and the dispositions associated with it, and (ii) greens especially stand to benefit from this kind of theorising. I agree.² Underpinning my own discussion here is a strong sense that (a) the orientations of environmental political theory make it especially well-placed to address this deficit, and (b) that the implications of this ‘translate’ across democratic theory at large. In other words, better *environmental* democracy is better *democracy*, full stop. It’s better because it will, of necessity, just in doing the work it needs to do, have paid better attention to the nature and significance of listening.

Democracy and voices

² Dobson’s ultimate argument is one that I am less assured about: *viz.*, that a focus (à la Latour) on epistemological doubt might bring with it a “concomitant recognition of the importance of listening as well as speaking” (Dobson forthcoming, p. 16). Latour’s own work seems to me to lapse at points into a kind of epistemic fallacy – i.e., the conflation of ontology with epistemology which I refer to in the penultimate section below – but this is not a point properly pursuable within the space available here.

Familiarly, democracy is concerned with how voices relate to decisions. We find in all major philosophical accounts of democracy some version of the concern for how ‘the voice of the people’ will be registered and processed – and how in turn this will inform the legislative process. Of course, for all the ubiquity of that quoted phrase, in the end the point will be put more complicatedly than that. If ‘the people’ were univocal, then many of the niggling problems which democracy theorists spend their time working through would barely niggle at all. Neither is ‘the people’ itself an uncontested notion, a fixed or unitary entity, somehow self-defining in its boundaries or conditions of membership. There are many, shifting voices, different wills, conflicting preferences – a fact of life in any ancient city-state just as in contemporary Los Angeles. Democratic theory has always, in large part, been the theory of what to *do* about this plurality, if the aim is a just and orderly polity where, in one sense or another, the people’s voice is sovereign. There is an epistemic dimension to this: knowing what the people’s voice actually *is*. Since ancient Athens there have emerged a range of different systems for gleaning this knowledge, each with its merits but none by any means problem-free: participatory models, representative models, deliberative models, allied in turn with some particular model of the polity itself – liberal, republican, and so on. One component of such problems reflects how it is that the people ‘deliver’ their voice in the first place – how they express their views in such a way that can be processed and measured in an accurate, meaningful way. There are concerns about the relative muteness (as a representation of will) of a raised hand or an X in a box on the ballot paper, about whether political parties can ever come close to representing the will of their supporters or others, about the majority shouting the loudest, of some voices always being drowned out. There are also concerns about possible discrepancies between people’s *articulation* of their views and preferences, and other putative measures of their interests. There are fallibilities, textures and nuances to any voice – individually and *a fortiori* collectively – which are difficult to capture in the ultimate form of any decision towards the formation of which such voices contribute.

Given all of these concerns about ‘voice’, though, it is all the more conspicuous – the more so, the more one looks – that philosophers of democracy have said so little about listening. On the one hand, all models of democracy invoke or imply some relationship between assertion and attention, or speaker and audience. Here, among very many available brief definitions of democracy, is one from David Beetham: “a procedure for taking decisions in any group, association or society, whereby all members have an equal right to have a say and to make their opinions count” (Beetham, 2005: 2). That opinions are *heard*, duly and appropriately, is preconditional to any such procedure – and thus, that they are listened to, and listened out for. ‘Good listening’ thus seems a crucial democratic virtue – and, as even the most formalistic of political theorists have tended now to concede, virtues are a crucial counterpart to whatever counts as institutional correctness when it comes to the achievement of democracy in practice. It

is not frameworks themselves which deliver whatever it is that democracy is supposed to deliver – these may be necessary, but they are not sufficient. Also required are agents with a willingness to contribute to the conversation, and to make their opinions count.

