A central aspiration of the ‘Britishness’ agenda in UK politics is to promote community through the teaching of British values in schools. The agenda’s justification depends in part on the suppositions that harmony arising from agreement on certain values is a necessary condition of social health and that conflict arising from pluralism connotes a form of dysfunction in social life. These perceptions of harmony and conflict are traceable to the ancient Greeks. Plato used the device of the soul-city analogy to provide a form of independent justification for his favoured model of community according to which harmony was essential. However, the soul-city analogy involves an intellectual sleight-of-hand. The idea that conflict connotes a defect in social life, which continues to haunt contemporary debates about community and values education, is the vestige of an ancient aristocratic ideology and we must learn to see it as such. There is no more reason to accept the Platonist portrayal of the place of conflict in social life than there is to accept a diametrically opposed Heraclitean account, which interprets harmony as the central threat to social flourishing. The implications of this ancient dispute for modern education are considerable: there is nothing natural or inevitable about the association of conflict with social dysfunction that partly supports the Britishness agenda; it is a political prejudice. Coming to see it as such will reveal new pathways to belonging and new ways of understanding the role of education in fostering the good society.

When the ancients speak, they do not merely tell us about themselves. They tell us about us. . . . They can tell us not just who we are, but who we are not: they can denounce the falsity or the partiality or the limitations of our images of ourselves (Bernard Williams, 1993, pp. 19–20).

Since the 2005 terrorist bombings in London, an increased emphasis has been placed, in public debates in the UK, on the need for citizenship education to initiate children into a political community within which they may find a sense of belonging.¹ This idea first gained momentum under
the premiership of Gordon Brown (see, for example, Brown, 2006), but it is in fact an agenda that enjoys cross-party support. In a 2007 speech at Cambridge University on ‘Islam and Muslims in the World Today’, David Cameron suggested that the London bombings and the climate of insecurity they helped to inaugurate are partly traceable to a sense of ‘alienation’ and a ‘lack of belonging’, particularly among British Muslims, though also among other cultural minorities (Cameron, 2007). Cameron argues that this sense of alienation must be overcome, and that this can be achieved by creating a framework of common British values in which all people may feel that ‘they are part of a shared national endeavour, a positive purpose’ (Cameron, 2007). And he argues that this framework of shared values can be promoted in part by an education that ‘celebrates British achievements’ (Cameron, 2007). In other words, the moral and cultural diversity of liberal democratic British society has fuelled a process of social fragmentation and feelings of alienation that have made society less secure. In order to combat these conditions, we must teach our children about British achievements with a view to instilling shared British values, that will serve to restore community cohesion and a sense of civic belonging. This is the core of the Britishness agenda in UK politics.

The language of the politicians reflects a widespread perception that conflicts of political values connote a defect of social life, and a barrier to belonging, which is taken to consist in a state of at least partial social harmony arising from shared public values and purposes. A ‘successful society’, as Liam Byrne and Ruth Kelly suggest, is one where there are certain core shared values which bind us together’ (Kelly and Byrne, 2007, p. 11). While there is a great deal of debate about the nature of the values to be instilled, about the nature of ‘Britishness’, there is very little discussion of the underlying associations between harmony and belonging, and conflict and alienation. These associations run very deep in our social thought, and tend to be presented in debate as largely a matter of common sense. But where do these common sense perceptions come from, and are they reliable?

In this paper I want to examine and to challenge the sense of naturalness and inevitability that surrounds the association of belonging with consensus, and thereby to enhance debates about civic education at both the theoretical and the political levels. I shall argue that in order to understand why we think of belonging as we do, we need to understand the ways in which the ancient Greeks understood harmony and conflict in social life. I shall suggest that there is a form of continuity between our idioms and theirs, and that we may therefore shed light on our social outlook by interrogating theirs. In other words, then, and following Bernard Williams, I want to make the ancients speak about themselves in a way that might tell us something about ourselves and that may expose the limitations of our conceptions of community and belonging. In so doing, I hope to suggest that a philosophical debate more than 2000 years old bears crucially on one of the central concerns of educational policy today. To be clear, my intention in this paper is not to show that there are
no good reasons to use the educational system to promote shared values. My aim, rather, is to show that discussions of the issue have often been unhelpfully distorted by what is essentially an ancient myth.

