Negotiating: The Cognitive Argument

We are inclined to view negotiations as an interaction between two different parties. Can we conceive of them as also occurring within the same person? And, if this makes sense, can we draw some useful lessons from self-negotiations that can help us circumvent failures in negotiations with the other?

'Negotiations', of course, is a term that covers a wide range of activities. These can be over a contract, or wages, or a business deal, or a living arrangement, as well as over a solution to a political or other kind of problem. What seems common to all these are two basic processes or activities subjects engage in. One is deliberation, where one is constantly weighing the pros and cons of different elements of an unfolding picture before one that will define the relationship at issue with the other. The second consists of the actual movements one makes of the pieces or positions in that picture or map on the basis of that deliberation. The general idea is that the deliberations involved, as well as the positions formulated as a consequence of these, are in theory at least influenced by analogous processes undertaken by the second party. The relation between the two sides is interactive. In talks between management and unions, a union makes demands which management deliberates about, and perhaps counters by proposing alternatives, which unions then deliberate about, and respond to by making a move themselves. As in chess, one first considers which piece it would be best to move where in a given circumstance, and then one makes that move. One expects a counter-move also guided by deliberation on the part of the other side.

If we accept that deliberation followed by the taking of a position are the two constitutive elements of a negotiation between two parties, with interaction between them, then there is good reason to propose that, in terms of logical structure, there is no difference between negotiating with the other and a process that one could describe as negotiating with oneself: one deliberates by oneself over whether or not to 'make a specific move' in one's life, one is persuaded to make it and reaches a conviction in that regard, but only to find, very often, that one 'talks back' to oneself, introducing data or thoughts that reveal consequences or implications arising from one's earlier conviction that lead one to 're-consider', or to re-engage in another deliberative process.

You might ask what 'talking back to oneself' means, or *who* are we to conceive of as that interlocutor if not you? Also, where and how is that interlocutor engaged in his or her deliberation? These questions might be asked by way of discrediting the example altogether. A plurality in the person is discounted forthwith. Or they may be asked by way of admitting a subliminal dialogical self, but questioning nonetheless how far the analogy can hold between the dialogical activity of such a subliminal self with one's conscious self, and that between two selves in dialogue.

An approach that discredits the example altogether would typically rest its position on a primitive belief in an I/Other disjunction, where, that is, one is held to be either one person or another but not both –that the bundle of beliefs making up one's identity does not overlap with that of others. This binary picture is not as simple as it sounds, nor is it an entirely innocuous position as it might at first appear. It has far-reaching implications, as I shall try to show, the most harmful of which is the conclusion it leads one to hold (or the implicit assumption on which it is based) of the fixity and uniformity of identities. The reader/audience can already surmise even at

this early stage how identity-rigidity stands to be one of the major obstacles –if not *the* major obstacle to a successful negotiation.

Leaving that aside for a moment let me address the less-skeptical approach –that which admits a healthy degree of plurality in the self but wonders about how analogous that can be with inter-personal plurality. The challenge before us here concerns how seriously we can take the 'talking back to oneself' component of the example, or how seriously we are to contemplate the positing of such a component of the self. It is not in doubt here that, as in a typical negotiation, at least one side (let us say, the conscious me) engages in both deliberation and making a move –that is, by weighing to oneself the pros and cons of a particular point of view. What is in doubt is the role of the presumed 'other me' -in particular, what may be in doubt is a presumed process of deliberation that this 'other me' engages in. We can imagine the conscious me deliberating, then taking a decision, only to find myself once having taken it suddenly faced by what appears to be a totally convincing opposite point of view, one that somehow unfolds and presents itself quite independently in my mind. Often, this new point of view doesn't necessarily come as a flash all by itself, but is accompanied by one or two steps or components of an inchoate argument or a scenario the conscious me hadn't considered earlier, or that hadn't seemed sufficiently important or decisive. I can deliberate about whether to see a film, weighing the pros and cons that seem relevant to a decision, and make up my mind to see it. Only, once having made up my mind, I suddenly find myself more convinced by the opposite point of view, underwritten by doubts and concerns I hadn't faced before, or that I hadn't considered as carrying the same weight as they now seem to carry. Such doubts and concerns can include, for instance, the specific day of the week I had decided to see the film, which now proffers itself to me to be inappropriate, or one of the minor actors in the film, who in my