Much of recent democratic theory has been directed towards enhancing the access to the democratic conversation of different kinds of voice. This applies to generalised discussions of democracy in both the Anglo-American and continental traditions, where there has been increasing sensitivity to the ways in which difference – in terms of culture, gender, sexuality and other possible sites of exclusion – requires more sensitive accommodation within political models. It applies too with the explosion of interest in global justice, raising as this does the need to address the terms of dialogue between western and other ‘takes’ on relevant concerns. And it has a special resonance in green political theory, with its expanded sense of candidate interests to be included in the range of normative discussion – non-human nature; future generations; citizens of other states – and the importance here of considering links between environmental and social injustices. Yet on the other hand, among familiar motifs in such theory – ‘giving voice to’, ‘empowerment’, ‘citizenship’ and in general “the inclusion of previously excluded voices” (Phillips, 1995:) – we find little mention (nearly nothing) of listening itself. It is as if, as long as space is provided for all (or all affected) parties to *speak*, then the crucial democratic work is done. There are some recent exceptions, where ways in which *listening* to “the voice of the people” takes place are critically grappled with.³ But by and large the recording of that voice is treated as a practical, rather than a philosophical, challenge. The crucial theoretical labour lies in establishing the space for all (or all affected) parties to speak. Establishing space to *listen* is secondary, if it is addressed at all. And usually it is not – at least, not directly. Even less are the preconditions of good listening, the contours of public attentiveness, dwelt on by political theorists. But again: if democracy is about the people’s voice, it seems vital that we take account of the activity of listening, its challenges and preconditions, in order to gauge whether, and how, the people’s voice might plausibly be said to have been heard.

The attentive deficit

So why might listening have been so markedly absent from democratic theory in general? To some extent one might account for this in terms of dominant habits of philosophical tradition – each, in different ways, reflected also in political practice. Here we find various candidate answers – and it’s worth picking some of these out, albeit with an admittedly broad and mostly unspecific brush. One might be the prioritisation of speaker over audience – in philosophy, but equally in depictions of what it is to debate, discuss, deliberate or publicly converse. Typically,

³ See for example Bickford (1996) and, much less extensively, Dryzek (2000).

wisdom lies on the side of the speaker – and indeed with the writer of texts, rather than their reader. The substance of discussion lies in words themselves (and thus with their enunciator) rather than their apprehension by an interlocutor or, even less so, by a non-speaking listener. Relatedly, there is the assumption that politics itself is about speaking – which as Dobson notes (forthcoming: 1-2), is explicit in Aristotle and has resonated, more or less overtly, ever since. Aristotle (1946: 5-7) distinguishes between ‘making sounds’ and ‘language’, or in other translations between ‘voice’ and ‘speech’. The first in either case is merely the capacity to indicate pleasure or pain; the second is what enables the communication of judgements about right and wrong. ‘Speech’ is, in our context, an especially suggestive translation: it is speech which distinguishes humans from other animals, and sets them apart as *political*. As Dobson puts it: “Thus politics itself is defined by inclusion/exclusion, and the mark of those who are included is the right and/or capacity to speak, and the mark of the excluded is the derogation of either their right or their capacity – and often both – to speak” (forthcoming: 2).

Another, related assumption is that among discussants – be they interlocutors at a micro level, or the wider community engaged somehow or other in dialogue – *agency* is located on the side of speaker rather than listener. Thus it’s not just that speaking is where the expertise lies – it’s also where the action is, in a more general sense. The speaker is the active, creative, effective party – so that productive labour is associated with assertion rather than attention, proactivity rather than reactivity. The result is that listening is very often assumed to be passive, if it is mentioned at all. Great speeches are recorded, anthologised, mythologised, with oratory treated as emblematic of the craft of politics. Great listening will not find similar honour. It is harder to size up in terms of material impact, or historical consequence. It goes less noticed, perhaps mostly because it doesn’t even, in Aristotle’s terms, make a sound, or leave an obvious footprint.

