

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 32 | Issue 3

Article 6

7-1-2015

Edward Langerak, CIVIL DISAGREEMENT: PERSONAL INTEGRITY IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

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Recommended Citation

Wolterstorff, Nicholas (2015) "Edward Langerak, CIVIL DISAGREEMENT: PERSONAL INTEGRITY IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 32 : Iss. 3 , Article 6.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil201532345

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol32/iss3/6>

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BOOK REVIEWS

Civil Disagreement: Personal Integrity in a Pluralistic Society, by Edward Langerak. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014. ix + 170 pages (paper).

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The opening words of this excellent book are these: "A pluralistic society is one that includes individuals and groups with different and conflicting convictions about what constitutes a good life. These convictions are so important to the personal identities of its members that their integrity requires open disagreement with each other. But maintaining the social and political ties necessary to a peaceful society requires that they disagree in a civil way." The project of the book is to explain what it is to disagree in a civil way and to elaborate on why disagreeing civilly is important.

After an opening chapter devoted to distinguishing different types of claims, different types of disagreements, and different reasons for offering arguments, Langerak turns, in the second chapter, to analyzing the various ways in which ours is a pluralistic society. One of the things that impressed this reader about this chapter, and about the book as a whole, was the lucidity and propriety of the distinctions that the author draws. It happens sometimes that philosophers draw distinctions so as to dazzle the reader with the author's facility at drawing distinctions. Not so Langerak. Discussions in the area that Langerak is dealing with are full of terminological confusion; crucial terms are used with different meanings. Langerak performs a great service in drawing distinctions that dispel the confusion.

The meaning of the multivalent term "pluralism" that is most important for Langerak's purposes is the meaning that he calls "perspective pluralism." By virtue of differences in our experience and reflections, we human beings have many different perspectives on what is real and on what is good and right, with the result, writes Langerak, that "any number of claims, theories and ways of life, including moral and religious outlooks, will be judged right or wrong—or reasonable or unreasonable—depending on our respective perspectives" (51). Langerak affirms the principle



that something that is reasonable for one person to believe, given that person's perspective, may not be reasonable for another person to believe, given that person's perspective. (I myself would prefer the term "entitled" to the term "reasonable.")

He spends some time in the chapter dispelling the fear some readers might have that the relativity of reasonableness implies the relativity of truth. Whether or not some proposition is true is independent of whether or not it's reasonable for one or another person to believe it. Some of my reasonable beliefs may be false, some of my unreasonable beliefs may be true. Truth does not track with reasonableness. Langerak is not a relativist on truth.

In the third chapter, Langerak moves on to discuss toleration. The chapter opens with these words: "In a pluralistic society we can and should engage in open-minded conversations during which we listen as much as we talk, engage in sincere dialogues during which we try to see the issues the way others do, and engage in mutual inquiries during which we patiently and fair-mindedly examine each others' arguments. However, we cannot expect that these well intentioned efforts will bring consensus" (77). In many cases, what we ought then to do is tolerate beliefs we disagree with or behavior that we disapprove of. Langerak goes on to dispel conceptual confusion by distinguishing various senses of "toleration" and arguing—correctly, I think—that its central meaning is that of enduring, or putting up with, beliefs that one regards as false or behavior that one regards as wrong. It's the best discussion of toleration that I know of.

Shortly after the passage just quoted, Langerak writes, "Of course, even a pluralistic society finds itself with crimes and other forms of behavior that no civil society can endure, so appropriate intolerance will always have its place. Indeed, moral progress in history is often marked precisely by civilized societies' becoming intolerant of oppressive practices such as slavery and various forms of unjustified discrimination" (77). Langerak repeats the point a few times; but he never develops it.

I wish he had. I realize that it may seem churlish of me to dun him for what he does not say after praising him for what he does say. It's the classic strategy of reviewers: if you can't fault the author on what he did say, fault him on what he did not say. But here's my point: in pluralistic societies, it's just as important that we seek to eliminate or diminish what is intolerable as that we tolerate what is tolerable.

The picture that comes through, both in Langerak's discussion and in the literature that he engages, is that of a well-ordered faculty meeting in which each member feels free to state his position, in which each member is capable of defending that position with arguments, and in which each member listens openly and attentively to the position and arguments of those who see things differently. Not all faculty meetings are like that; discussions in civil society are seldom like that. Chicanery, corruption, self-interest, and domination are defended with threats, deception, bribes,

cronyism, and the like. Jeff Stout's book *Blessed Are the Organized* contains some vivid examples.