unconscious memory is identified as someone whom I took a definite disliking for, or the alternative gentle walk by the sea, which I had been considering in the back of my mind to take for some time now …these, and suchlike considerations or thoughts, suddenly seem to call for a different decision. Significantly, these are not issues I had considered –or had considered in the same way- in my conscious deliberation. Nor am I now necessarily recalling all these to mind –though some, like that of the minor actor, I do now recall; but this, before I recalled it, had been active somewhere in my brain, fulfilling a different role at the unconscious level, as part of a sequence of thoughts subliminally coming together to formulate a point of view other than the one I consciously formulated. These different data just didn't figure- or they didn't play an important role- in my conscious deliberation. I am sure this experience is common to all of us: we deliberate consciously along one track, so to speak, only to find that another track in our minds has been analogously and independently active.

Two kinds of self-dialogue then seem to be happening here: one is 'up-front' and conscious, so to speak; the other is buried and inchoate. But while inchoate, I can in retrospect consciously reconstruct that inchoate deliberation which I seem to have unconsciously undertaken, thus making myself understand the process (the sequence of thoughts or data) that led me to finding myself swayed by the different position. The sequence, as already intimated, is not strictly speaking an argument as such: rather, it is a series of data each one of which, either independently or in combination, presents itself as reason *against* the conscious decision I have already taken, or against one of the factors weighing in favor of having taken that decision. In other words, it is a straightforward case of weighing pros and cons. Of course, my conscious self could question that new position, and the process can be taken a further step or two, or even more, as can be

imagined. In all of the above, no one would deny the normalcy of the first kind of self-dialogue, that is, as I proceed to formulate a point of view by consciously considering its pros and cons. But what may be at issue is the other side of the picture: what is it exactly that happens –in the dark, so to speak- before I find myself faced with a contrary position, and *who,* or *what* is it that makes it happen. Can an inner or subliminal self deliberate, all by itself, so to speak?

Let me immediately clear up one point here before addressing those questions: positing another self deliberating over the same issues I too am deliberating about, but about whose content and sequencing I am not aware, is not itself the issue. Typically, I am not conscious of someone else's deliberation when I negotiate with them anyway. If there is an objection here, it is that I cannot myself be the subject of a deliberation I myself am not conscious of. But this objection, let it be noted, is simply a reiteration, perhaps in another form, of the same position that denies plurality in the self. It is an objection that begs the question. What should be considered rather is whether a deliberative process can be envisaged by the 'other me' of which the 'conscious me' is not aware. Even assuming that something inchoate goes on in my mind that seems like a thinking process, can one still consider it to be *deliberation*? Can't it be something else, like an Augustinian 'contrary will', or an Aristotelian *akrasia,* or simply the occurrence of a new, overwhelming piece of 'evidence' or information that suddenly comes to mind? The case I am considering stands out to be quite different from all of those: it is not a case of two wills conflicting with one another, or that of my will being too weak to be informed by my own reasoning, or that of suddenly discovering a new piece of information. It is more in the nature of certain pieces relevant to my conscious deliberation that hadn't figured before or that somehow slipped out of it or come to assume different weights as they begin to

gather together in the back of my mind to form a logical sequence of its own that finally presents itself to me either as a conclusion only, or as a conclusion together with one or two supporting steps. If my conscious deliberation highlights what seem to me to be immediately pertinent items of information, that deeper process seems to reach out far and wide in my bank-data for further items or experiences that shed a different light on what I may be consciously considering. That this is not far-fetched can be gleaned from countless experiences a person has, in which data that seem to have been collected during one's life and that may have been dormant before are suddenly activated and somehow converge with other data pertinent to an arising situation before one in such a way as to make one reach the conviction that one particular move rather than another which had been adopted is the best one can make in the circumstances. This envisaged move could be simple –and, sometimes, even instinctive- as deciding at the last minute not to walk down a particular alley, although my initial plan and after conscious deliberation was to do so in order to reach a particular destination. This last-minute decision is prompted by data my senses register in present-time, as I approach the alley, which independently call forth other data registered from the past, all of which draw together by themselves and form a sequence that then presents itself at the conscious level, weighing in for a decision contrary to that I had taken before. Significantly, the drawing together to form a sequence of the said data happens *unintentionally.* One could almost say it is alike to an independent and subliminal computation of data in my mind. In a recent paper by Timothy Williamson, on imagination as a way to knowledge, the structural coherence of a similar procedure is proposed to explain how our imaginative side often helps us 'to know' what a best step to take is in a particular circumstance, like jumping from one side of a stream to the other. Disparate but relevant data stored from past experience compute almost mechanically. Many examples can be cited where unconscious and