The article is divided into six sections. In the first, and through discussion of the idea of belonging, I shall explain the nature of the continuity I have mentioned between our social perceptions and those of the Greeks. In the second, I shall explain how the Greek conceptual system functioned to sustain their negative perceptions of social conflict by discussing Plato’s analogy between the city and the soul. In the third section, I shall suggest some reasons to doubt the validity of Plato’s position and, in the fourth, I shall illustrate, through discussion of Heraclitus, how it is possible to sustain a very different (and more positive) perception of social conflict. In the fifth, I shall return to the contemporary context in order to explain why these ancient debates should matter to us and, particularly, to contemporary educational theory. Finally, by way of conclusion, I comment on the consequences of my argument for the Britishness agenda in education and offer general reflections arising from the argument on the relations between philosophy and practice.

I CIVIC BELONGING AND SOCIAL METAPHOR

In the justifications that politicians offer for the teaching of shared values in schools, the concepts of community cohesion and of belonging do considerable argumentative work. It is because belonging is of great value (instrumentally and intrinsically) that we need to construct a political community capable of sustaining a sense of belonging; and it is because we need to construct that sort of community that we need to instil common values.

But the ideas of community cohesion and belonging that carry this argumentative burden are notoriously obscure. As Andrew Mason has observed, civic belonging is variously characterised as either a human need or a desire that consists in the sense of being at home in one’s society, or as a feeling of mutual identification or perhaps of mutual recognition among citizens (Mason, 2000, pp. 51–2). And the significance of this achievement is thought to reside in the manner in which it supports feelings of self-respect, or possibly self-esteem or maybe a sense of quietude or psychological security (Mason, 2000, pp. 52–3). Community, on the other hand, is meant to name the form of social arrangement that (perhaps uniquely) satisfies the need or desire for belonging.

Needless to say, there is a good deal of ambiguity here, and this makes the concepts ripe for political exploitation. Due to its obscurity, there is scope for politicians to invest the appealing promise of civic belonging with content directed towards their (less appealing) political goals. Part of the problem is that national political communities are rarely face-to-face, and as a result there is a sense in which the social bonds they involve are not directly apprehensible, but are rather invisible or ‘silent’ (Ignatieff, 1984, p. 10). Community at this level, as Benedict Anderson has stressed,
is a form of union that must be *imagined* (Anderson, 1991); and it is important to note that our imagination of political community and civic belonging is richly metaphorical.

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have argued that our normal conceptual system is ‘metaphorically structured’. By this, they mean that ‘most concepts are partially understood in terms of other concepts’ (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 56). Because the ideas of political community and civic belonging are rather abstract, we make sense of them in terms of other concepts that are more readily apprehensible. For example, then, our concept of society is partly understood in terms of our concept of a person: societies (like persons) are subject to sickness and disease; they are *plagued* by conflict, whilst civic education may have a role to play in social *healing*. Society is also a machine, whereby conflict indicates a kind of social *malfuction* that may lead to societal *breakdown* (recall Cameron’s notion of ‘Broken Britain’). Here the role of education is to *repair* the failure. Society is also a plant: cohesion and belonging constitute a kind of social *flourishing*, and education may have a role to play in *cultivating* or *nurturing* such flourishing.

These are among the metaphors we live by; they profoundly shape our social thought and they support the convictions that conflict connotes a defect in social life, and that disagreements about core public values undermine political community and the sense of belonging it is supposed to involve. In our conceptual system, social conflict is invariably associated with dysfunction, with disease, breakdown and withering, all of which are deemed bad, while social harmony is associated with health, working order and flourishing, all of which are deemed good. These metaphors are extremely pervasive and they have had a considerable impact on the way in which we understand the possibilities for belonging in modern societies and the role of education in fostering that belonging. But where have these metaphors come from? How have we come so naturally to understand and evaluate our society in these particular terms?

