### AT: Reasonability

#### Their model of reasonability is untenable—it amounts to “our interps are reasonable if we say so,” which makes the topic an unlimited free-for-all and solves neither side’s offense. Competing interpretations is the best guide to making a fair decision with incomplete information.

Hansen, 18—Senior Associate Professor, Danish School of Media and Journalism (Ejvind, “Aporias of courage and the freedom of expression,” Philosophy & Social Criticism, Vol 44, Issue 1, 2018, dml) [language modifications denoted by brackets]

In order for a practice to be courageous there needs to be some kind of goal, and, furthermore, some kind of connection between the goal and the practice. This is admittedly still pretty vague. Insofar as we define courage as a challenging practice in which we risk our lives in order to reasonably further some kind of goal, we have reached a definition with elements (‘risk’, ‘lives’, ‘reasonably’ ‘further’, ‘some kind of goal’) that are very open to differing views.

On the one hand, this is certainly as it has to be. If we are to articulate a positive supplement to the negative definitions of the freedom of expression, it must be very open, because it should be open to the improvisational and disruptive impulses of courage. As soon as we start to define the goals and the ways of reaching them too strictly, these very definitions might themselves become objects of challenge through the aporias of courage.

On the other hand, even though the positive freedom we are seeking to instantiate is open to differing views, this does not mean that we might as well do without it – especially not when we are talking about communicative expressions. It draws on the intuition that life at the outset is the prime value, and if you risk your life you are thus expected to be able to say something about why this sacrifice is necessary. The agent who risks her or his life always has the burden of proof.

Certainly, what is taken to be necessary may vary almost endlessly. That cannot be determined in advance, once and for all. But an agent who risks her or his life without being able to give some account of why, is foolhardy – and the chances that she or he [they] in some sense will be taken seriously is minimal.

With this last move, we are, as premised above, closing in on a deliberative approach (as articulated in Cohen, 1989, 1997; Habermas, 1981, 1992, 1996; Rawls, 1999[1971]), something that may seem surprising given the French inspiration of the previous sections. Knowing Habermas’ hostility towards the anti-rational impulses in these positions (Habermas, 1985) on the one hand, and Derrida’s hesitation on linguistic generality (cf. the previous sections) on the other hand, this calls for some comments.

We are not going to claim that the Habermasian and Derridean approaches could be reconciled. In previous writings we have, however, argued that Habermas’ deliberative approach and the world-disclosing approaches (in this article: Foucault and Derrida) articulate two different (and to some extent opposing) impulses in our social, political and communicative practices: the impulses of systematicity (attempting to bring together seemingly disparate phenomena) and the quest for adequacy (attempting to understand phenomena in their entire diversity) (e.g. in Hansen, 2005a, 2005b, 2013).

As shown above, Derrida’s deconstructive approach can certainly be seen as an attempt to reveal the necessary gaps and aporias embodied in the generalizing aspects in argumentative deliberation. At the same time, however, the findings of his analyses do not lead to a refusal of the generalizing approaches as such:

The undecidable is not merely the oscillation or the tension between two decisions; it is the experience of that which, though heterogeneous, foreign to the order of the calculable and the rule, is still obliged – it is of obligation that we must speak – to give itself up to the impossible decision, while taking account of law and rules. (Derrida, 1994: 539; emphases added)

Even though Derrida in the above quote is reflecting upon the undecidable and the moment of freedom he still acknowledges that the resulting decision needs to take account of laws and rules. Derrida is very clear that true decisions are not determined by existing rules and laws, but at the same time, however, neither are they entirely independent of rules and laws.

Habermas and Derrida certainly disagree in their analyses of how rules and laws are (should be) established – Derrida focusing on emergence through continuous challenges, Habermas focusing on the deliberative and argumentative trying to overcome mutual disagreements. Habermas’ account has its limits when it comes to articulating reasonable resentments towards existing discursive structures (this is an often raised criticism of Habermas’ approach – see, for example, in Thomassen, 2007), Derrida’s approach is lacking in reflections on the forces or mechanisms that bring back new accounts of the general: how and why do new rules, laws and accounts of courage come about?

Both positions are (if not in their full articulations then at least in their founding intuitions) in fact right. In order for deconstruction not to become merely destructive, we need to understand how reason in communication plays the role of helping agents to reach reasonably towards each other. Otherwise public discussions will tend to dissolve into an infinite ocean of unconnected conversations; any point of view will appear as equally valid; any decision will be prevented by the persistent possibility of raising counter-voices by minority groups. Deliberation is the responsibility of trying to reach common understandings in spite of initial disagreements. This is where Habermas is right. On the other hand, in order for such reasonable accounts not to freeze into dogma, we need (courageous) challenges of the very accounts of reasonability. This is where world-disclosing approaches as suggested by Foucault and Derrida are at their strongest.

However, having seen that every human practice is embedded in aporetic paradoxes, it should not come as a surprise that even reason is aporetically structured: seeking deliberative consensus is a legitimate aim only insofar as the exchanged arguments seek to include courageous challenges (possible disturbances of consensus) of the discursive horizons, just as we have seen that notions of courage make sense only through some deliberative reflections of our means and goals.

VII

The quest for a reasonable account of the necessity of change does not imply that (1) an act without such accounts is by itself illegitimate – sometimes we do things without any reason or clear ideas of what we try to accomplish that turn out to be of value nevertheless. But in public exchanges where we want to affect others, the others should in some way come to understand why change is necessary.

Neither do we want to imply that (2) changes may never come about without agents being able themselves to give an account of why this is necessary. Quite often actions and events are conceived in ways that the initiators did not foresee.

What we are trying to argue here is thus not that the suggested reflections on positive freedom of expression should replace prevailing accounts of negative freedom. It may be argued that a freedom of expression that is only thought through negative accounts of freedom is problematic, but that is quite another argument and it is not implied by the above reflections. The reflections merely suggest that in evaluations of actual public spheres it is inadequate merely to consider the plurality of voices (as suggested in the negatively conceived accounts of the freedom of expression).

This is where we suggest turning our attention towards notions of courage. If our bandwidth of attention is limited, it is important that we in our engagements in the public spheres are not overwhelmed by insignificant utterances that merely affirm existing states of affairs. For public deliberation to become democratically fruitful it is important that we are attentive to courageously challenging statements; challenges that are, certainly, made comprehensible to us by the speakers’ attempts to convince us of the underlying goals and means.

Certainly, if these reflections are to gain any real relevance they will need to be further articulated, and in such articulations it will be necessary to substantiate notions of ‘life’, ‘reasonably’, ‘some kind of goal’, etc. And these substantiations might narrow the plurality of voices heard in the public.

As demonstrated in the previous sections the alternative to doing this is, however, not to make every voice visible in the public spheres. Even though they may exist in the public sphere, it is not certain that the limited bandwidth of attention leaves room for their actually being heard by any critical mass.

Insofar as we consider the public spheres not merely as spheres in which voices should be uttered but also as spheres in which voices should be heard, we need some way to select out those voices from the chorus that are significant in relation to some given context. Unlimited plurality is not an option. The question thus becomes how plurality should be limited. Should plurality be limited according to explicitly articulated rules and norms, rules and norms that can, due to their explicit articulations, themselves become subjects of dispute? Or should plurality be limited according to unconscious power structures, the rules of the strongest?