Yet listening is necessarily constitutive of debate, discussion, deliberation and other hallmarks of democratic activity. To *be* speech, sound-making needs an audience. To be a *speaker* (rather than a ‘mere’ sound-maker) one must also, first, be a listener. And listening itself is an active engagement, with others and with the world. If there is a plurality of voices, it is this through such engagement that they are uncovered and responded to. Thus to view listening as definitively reactive rather than proactive is anachronistic, as well as phenomenologically misplaced. Listening must, in literal, empirical ways, arise in tandem with speaking, in order for something like democratic exchange to take place, and to amount to more than the unintelligible, formless coincidence of noises. Listening is a process characterised by openness to possibility, to interruption, and to that which is not reassuring – an openness to being pulled up short, and required to readjust one’s orientations in light of unanticipated information, arguments, perspectives or insights. As a process listening is, as the poet Fiona Sampson puts it, “always incomplete and so imperfect” (Sampson, 2007: 22). But it is a crucial plank of the interaction on

which democratic exchange, in a society of strangers, and of plural, conflicting interests and voices, depends. Thus Susan Bickford describes listening as “a constitutive element in the process of figuring out, in the face of conflict, what to do” (1996: 19).

So for all its habitual neglect in democratic theory, we find strong reasons to treat listening both as necessary for democracy to get going, and as a virtue of democratic practice once things are in full swing – a virtue, that is, of both citizens and institutions.

Speechlessness and dependency

It is often said of participatory models of democracy that they are especially well-placed to cater for the interests of those (human or otherwise) who have interests but lack the capacity to voice them – or to put it in Aristotle’s terms, those who have voice, but not speech. Among others this might include future generations, animals, younger children, those with physiological or mental impairments – and if we follow Dryzek (on which, more shortly) nature in general. Thus for Robert Goodin, democracy is “a process in which we all come to internalize the interests of each other and indeed of the larger world around us” (1996: 844). If this is so, then the terms on which participation – and so any such ‘internalisation’ – might take place need to be clearly staked out. For if certain forms of active participation are the name of the game, ‘speechless’ groups might seem definitively excluded. The notion that some will necessarily speak as proxies for the speechless seems connotative (if anything) of representative rather than participatory democracy. It also seems to wire-in a certain presumptiveness vis-à-vis those with speech, in terms of the capacity to know the interests of those without. At first blush there seem paternalistic, perhaps more aggressively oppressive overtones to any system where the speechless are, from a position one step removed, to be enfranchised by the speaking.

Yet in its simplest terms, such a recoiling at the notion of speech by proxy assumes that to speak on behalf of others is inherently paternalistic, and that it is avoidable – i.e., there are forms of democratic participation which might involve one speaking purely, independently, uncontaminatedly and solely *for oneself*. This latter needs a particular kind of unpacking, and exploration – for which there is not the space here. Suffice it to say that it is more problematic than it seems. Equally, this kind of response might assume that speechlessness – and so the state of greater dependency on the participative energies of others – is rather more exceptional than is in fact the case. As MacIntyre (1999) has extensively argued, such a state of dependency and vulnerability is not as marginal, temporary or atypical as it may seem – but one with much broader reach, within and across lives. The figure of the autonomous, independent, self-sufficient, able-bodied rational interlocutor figures widely as the model subject of moral and political theory. But the effect of MacIntyre’s case is to show that this figure itself is a transitional,

exceptional one in the greater scheme of human life – and that if ‘independence’ is her defining trait, she is more a convenient construction of philosophers than anything resembling a plausible, everyday model of ‘lived’ human selfhood. In fact rather than by some kind of radical independence, individual human lives are characterised by an inevitable *dependency* on others – the denial of which looks increasingly wishful and drastic, the more it is reflected on.

To put it the other way around, the kind of self-sufficiency emblematic of the typical figure of moral and political theory is a temporary state. This mutual dependency means that certain social virtues – embodied for example in education and healthcare – are preconditional for the kinds of practical reasoning which democratic intercourse requires. The dependency reflects our animality – which both enables and constrains our achievement of the status of fully fledged practical reasoner, flourishing and in a position to reflect on the nature of flourishing itself. Partly because dependency relationships are definitive of the human condition, rather than exceptional to it, MacIntyre insists, as in the passage quoted at the start of this article, that the virtues of character which emerge in such relationships translate more widely into those which are required in general. To act as a proxy requires a very particular kind of orientation, and set of skills. But as virtues, these travel wider. It is from consideration of moments and relations of vulnerability that we gain purchase on generalised aspects of human being which the dominant terms of normative theory will tend, routinely, to leave out of account.

