

Whatâ??s wrong with pluralism

Description

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Iâ??ve had many conversations with chatGPT on subjects as diverse as writing computer code to comparing and contrasting ideas from philosophy. The performance is impressive. It is a little like talking with an extremely well-informed and patient tutor.

It is also *unlike* that kind of pedagogic human-human interaction in several respects. It becomes obvious to anyone using an AI chatbot that recollection of previous conversations is limited. See post: AI learns ABC. The frequent user learns rapidly to deal with that and other obvious limitations.

More significantly, an AI chatbot has no opinions â?? at least, it is bereft of first person narratives proffering opinion. Or, at least, opinions on the matters it presents are concealed within its biases. It specialises in laying things out dispassionately leaving it to the user to form an opinion. In that respect it behaves *pluralistically*.

Pluralism 101

Most of us are familiar with the positive connotations of a pluralistic community â?? a society or state that encourages a diversity of cultural practices, opinions, and beliefs. The advocacy of such plurality is institutionalised through EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion) policies with a focus on protected characteristics, such as age, disability, gender, race, religion, belief and sexual orientation. Clearly, pluralistic societies are in contrast to autocracies and theocracies that might impose particular beliefs and practices that constitute a singular view of normalcy.

There are many aspects to social pluralism, and some challenges. Pluralism can lead to a kind of relativism, which discourages discussion and disagreement about differences. It can perpetuate a persistent quest for common ground, an insistence that all differences can be reconciled through the realisation that everything is fundamentally the same. Such levelling can in fact serve to silence individuals and groups. The master narrative that underneath it all we are all basically the same may be led by certain power elites with a stake in defining what constitutes that common ground, including those who claim to define the spectrum of diversity in a community. To lay out similarities and differences in beliefs in an apparently dispassionate way itself conceals certain power relations under

the guise of pluralism, exploiting the virtues of social equality, diversity and inclusion.

The philosopher Richard J. Bernstein has been a strong influence in my own thinking about pluralism. In his essay â??The varieties of pluralism,â?• he provides an illuminating quote from an article by Hanna Pitkin and Sara Shumer about participatory democracies. Iâ??ve read the article and include the quote here.

> â??Democratic politics is an encounter among people with differing interests, perspectives, and opinions â?? an encounter in which they reconsider and mutually revise opinions and interests, both individual and common. It happens always in a context of conflict, imperfect knowledge, and uncertainty, but where community action is necessary. The resolutions achieved are always more or less temporary, subject to reconsideration, and rarely unanimous. What matters is not unanimity but discourse. The substantive common interest is only discovered or created in democratic political struggle, and it remains contested as much as shared. Far from being inimical to democracy, conflict-handled in democratic ways, with openness and persuasion, is what makes democracy work, what makes for the mutual revision of opinions and interestâ?• [48].

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The passage highlights the differences evident in any community, and the presence of disagreement, imperfect information, and unpredictability. Eventually, communities may need to effect some action: allocate resources, commission projects, draft regulations, deliver justice. Whatever the resultant action, itâ??s even more important that people talk to one another than that they reach unanimity. This is a pragmatic approach to decision making, and one that reckons with, if not accepts, the presence of *agon*, or *dissensus* as well as consensus, as outlined in the previous post.

Academic pluralism

I mentioned AI as tutor at the start of this post. We can blame education for the promotion of a watery kind of pluralism: the dispassionate laying out of theories and facts; recourse to comparing and contrasting, identifying pros and cons, advantages and disadvantages, encyclopaedic laying out of positions. Signs of pluralism in discourse include idioms such as â??on the other handâ?¦ ,â?• â??there is little agreement on â?¦ ,â?• â??thatâ??s an interesting proposition â?¦ â?• and â??there are X number of positions on this issueâ?¦ .â?• As in democratic communities, such laudable pedagogic practices have their limitations: concealing biases, or at least pretending that they do not exist, surreptitiously exercising power over domains of knowledge, levelling differences, subsuming radical or challenging positions within conventional typologies, subsuming the extraordinary within the conventional.

I think I was first alerted to the pitfalls of pluralism in early forays into hermeneutics and phenomenology. What some of us thought was a radical position challenging so many presuppositions about knowledge, understanding and methods, particularly in the field of computer-aided design, others rapidly subsumed within an overall framing as yet another opinion, or a variant of the accepted norm. It then became apparent that our self-proclaimed radical â??newâ?• way of thinking made little difference to the theories and practices of those already invested in â??oldâ?• ways of thinking. We read Thomas Kuhnâ??s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and wove the challenges of â??incommensurabilityâ?• into our self narratives. I provide this account here not to vindicate our own conceits, but to emphasise

how different viewpoints might resist pluralism, and unevenly within communities.

This brings me back to ChatGPT as pluralist. Training on vast repositories of texts, embodying so many differing positions, is likely to produce an AI with biases certainly, but also to present as if devoid of conviction on any particular point of view. That limits the conversation somewhat. Even an effective tutor will invite disagreement, and approach the conversation as an opportunity to share in the â??the mutual revision of opinions and interest.â?•

References

- Bernstein, R. J. (1983). *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Bernstein, R. J. (1987). â??The varieties of pluralism.â?• *American Journal of Education* **95**(4): pp. 509-525.
- Kuhn, T. (1970). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.
- Pitkin, H. F. and S. M. Shumer (1982). â??On participation.â?• *Democracy* **2**: pp. 43-54,

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Notes

- Featured image is from Dall-e prompted with: Please provide an image that features the word â??pluralismâ?• on a school blackboard. Deploy a high-tech grungy, futuristic industrial aesthetic. No human or animal forms.
- Pluralism also reveals itself in the idea that there are two sides to every story, crime, accusation. *Two sidesism* is a charge levelled against certain types of journalism. See https://tdunlop.substack.com/p/journalism-is-broken.
- Pluralism can take on a temporal dimension, as when social and philosophical ideas are positioned historically and chronologically, as if the time and the place in which ideas surface are more significant than their applicability in the current circumstances.

Category

1. Artificial Intelligence

Tags

1. chatgpt
2. democracy
3. education
4. hermeneutics

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