The idea that conflict is a sickness that connotes a defect in social life is not an idea of our own invention; it is an idea that we have inherited from antiquity. A central political preoccupation of ancient Greek thinkers was the problem of *stasis*. *Stasis* is typically translated as ‘civil war’, ‘faction’ or ‘civic discord’, but as Kostas Kalimtzis has argued, for the Greeks the idea was also associated with the notion of *disease* (Kalimtzis, 2000). While the Greeks did not think of the polis literally as a physical organism, there was a strong metaphorical association: ‘it became commonplace to speak of [the polis] as an organism that thrived in health, wailed in pain, became afflicted with disease, and even suffered death’ (Kalimtzis, 2000, p. 22). Just as conflict among the elements composing the human body was considered a sign of illness, and harmony a sign of health, so too in the city: *stasis* was a sickness whereby the normal functioning of society was arrested and brought to a halt (Kalimtzis, 2000, pp. 19–20). And the cause of this sickness was the absence or the demise of *homonoia*, ‘together-mindedness’ or concord. In other words, then, disagreement (‘apart-mindedness’) provoked *staseis,*
conditions of factional conflict that were universally castigated as ‘disease, a plague, the worst of all evils’ (Kalimtzis, 2000, p. 8).

We may detect this conviction—that discord presents a serious threat to the health, happiness and success of the polis—running through the work of both Plato and Aristotle. In the *Politics*, Aristotle asserts that ‘every cause of difference makes a breach in the city’ (Aristotle 1984, 1303b10–15), and, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he writes that the promotion of concord, and the elimination of faction, is the ‘primary object’ of lawgivers (Aristotle, 1976, 1155a25–30). And Aristotle’s claim itself echoes a statement of Plato’s in the *Republic* that associations divided by conflict arising from the absence of concord ought not to be described as communities:

They should have a more capacious title, . . . since each of them is not so much a community as a great many communities. . . . Minimally, they contain two warring communities—one consisting of the rich and one of the poor. Then each of these two contains quite a number of further communities. It would be quite wrong to treat this plurality as a unity (Plato 1993, 422e–423a).

For Plato, social conflict arising from discord is clearly anathema to community. Moreover, this has very significant implications for education in Plato’s scheme. This is not the occasion for a discussion of Plato’s extensive and controversial views on education, but it may be worth emphasising that moral education plays an important role in Plato’s account of the ideal community, and that part of the purpose of this education is to promote concord. Children are to be denied access to poetry, ‘for if the prospective guardians of our community are to loathe casual quarrels with one another, we must take good care that battles between gods and giants . . . don’t occur in the stories they hear and the pictures they see’ (Plato, 1993, 378c). And, of course, Socrates notoriously advocates the inculcation of his ‘noble lie’ with a view to forging harmony among the disparate social classes (Plato, 1993, 414b–415d).

There is remarkable continuity here between the language of Plato and Aristotle and that of our politicians today when they associate conflict arising from pluralism with social dysfunction, and harmony arising from shared public values with social success. When we speak of societies plagued by conflict or of broadly harmonious societies as healthy or happy or flourishing societies, we are invoking the same metaphors as those used by the Greeks. It is my hypothesis therefore that we may be able to learn something valuable about some of our understandings and evaluations of society, the sources of which are presently opaque, by examining those ancient Greek understandings and evaluations of society that are continuous with our own.

There are two ways of interpreting this idea of continuity. First, one may envision a strong form of continuity which holds that the metaphors we deploy are metaphors that were invented and passed down to us by the
Greeks. This is by no means an absurd suggestion. It is hard to exaggerate the influence of ancient Greece on contemporary Western culture. As Gerard Delanty remarks, ‘the modern idea of community has its origins in the Greek political community, the polis. The kind of community that was exemplified in the polis provided the basic ideal for all subsequent conceptions of community’ (Delanty, 2003, p. 12). Michael Ignatieff concurs, arguing that our political images of civic belonging are ‘haunted by the classical polis’ (Ignatieff, 1984, p. 139). And, Lakoff and Johnson suggest that ‘to this day, [Plato’s] metaphors dominate Western philosophy’ (1980, p. 190). But such a strong form of continuity is obviously difficult to verify. There is a second, and weaker, form of continuity that is easier to sustain. This interpretation observes simply that our concept of society is structured by a system of metaphors that bears a striking resemblance to that which structured the ancient Greek concept of society. Continuity in this weaker sense seems hard to deny and indicates that there may still be considerable value in trying to understand the metaphors by which the ancients lived, for so doing may help us better to understand the (remarkably similar) metaphors by which we live today, even if we have not strictly inherited those metaphors.