For reasons not clear to me, the tracks on which discussions concerning toleration and public discourse proceed never intersect with those on which discussions concerning the righting of injustice proceed. I think it would be a great contribution if someone integrated reflections on tolerating disagreements that are tolerable with reflections on struggling to eliminate behavior that is intolerable. Achieving personal integrity in a pluralistic society requires both forms of activity.

In his fourth chapter Langerak engages the public reason debate. Given the fact of perspective pluralism in our society, how should we conduct our debates on public policy and prospective legislation? As one would expect, he takes note of Rawls's restraint principle: on constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice, "conscientious citizens ought to restrain themselves from using nonpublic reasons to advocate or vote for coercive legislation unless they also are willing and able to provide public reasons for it" (113), public reasons being those that citizens "can reasonably expect their compatriots could reasonably accept" (114).

After discussing various alternative principles, Langerak settles for a clarification of Rawls's principle. Rawls's restraint principle can be interpreted as affirming either a *prima facie* obligation of citizens or an all-things-considered principle. Langerak proposes that it be interpreted as affirming a *prima facie* obligation, one that can be overridden, though "only in certain carefully considered circumstances." What then follows is a subtle and insightful discussion of the sorts of things one should consider in deciding whether or not, in a given case, to override the restraint principle. This is a valuable contribution to the literature.

Let me make two comments about Langerak's affirmation of the Rawlsian restraint principle. First, the discussion of what should happen is once again idealized. Langerak's discussion of public reason is like all discussions of public reason in that, here too, the picture that hovers over the discussion is that of a well-ordered faculty meeting.

Consider Aunt Mabel. She doesn't like engaging in arguments. It doesn't matter whether the arguments are on political matters, on religious matters, on ecological matters, she doesn't like engaging in arguments. She's not opposed to arguments as such; she doesn't mind listening in on arguments, provided they are civil. But she doesn't like to engage in them herself. When an election or a referendum is coming up, she listens carefully to what the candidates or the proponents are saying. She finds that she doesn't always understand what they are saying; she didn't understand much about the Affordable Health Care Act, for example. So her aim in listening is to settle on who she can trust; that's who she votes for.

There are a lot of Aunt Mabels in our society. And all of us sometimes act like Aunt Mabel. Nobody has time to argue about all political issues, not even all important ones.

Is Aunt Mabel failing in her obligations of citizenship? We can agree that she is not the ideal citizen. But is she failing in her obligations? Not so far as I can see. It's because I don't regard Aunt Mabel as failing in her obligations of citizenship that, in my writing about these matters, I have never tried to specify the sorts of arguments that citizens *should* give on political matters; I have confined myself to discussing which sorts of arguments they are *permitted* to give. Given that I think citizens are not obligated to give any arguments at all, it's my view that they are not obligated to give arguments of a certain sort. Are certain kinds of citizens obligated to give arguments in certain kinds of situations? Am I, for example, a professional philosopher, sometimes obligated to give arguments? Perhaps. But I have no idea whatsoever how to specify which kinds of citizens are obligated to give arguments in which kinds of situations.

My second comment about Langerak's discussion of public reason is that when we put together his acceptance of Rawls's definition of public reason with his main thesis concerning perspective pluralism, it appears that there are very few, if any, public reasons. Here, once again, is the definition of "public reasons" that Langerak takes over from Rawls: public reasons "are those that advocates in the public square can reasonably expect their compatriots could reasonably accept." The locution "could reasonably accept" is vague. Presumably what's meant is this: public reasons are reasons that advocates can reasonably expect that all of their compatriots could reasonably accept *given the perspectives that those compatriots actually have*. It's not relevant what one's compatriots reasonably believe in some other possible world where their perspectives are different from what they are in the actual world. Now recall Langerak's thesis concerning perspective pluralism: a proposition that is reasonable for one person to believe, given his perspective, may not be reasonable for another person to believe, given her perspective. I join with Langerak in affirming this principle.

Here's the question: are there reasons that those of us who are advocates can reasonably expect that all of our compatriots could reasonably accept given the perspectives that those compatriots actually have? Presumably there are some things that everybody could reasonably accept—that $1 + 1 = 2$, for example. But we are talking here about reasons relevant to debating prospective legislation and public policy. Given the enormous diversity of perspectives in our society, I see no reason to believe that there are any public reasons—or to speak more cautiously, no reason to believe that there are enough public reasons to settle the wide range of political issues that we face. I think that what all of us "can reasonably expect" concerning our compatriots is that, if there are any public reasons, there aren't enough of them. Given Langerak's thesis that reasonableness is relative to perspectives, the box containing public reasons is empty, or nearly so.