Of course, much of the most salient contemporary discussion of democracy has been of its deliberative variant. Adding deliberation to participation shifts focus from the decisions themselves to their justification, to the reasons for them and the way in which decisions were reached. Thus as Avner De-Shalit puts it, “The view that deliberative participation is the most significant component of democracy implies that decisions and policies, rather than being the result of a deliberation process, are part of it, and should also be debated” (De-Shalit, 2000: 145). Deliberation is to this extent a deepening of participation *tout court*: in a more specific sense, it requires that deliberation applies not just to specific issues, but again, to “the very rules of the discourse procedure and the way in which they are applied” (Benhabib, 1996: 70). If we consider deliberative democracy with MacIntyre’s points in mind, a priority emerges in the building-in of proxy relationships. This is a point on which liberal political theory has tended to be less than explicit: here the subjects are typically mature adults, with the status of children and others not fitting this category either oblique, or under-explained. As Frank Cunningham puts it, deliberative democrats see themselves as offering an alternative to the classical liberal (or more specifically, utilitarian) picture in which “citizens [enter] a democratic political process with fixed preference that they aim to further by use of democratic institutions and rules” (Cunningham, 2002: 163). This model is non-reflexive, in the sense that it involves the *aggregation* of given, individuated, mutually isolated preferences rather than their evaluation, or an exchange of views about them. This non-reflexivity is accompanied by an epistemic blindness to those without speech. It might

be assumed that in a purely aggregative milieu which pays little attention to the specificities of the proxy relationship, such relationships will not be treated with due acuity. The interests of the speechless might, it's true, trickle through into the expressed preferences of the enfranchised. But there is no guarantee that they are paid any attention; whether they are is at the whim of the voter. One key asset of a process which keeps its own rules and scope under deliberative review would seem, at least in principle, that it might ensure that the range of voices included would itself be under review – and that there be some provision to pause so that those with a voice, but no speech (in Aristotle's terms) to have their position considered, and their interests registered.

Unless all with voices are enfranchised, democracy will always involve some degree of speaking for others. That this is always, as MacIntyre describes it, an imperfect process (as is, arguably, speaking for oneself) – and that it will be messy, subtle, difficult and without any easy sense of closure – does not lessen its inevitability. It is a process to which the epistemic and normative significance of listening is crucial. For to avoid being simply oppressive, controlling or bluntly paternalistic, the proxy relationship is one which takes its cue from an attention to the voice of those who are spoken for. Hence, in this respect, the resonance of listening for green political theory. For here, the priority, and the mechanics, of taking non-speaking voices into account – voices of nature, of the environment, but also of human perspectives too often left out of policy debates – will be of central concern.

Democracy in/and green political theory

Doherty and de Geus helpfully identify “two standard and contradictory responses to the relationship between green politics and democracy” (Doherty and de Geus, 1996: 1-2). For the first, participatory democracy is proffered as a solution to the inherent ecological shortcomings of the liberal democratic state. If that state is incapable of “enabling the new ethic of responsibility which would be necessary if the behaviour of individual citizens was to become governed by ecological priorities” (Doherty and de Geus, 1996: 1), then what is needed is an overcoming of atomised, consumerised self-interest. How do we achieve this? Through decentralised, smaller-scale production and politics: an affirmatively communitarian alternative. □ From the second angle, democracy in general is seen as an obstacle to the achievement of ecological priorities. The latter are such that they can only be addressed by “a strong government that would be prepared to curb the freedom of individual citizens in order to prevent ecological degradation” (Doherty and de Geus, 1996: 2). Individuals will only ever act in their own interests, in a way which will be mutually destructive – see, famously, Garrett Hardin's (1968) account of ‘the tragedy of the commons’. Only a strong government would be able to act in the collective interest. This highlights a fairly standard dilemma among radical social movements whose goal is a social state

of affairs realising priority x (be this class equality, communal solidarity or a celebration of diversity). Do they (a) seek to incorporate attention to x into the means of achieving our desired state of affairs? Or do they (b) aim instead to bring about that state of affairs directly, so providing better circumstances in which to pay attention to x? It's just that in the green case, the stakes (in this case as elsewhere) are especially high.