II THE METAPHYSICS OF CONFLICT

It is important to note that the premise of Plato’s controversial educational agenda, his claim that conflict threatens community, is not intended as an empirical claim, but as a metaphysical claim: in so far as people believe that they have found community and belonging in contexts of plurality and discord, they have made a mistake. Plato’s contention is that humans are creatures who naturally and appropriately belong in contexts of harmony; conflict is a sign of defect in social life. And this claim is apparently unyielding to the evidence of experience. To think that one had found community in a context of discord would be ‘quite wrong’, a sign of confusion or muddled thought.

But now this move from the empirical to the metaphysical generates a new difficulty: why should we accept the underlying metaphysical contention that conflict connotes a defect in social life? Plato is evidently aware of this difficulty, and the argument of the Republic supplies a form of independent justification for its depiction of a healthy community. Central to the book’s argumentative strategy is the analogy that Socrates draws between the soul and the city, the claim that ‘a moral person will be no different from a moral community, but will resemble it’ (Plato, 1993, 435b). Consequently, and in so far as it is true that moral persons resemble moral communities, it should be possible to provide an independent justification for the contention that the good community is inhospitable to conflict by showing that the good man’s soul is likewise inhospitable to conflict.

Plato certainly seems to believe that the analogy holds in this regard. In the Republic, Socrates characterises the soul as divided and hierarchical. It
is divided into reasoning, passionate and desirous parts (Plato 1993, 439d–441c). In a well-ordered, rational and happy soul, the reasoning part governs and secures a harmony among the fractious elements (Plato 1993, 443c–444e). A soul in conflict, by contrast, is corrupt; ‘disruption and disorder of the three parts ... constitutes not only immorality, but also indiscipline, cowardice, and stupidity—in a word, badness of any kind’ (Plato, 1993, 444b). With this picture of the happy soul in place, we can see how the justification of the Platonist model of community might proceed: because we know that conflict between the different parts of the soul connotes a kind of defect or a malfunction, we may infer, by reference to the soul-city analogy, that conflict between the different classes or factions in the city also connotes a kind of defect or a malfunction. Equally, then, a flourishing city, a ‘happy’ community, is one in which there is no conflict between classes or factions.

Of course, in order for this argument to go through at all we would have first to accept the premise that soul and city are analogous. The idea has at least superficial plausibility. We may interpret Plato’s project as being one of finding the ground and structure for the polis in the nature of man. This in turn may be seen as a reflection of the widespread idea that politics should be understood as deriving in some stronger or weaker sense from human nature. Certainly, it is not absurd to regard socio-political conflicts as projections into the external world of conflicts within the individual. And the inevitable return: we invariably deploy socio-political metaphors in our characterisations of mental processes (deliberating, negotiating, warring). The idea that the appropriate organisation of the city will correspond to the appropriate organisation of the soul and vice-versa thus possesses a degree of intuitive force. Nevertheless, and beyond this apparent symmetry, the analogy has proven rather difficult to swallow and the topic has spawned a particularly knotty philosophical debate (see, for example, Ferrari, 2005; Lear, 1992; Williams, 2006). It may be objected that the organisation of the soul in fact provides no credible support for Plato’s picture of community because there is simply no connection between the two. For the sake of argument, I shall grant Plato the benefit of the doubt and accept that there is indeed an analogy between the soul and the city. The broader argument I mean to develop does not ultimately depend on the plausibility of the analogy itself.

III MYSTERIES OF THE SOUL

The difficulties begin elsewhere for this justification of the Platonist model of political community. Obviously, there is a sense in which the justificatory account I presented in the previous section simply moves the problem around: we justify the claim that community is inhospitable to conflict by reference to the further claim that the good soul is inhospitable to conflict. Even granting that there is an analogy between the soul and the city, how do we know that the good soul is inhospitable to conflict? Plato’s picture of the soul is extremely pervasive and very deeply entrenched, but
is it really apt? What is the source of the divided and hierarchical image of the soul?