unintentional computations in the brain take place, given a certain choice one has to make, that eventually determine what that choice will be. But even admitting the structural similarity being pointed out, the real objection that may be raised here is that (unconscious) computation is not the same as deliberation. One is intentional and the other is mechanical. However, considered objectively, any argument in favor of accepting that what our conscious selves do with data is deliberation rather than computation is one that can equally apply to the suggestion that what our unconscious selves do is also deliberation. The mere fact that *I* am not conscious of that deliberation is not, by itself -as was already stated- reason for supposing it does not exist. The logical structure, after all, is the same. To insist that nevertheless that *I* should be so aware, and that the two paradigms are different from one another (appealing to consciousness) is therefore simply to beg the question.

There is good reason therefore to suggest that the underlying structure of a negotiation process is the same, whether between two persons or in the same person. But why should one take such pains to show this? The answer has to do with trying to understand why and where negotiations between different parties fail, and what is required to make them succeed. Let us once again consider the I/Other disjunction paradigm, as opposed to the dialogical-self paradigm. In the former, the stage is already set for different, and perhaps opposed frames of mind. Each interlocutor has marshaled her own thoughts in a certain formation and is already set on guard, ready to parry the other side's move. The defensive posturing makes for placing every incoming thought from the other side under close scrutiny. Every such thought is suspect, simply by virtue of its origination from the other side. It is somebody else's thoughts, and its very contrariness reinforces the sense of its belonging to the other, a feature

characterizing what the other stands for, or *who* they are. The situation is the exact converse in the dialogical-self paradigm. Here, different or opposite points of view and sequences to those one has consciously deliberated transpire freely and unobtrusively in one's consciousness. They may even be contrary positions one has argued against the night before with someone else. One wakes up the next morning to find oneself convinced by them, now as they appear in a different light, with different considerations now associated with them than those with which they were presented to one the night before. Their contrariness now is not a feature of an otherness to be guarded against. They are not *alien* thoughts, not the thoughts of someone else. They are one's own thoughts. They belong to one as any other of one's thoughts, and are now integral to one's self-consciousness, to one's own identity.

Here, someone might ask, Why assume that such a process of interaction is not what takes place in a straightforward deliberation, when one is engaged anyway in weighing between the pros and cons of a proposition? The answer is that this indeed can happen, but only if and when one can develop the ability to free oneself of one's instinctive or conscious disposition to guard against a contrary point of view –indeed not to see it as a point of view that defines or belongs to someone else, but as one belonging to oneself. Typically, after all, in conscious deliberation what one does is to simulate an opposite point of view to one which one holds, or which one hypothesizes, in order then to marshal virtual arguments and provide reasons against holding it. In other words, the contrariness of that point of view is already a mark of its otherness. In contrast, in a deliberation resulting from what transpires from the unconscious track an idea's contrariness- as was said- does not signify otherness: it is assimilated as part and parcel of one's own thoughts. To clarify the difference by taking an extreme example, consider the notions that

Ishma'el was Abraham's intended sacrifice, or that Christ was not crucified, and two different ways in which a religious Jew or a Christian might entertain them…once as a grievous distortion by a schismatic and erroneous religion, but perhaps, once, as a valid notion on a par with one's held and contrary beliefs. This could never happen, it might be claimed. But this claim would rest on an I/Other paradigm, one whose fixity and rigidity we are questioning. However, whatever one's claim, the contrast between the two paradigms here is clear: there is a great difference between such notions being put to someone who does not believe in them, and focusing on which one prepares one's logical and historical arsenal to debunk them; and when they might simply one day present themselves free of their baggage to that person. In the latter case, one's view of them would be free of prejudice. They are simply another idea that belongs to one, and that can be dealt with, positively or negatively, on that basis.