Goodin presents this problem in terms of a contrast between value (“both *what* is to be valued, and *why*”) and on the other hand agency (the means of realising value) (Goodin, 1992: 19). His own upfront consequentialism commits him to prioritising the former: “it is more important that the right things be done than that they be done in any particular way or through any particular agency” (Goodin, 1992: 120). He happens to regard liberal democracy as the best means on offer to the achievement of environmental values. Even so Goodin's position rests on the dividing line between the two responses identified by Doherty and de Geus. For as he acknowledges, there are no guarantees that democratic procedures will generate green benefits. “To advocate democracy is to advocate procedures, to advocate environmentalism is to advocate substantive outcomes: what guarantee can we have that the former procedures will yield the latter sorts of outcomes?” (Goodin, 1992: 168). To this, Robyn Eckersley (1996) responds that greens should adopt a suitably adjusted liberal, rights-based approach committed to autonomy (both of humans and non-humans) as a prime value, to be nurtured by any processes which green politics endorse. As Neil Carter summarises the point: “Participatory democracy is one of the conditions necessary to construct a society in which the conditions for human autonomy prevail” (Carter, 2007: 57).

Se we have here two dimensions of the same kind of split. The split is between (i) those who think that democracy (of an appropriate, probably participatory kind) is conducive to, perhaps prior to, green values, and (ii) those who think that green values override democracy. There is a separate but intersecting split between consequentialist and principle-based normative approaches – so that while some presume that we are always talking about some or other configuration of the relationship of means to ends, others insist that some values (e.g., a commitment to autonomy) stand above such considerations, and should be treated as constraints on what might be acceptable by way of the achievement of green ends.

How might the previous discussion of listening relate to the issues raised here? In Goodin's terms, listening will be ecologically valuable if (and only if) it is a practicable, relatively beneficial way of helping prioritise green concerns and realise green aims. In Eckersley's, by contrast, it will be valuable if it is compatible with the respect for, and promotion of, “the fundamental right of humans to choose their own destiny” (Eckersley, 1996: 223). Now there are other versions of the relationship between democracy and environmentalism, and other important voices in the debate. But working with the contrast between these two as an example is instructive. I would argue that if we accept that listening has a central (albeit neglected) role to play in adequate accounts of

democracy, then its importance will be equally, if differently, appreciable from either angle. That is to say: there are good consequentialist reasons for treating listening as crucial, and equally pressing principle-based ones too.

Let's take the former first. Given that it is a *process*, the notion that listening is of any kind of prime value might seem to be something a full-on consequentialist will have some impatience with. We have depicted listening as an especially 'processy' type of process, in that it is definitely unpredictable and open-ended – and involves an openness to interruption and surprise. This is both a benefit of listening, and a potential cost: it might bring news we didn't anticipate, find dissonant or non-conducive, or otherwise don't want to hear. These risks seem not to enhance its credentials as a reliable vehicle for green concerns. Why put your money on an amplification of the significance for democracy of listening, as a way of delivering green outcomes? Well, for various reasons – partly reflecting arguments in favour of participatory democracy more generally, and for greens in particular. Participatory democracy would produce more responsive government, because "power would be shifted away from the hands of the few: from central government to local communities, from managers to workers, from the central party democracy to the local branch" (Carter, 2007: 55). Local communities will be empowered to protect their own environment, armed with a wider array of knowledge, representing wider interests, than is the case with centralised decision-making. Responses to environmental emergencies will be made more quickly. Ecological outcomes are more likely "by virtue of the improved responsiveness gained from drawing on a wider circle of interests, knowledge and skills" (Carter, 2007: 56).