Here is the difficulty: there is reason to believe that Plato’s image of the soul actually originates in his prior conception of the ideal city. Famously, Plato’s point of departure in the Republic is to seek enlightenment as to the nature of the good soul by inquiring into the (analogous) nature of the good city, because the goodness of the ‘larger entity’, the city, is ‘easier to discern’ (Plato 1993, 368e). So, the direction of travel is almost always from city to soul in Plato’s argument; the political vision is translated into a psychological model. Now it might be argued that Plato is simply using the political vision to illuminate the psychological model, antecedently and independently determined. In that case, there would be no problem. But critics have resisted that suggestion. Norbert Blossner argues that, on the evidence we have, it is in fact ‘very probable that Plato developed the psychology of the Republic with the city-soul analogy in mind’ (Blossner, 2007, p. 357). Stuart Hampshire goes even further and suggests that Plato derives his psychological model from his prior political vision. On Hampshire’s account, then, Plato’s picture of the soul is an ideological construct, a ‘fairytale’ that constitutes ‘the decorative part of a polemic against democracy and in favor of oligarchy’ (Hampshire, 1993, p. 45).

In other words, then, the accusation is that the supposedly ‘independent’ justification is not really independent at all. Plato’s metaphysical account of the relationship between community and conflict, an account that continues to haunt the modern political outlook via our system of social metaphors, derives what authority it has from a picture of the soul or psyche which is in fact itself an ideological artefact, reflecting the aristocratic political prejudice of an ancient Greek philosopher dismayed by the Athenian democracy under which he lived. The contention is that Plato invents a picture of the soul that is inhospitable to conflict in order to justify a picture of community that is inhospitable to conflict to which he was in fact already committed on independent, and political, grounds. The invented picture of the soul is then presented as being natural and inevitable and as providing the appropriate model for a flourishing political community.

In fact, Plato does offer some independent argument to defend his portrayal of the soul. He tells the story of Leontius, who is divided between opposing impulses both to look and not to look at a mound of corpses: ‘It’s as if there were two warring factions, with passion fighting on the side of reason’ (Plato, 1993, 440b; though note, again, the proliferation of political metaphors—the ‘warring factions’—here). He also notes the manner in which conflict can often be thought to operate in such a way as to frustrate normal human activities and aspirations. Without psychic harmony, it would not be possible for a man to act ‘to acquire property or look after his body or play a role in government or do some private business’ (Plato, 1993, 443e). The idea here seems to be that a person’s determination to act presupposes some unity of the will.

These arguments lend intuitive support to Plato’s psychological model, but they are not and could not be decisive. The truth is that we cannot
know for certain what the structure of the soul actually is. We have a range of competing pictures, but as Hampshire argues it ‘is impossible to point to the decisive tests, or to the impartially collected evidence, on which a judgement as to the truth of these pictures could be based’ (Hampshire, 1989, p. 34). The two key elements of Plato’s picture—division and hierarchy—‘are neither imposed upon us by observation of the operations of the mind, nor are they deduced from any first principles’ (Hampshire, 1989, p. 35). Blossner explains the difficulty here very neatly:

The soul is invisible; neither its structure nor its operations are directly observable. Analysis of human behavior permits us to draw conclusions, but no more than that, about the nature of the soul. The fact that many different models of the soul have been constructed over time should sap our confidence in the reliability of these conclusions (Blossner, 2007, p. 354).

In short: the soul is mysterious.

Moreover, there is good reason to believe that Plato would not have disagreed. In the Phaedrus, when Socrates comes to present once again the tripartite division and hierarchy of the soul (in his allegory of the soul chariot), Plato has him explain that ‘to describe what the soul actually is would require a very long account, altogether a task for a god in every way’; mere mortals are able only to speculate about the soul, offering accounts of what it may be ‘like’ through similes and metaphors (Plato, 1995, 246a). Moreover, he later admits that while ‘perhaps it had a measure of truth in it,’ the Great Speech, in which he had described the soul ‘may also have led us astray’ (Plato, 1995, 265b). In other words, Plato seemed well aware of the limits of his argument. He knew that he was offering a disputable account of the soul, an account that was unverifiable and therefore open to challenge.8