The positions, or points of view we are talking about eventually describe what the person who entertains them identifies herself with. To be rigidly opposed to entertaining their opposites, or alternatives, is to be a captive of that cluster of beliefs that constitute an identity, instead of being that identity's master. Let me pick up an example to explain the implications of this from a recent paper by Uri Avnery, on what it means to be a Zionist (needless to say, a similar argument would apply to what it means to be a Muslim, or a European, or anything else): one could freely accept oneself to be a Zionist on a Martin Buber interpretation (who wished for a binational state), or on that of a Naftalie Bennet (who wishes for a clinically Jewish state), and switch from identifying oneself as a Zionist from being one kind to being the other. One's national or historical identity narrative here is crucial for how one defines oneself as a Zionist. Equally crucial is how one decides to relate to this narrative. One either submits to a predefinition, or formulates a new one. More radically, one could –while

remaining who one is, or retaining one's own identity as a person- discard being a Zionist or a nationalist altogether. One would have no problem, while continuing to feel who one is, to define what one believes and is prepared to do. In contrast, the I/Other disjunction paradigm defines for one, once and for all, what being a Zionist is, such that stepping outside of this definition comes to be viewed as a betrayal, or as treason. It comes to be viewed as having stepped outside of oneself and to have assumed the position of the other, indeed of having somehow *become* 'the other' –the enemy. That is how Rabin came to be assassinated. But that is also how, we must remind ourselves, having failed to win over the other side, he managed to win the other side over.

History is replete with examples (including at the very personal level, such as in intimate relationships) where individuals manage to redefine who they are, with the purpose of constructing a better relation with the other. We sometimes call this 'adapting oneself' to make a success of the relationship with the other. One allows oneself, consciously and unconsciously, to internalize positions and attitudes that independently one would have rejected out of hand as being against one's character. One allows oneself to make changes to one's behavior, often this having the effect of also transforming the other. The principle here is to accept that an identity is constituted –though not perhaps exclusively, nor necessarily not entirely- by a collection of general attributes, some of which perhaps being more pertinent to it than others, but each one of which is such that it can be broken down to less general attributes, and ultimately to definite descriptions of specific positions on specific subjects. It is important to keep this reductive structure of identity in mind –that ultimately, general terms only 'speak to us' when broken down to specific situations. Being a Zionist as a general attribute can mean at the specific level sticking to every inch of so-called 'Greater Israel', or to the belief that God actually

made a gift of a specific bit of a land to a specific people. But nothing stands in the way of retaining the general attribute of being a Zionist while deciding to change that specific position. One can do the same if one considers oneself to be a patriot Palestinian, or a Muslim, or a good parent. One need not be a captive of one's predefined identity in any one of those roles, and can instead chisel it oneself. In so doing one could also be defining it for others of one's tribe, and, in a best scenario, help opponent others to engage is a similar process of self-transformation themselves, bridging gaps between opposites, and making peace between the two sides more possible. In terms of the underlying process, this facility of allowing oneself to change even as one stays the same is the same as that where one can retain the sense of who one is even as one contemplates and perhaps adopts one's unconscious computations –deciding, at the last minute, even in extreme or existential cases, not to blow oneself up in a suicide mission, or not to marry the person one has been planning to marry for the past few months –suddenly realizing that neither decision was the right one to have made. Less dramatically, and more generally, if one allowed oneself to see the underlying similarity between the self-negotiation and other-negotiation paradigms, one may be better placed to view an opposite point of view, associated with an opponent, as one that could very well be one's own.

In a political negotiation, such as that between Israelis and Palestinians, the different issues that one typically hears being raised by one side or the other –significantly, on the basis of an I/Other disjunction paradigm- can perhaps be summarized under the two headings of the 'self-interest' and 'moral' arguments. The latter can be thought of as subsuming historical or cultural dimensions. I do not discount the weight of these. However, I believe their far-reaching meanings and hold on one can only reveal

themselves if a third dimension is injected into the model, what may be called 'the cognitive argument'. This is the argument that says, first, that self-negotiation shares the same underlying structure as that of negotiating with the others; second, that this sameness encourages us to define who we are and what positions we might adopt even if these conflicted with preset definitions of ourselves; and ultimately, that there is a logical (rather than just a prescriptive) sense of our being on a par with the others. Without such a logic, and left only with the normative argument, many of us will just continue to propagate the dangerous proposition that some of us, just for being *ab initio* different, or themselves, have more worth than others.

Logical arguments, like moral ones, do not of course automatically command assent, especially if they seem to conflict with *wants.* They do, however, happen to have an abiding effect. A conscious effort on the part of leaders and opinion-makers to encourage people to see that effect can be a useful means to transform intractable negotiations into resolvable ones.

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