Maybe this argument works, and maybe it doesn't: there are a range of reasons and factors which might either support or undermine the expectation that enhanced participation will lead to a promotion of the green agenda. But the crucial point from our point of view is that *if* it works, then the place of listening in participatory democracy is key to *why* it does so. For the benefits of participation hinge on increased and better-quality dialogue, greater speed in uncovering threats and proposing solutions, greater awareness of the texture of different perspectives on the issues at hand and more inclusive consultation, amongst others, to all of which the contribution of effective listening is central. A willingness to respond to developments or arguments depends in large and crucial measure on the capacity to pay due, active attention to them in the first place. If participation is consequentially valuable for greens, this is partly because of the centrality of listening to the process. Institutional responsiveness depends itself on the existence of adequate processes for listening.

So what about a principle-based approach – one, for example, which regards autonomy as a sacrosanct, non-negotiable value never to be overridden by the pursuit of otherwise good green outcomes? For Eckersley, as we have seen, participatory democracy is a vital aspect of the architecture of a society in which autonomy (human and non-human) might flourish. One key reason for this is that it helps foster an ecological consciousness which itself is emblematic of the

achievement of citizenly engagement – understood as a fundamentally *critical* activity. For Eckersley and others seeking to reconcile the traditional liberal prioritisation of autonomy with specifically green concerns, this move is pivotal. As she puts it in *The Green State*:

Liberalism's otherwise laudable humanist impulse to expand human autonomy comes to grief in the belief that autonomy can only or best be achieved by mastering the natural world through increasingly sophisticated technologies and the application of instrumental reason. ... Emancipation is crucially dependent on critical questioning (of authority, dogma, superstition, or blind faith). (Eckersley, 2004: 107-8)

Eckersley suggests that certain such dogmas are inherent in liberalism itself – and in the particular version of autonomy (as self-mastery) which it has tended to promote. This licences a 'muscular individualism' alongside a general denial of the dependency of human beings on each other, and on the natural world (Eckersley, 2004: 108). For Eckersley a 'green' version of autonomy requires the transformation of the kinds of individual orientations and preferences to which such dogmas give rise.

Here, once again (and without wanting to get too trigger-happy about the catch-all significance of listening) it is easy to see how listening might be regarded as vital to the achievement of the kinds of enhanced, rounded-out, citizenly autonomy which Eckersley invokes. For the list of dogmas given might collectively be categorised as symptomatic of a lack of attentiveness: to our relationships with others; to the specificity of the natural world, and so on. As Eckersley puts it, "It is difficult to see how these dogmas would survive critical scrutiny in a genuinely free communication-community in the present ecological age" (2006: 108). This seems a fair assessment – provided that such a community is founded on the primacy of listening (to others, to alterity) as well as giving space for the expression of a full range of voices. Which, we can assume from Eckersley's work, will be the case – even though listening does not directly feature in her account. If we take the enhancement of autonomy as a prime, non-negotiable value, then only in terms of a 'muscular individualism' would this be achievable except by a recognition of the primacy of listening.

Put these points together, and we might say that democracy is valuable to greens *both* because it's more in tune with the general ethical orientations and principles of environmental political movements, and *also* because it will in any case be more effective in generating the changed circumstances which due attention to ecological priorities requires. And an appreciation of both reasons involves, in turn, an appreciation of the importance of listening to democracy itself. To put this another way: the significance of listening to democracy, as identified by Dobson and Bickford among relatively few others, applies whether green politics takes a consequentialist route or not.

Listening and (green) democracy

It seems to me that although it does not linger on the question of listening, the work of John Dryzek is especially well equipped to accommodate its importance. Dryzek distinguishes discursive from deliberative democracy – the latter, though related, being a model which is more absorbable within the liberal constitutional model. Discursive democracy is characterised by a wider, deeper emphasis on reflexivity. As he depicts it,

discursive democracy should be pluralistic in embracing the necessity to communicate across difference without erasing difference, reflexive in its questioning orientation to established traditions (including the tradition of deliberative democracy itself), transnational in its capacity to extend across state boundaries into settings where there is no constitutional framework, ecological in terms of openness to communication with non-human nature, and dynamic in its openness to ever-changing constraints upon and opportunities for democratization. (Dryzek, 2000: 3)

Dryzek is explicit – to pick out the second last of those listed themes – about the capacity of discursive democracy to work across the boundary with nature, and to include mute and speechless others. Following Val Plumwood (1995) among others, he points out that relationships with nature are, in important senses, *already* political. To advocate their democratisation is not to recommend some extravagant extension of the scope of politics, but to change the dynamics of the human/nature relationship in a less colonial, less authoritarian, less instrumentalising direction. Equality between humans and non-humans “cannot,” he observes, mean “literal equality in the capacity to speak” (2000: 153). But there are two things it can mean. One is that the speechless – non-human as well as human – can be regarded as deserving equal representation in “the politics of ideas”.⁴ The other is that “non-human nature can make equal demands on our capacity to listen” (2000: 154).

Dryzek posits as a “regulative ideal” of green democracy “effectiveness in communication that transcends the boundary of the human world” (2000: 154). In opposition to the paradigm of aggregative liberal democracy, he suggests, “this communication does not have to be mediated by the material interests of particular actors” (2000: 154):

The content of such communication might involved attention to feedback signals emanating from natural systems; in which case, the practical challenge when it comes to institutional design becomes one of dismantling barriers to such

⁴ This term is deployed by Anne Phillips (1995) as a counterpart to the ‘politics of presence’. Phillips endorses the latter, arguing for example that the political presence of women (rather than any particular ideas they may express) is crucial for gender democracy. Dryzek here suggests that while nature cannot present itself in the politics of deliberation, it can nonetheless – like “the very young, the mentally ill, intellectually disabled and so forth” (2000: 153) be *represented* there, and be said to have an equal right to this.

communication. It is also important to attend to the feedback signals emanating from those closest to environmental damage. Plumwood (1998: 579) calls this the capacity to hear “the bad news from below”. With these principles in mind, it is a straightforward matter to criticize institutions that try to subordinate nature on a large scale, and those that are remote and so incapable of hearing any news from below, be it good or bad. (Dryzek, 2000: 154)

All of this affirms the value of listening, and the inevitability of the proxy relationship. None of this is reassuring: it might well be that the news from below is indeed bad. But that is, of course, no reason to exclude it from an airing in the deliberative process. Dryzek does not theorise listening. He asserts its importance, explicitly and otherwise, without unpacking its ins and outs, or its different possible meanings – after all, its sense is importantly figurative as soon as we get to the notion that institutions might listen out for signals of damage from an environment which, in whatever senses it is an agent, and in whatever senses it has things to say, is in important ways also, to some degree, mute

Dryzek’s approach to democracy is particularly receptive to a stress on listening for perhaps three main, interrelated, reasons. One is that discursive democracy is characterised by process rather than stasis: as with Sampson’s account of listening, it is definitively open to disruption of the given, and as Dryzek puts it, “reflexive in its questioning orientation to established traditions” (2000: 3). Another is that it is pluralistic in its account of what counts as a voice. But perhaps the most crucial reason lies in the gap which for Dryzek lies between discursive democracy and its liberal democratic counterparts (which for him include many recent variants of deliberative democracy). For the liberal accounts he seeks distance from, deliberation requires some kind of commitment to political principles and constitutional rules which themselves represent a prior designation of what counts as a voice, or – more substantively – a ‘reasonable’ point of view, or contribution to discussion. Thus for Rawls, who describes his own later understanding of democracy as a deliberative model, “citizens are to conduct their fundamental discussions within a framework of what each regards as a political conception of justice based on values that the others can reasonably be expected to endorse” (Rawls, 1993: 226). As I have co-argued elsewhere (Ceva and Calder, 2009) there is limited scope for this level of presumed consensus. One might add: the establishment of this degree of consensus around political values must entail an advance decision not to listen to certain kinds of voice. Dryzek’s model of democracy, by contrast, rather than simply attempting to pin down in advance the terms of public reason and install these as rules of the game, is more explicitly open to non-constitutional, extra-legal, informal and structural enablers and constraints. It is thus set up to be more attentive towards – and so more inclusive of the marginal or non-traditional voice.

For participatory models of democracy, and the particular versions of them presented by deliberative and discursive democrats, social inclusion is both a premise of and a product of successful democracy. Environmental political theorists will want to extend the boundary of

inclusion to the non-human world. One way of putting this aim is, as Latour puts it, to add new voices to the discussion: “the voices of nonhumans”. “To limit the discussion to humans, their interests, their subjectivities, their rights, will appear as strange a few years from now as having denied the right to vote of slaves, poor people, or women” (Latour, 2004: 69). Latour’s extension of the scope of democracy echoes an important theme of MacIntyre’s work on dependence, and – in their different register – the full range of recent works seeking to find a place for issues, interests and orientations previously, in their different senses, beyond democracy’s radar. For the point is to dismantle the notion that the only people whose voices should count are conventional political subjects (however conceived), and that membership of that last group might be confined (for example) to those most proximate to some unfeasibly independent, extravagantly self-mastering agent.

Yet the gesture of inclusion still comes from those deemed agents – and still, to this extent, seems to reflect their biases, and certain epistemic limits bestowed by their perspective.⁵ Equally, not everyone or everything can listen, or (*a fortiori*) listen well. In any conversation across human/nature boundary, a case can certainly be made that both sides have ‘voices’, make ‘signals’ – on this, Aristotle and Dryzek are in their different ways at one. But the idea that nature itself will listen is rather harder to sustain. So is the idea that all of nature should always be listened to – that all of its ‘signals’ are equally entitled to a hearing. On the other hand, discrimination between which voices matter the most, at any point, is part and parcel of any account of democracy. The relaxation of epistemic frontiers, or the opening of the channels to include previously unheard voices, does not change this – it simply reinforces the point. The categories through which discrimination happens are provisional, fallible – but will always apply, as without them there would be no distinguishing between signals and mere noise, or noise itself and silence. In this sense, to emphasise the place of listening is to warn against any conflation of ontology with epistemology – of what *is* with what is, or might be, *known*, or reality itself and our current categorisations of it. To be orientated towards listening is to be orientated to that which punctures expectations, challenges existing boundaries, or otherwise unsettles the given.

⁵ Here we touch on an issue of wider, vital currency within environmental theory, but of particular importance to an adequate thinking-through of the proxy relationship: the relationship between (i) the interests of non-human nature and (ii) their articulation in language. Or to put it differently: given that such interests require interpretation in order to be included within the deliberative process. Adequate treatment of this issue requires a fuller discussion – and I am grateful to a reviewer for pointing out just how important this is (for Latour and Dobson’s approaches, as it happens, as much as for Dryzek’s and my own). My position for current purposes, though, is that here we find a matter of degree, rather than of kind. In so far as the democratic encounter involves dealing with difference (or otherness), and, following Goodin, seeking to internalise the needs of each other and the wider natural world, then we face epistemic hurdles if this is to be accomplished with due acuity and sensitivity. To speak for others (human or otherwise) is a tricky business, perhaps doomed to incompleteness. But this in itself does not mean that it is either avoidable, or diminished in its normative importance. Again, though, this is the prompt for a further, more specific development of the ideas broached here.

Conclusion

This discussion has sought to reinforce the point, stressed too seldom but most recently by Dobson, that democracy has a “listening deficit” (Dobson, forthcoming: 15). It has considered different aspects of this deficit, some of its implications, and possible sources of it. None of this is comprehensive, or amounts to a theory of democratic listening. Rather, my hope has been to show that the deficit is important, that addressing it is crucial. Talk of ‘consensus’ may (and arguably always does) suggest silenced voices, rather than the simple triumph of public reason. That environmental political theories – with Dryzek’s being a particularly strong example – are well-placed to address the deficit does not itself guarantee that they resolve it. Yet they do give us a strong starting-point from which to work further and deeper through the role of listening in democracy, both theoretically and in practice.

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