Let me summarise the discussion so far. Taking up the hypothesis that our vocabulary of civic belonging remains haunted by the ancient polis, I proceeded to look back to the perceptions of society to be found in the works of Plato and Aristotle. I suggested that it is possible to detect a continuity between their view and ours: the conviction that moral conflict constitutes a form of dysfunction and a barrier to the realisation of the best kind of political society, the flourishing community. Next, I articulated a justification for Plato’s image of community that proceeds by appeal to the analogy he draws between city and soul. In this section, I have sought to show that Plato’s image of the good soul, and consequently his image of true community, is highly disputable. The soul is invisible—all characterisations of it are in the end speculative. And Plato knew this. It is plausible to suggest that his account of the soul (and hence of community) was never intended as the final word on the matter. Indeed, there is reason to suspect that his picture of the soul was ideologically charged and that his intention was to lay down a challenge, to offer a picture of the soul/community as a contribution to a debate that he recognised as being wide open, ongoing and ultimately interminable.
There is nothing natural, inevitable or unavoidable about the supposition, which underpins many of the social metaphors we live by today, that the flourishing community is inhospitable to conflict.

IV HERACLITEAN PLURALISM

Even as Plato was writing, he was aware of a powerful account of the soul to rival his own: that of the Presocratic philosopher, Heraclitus. It is hard to tell with any degree of certainty what Heraclitus thought; all that remains to us is a collection of notoriously obscure fragments, the provenance of many of which is uncertain. Nevertheless, it is at least possible to discern in Heraclitus the outlines of a very different picture of human personality, one that is entirely at odds with the image we find in Plato.

Heraclitus appears to hold that the soul is constituted by fire, or at least that the soul possesses characteristics similar to those of fire:

Death for souls is the birth of water, death for water is the birth of earth, and earth is the source of water, and water is the source of soul (Heraclitus, 2000, F44).

Soul in this fragment would seem to replace fire, the implication being that Heraclitus means to identify the human soul with the most volatile and erratic of the elements (see Waterfield, 2000, p. 36 and Kahn, 1979). There is no clearly discernible structure here, certainly no hierarchy. Instead, we are presented with the image of a soul normally and properly in conflict. It is worth emphasising how dramatically different this picture is from Plato’s. Not only does Heraclitus offer a different view of the status of conflict in the soul (normal for Heraclitus, abnormal for Plato), he appears to understand the nature of conflict in an entirely different way from Plato. While Plato envisages states of harmony or conflict between relatively stable and monolithic parts of the soul, Heraclitus envisages the parts of the soul as so many flickering flames: changeable, internally unstable and wholly unpredictable.

Against this image, Plato would surely urge that the inner disorder it portrays would be destructive and paralysing: how could the fiery soul ever act ‘to acquire property or look after his body or play a role in government or do some private business’ (Plato, 1993, 443e)? But in Heraclitus, we find a strikingly different interpretation of the place of conflict in human life:

War is father of all and king of all. Some he reveals as gods, others as men; some he makes slaves, others free (Heraclitus, 2000, F23).

For Heraclitus, conflict is not destructive, but constructive; not paralysing, but energising. All things come to pass ‘in accordance with strife and necessity’, he insists (Heraclitus, 2000, F22). This principle informs Hampshire’s argument that, in the mind, ‘all determination is negation’
Hampshire, 1999, pp. 34 and 40–1). His idea seems to be that we come to awareness of what we are and of what we will do primarily through our resistance to what we refuse to be and what we refuse to do. ‘Individuals inevitably become conscious of the cost exacted by their own way of life and of the other possibilities of achievement and enjoyment discarded. They feel the cost in internal conflict also. Every established way of life has its cost in repression’ (Hampshire, 1983, p 147). It would therefore be impossible, on this view, to act to acquire property, to look after one’s body, to play a role in government or to do some private business without the experience of inner conflict and the repression of alternative pathways undertaken and opportunities lost. On the Heraclitean picture, a life devoid of conflict, far from being a good and productive life, would be a life in which no particular ends were valued and pursued. Such a life would be formless and indistinct; it would be inhuman.

While Plato’s picture of the soul has dominated Western thought, there have been a number of dissenters. One example is Denis Diderot, whose dialogue, Rameau’s Nephew, in particular would seem to suggest a Heraclitean picture of human personality. The tetchy interplay of ‘moi’ and ‘lui’ throughout the dialogue, each endlessly contradicting and disputing the declarations of the other, has often been interpreted as symbolising two volatile sides of a normally divided soul. We might also think of Michel de Montaigne when he reports that ‘we are all patchwork, and so shapeless and diverse in composition that each bit, each moment, plays its own game. And there is as much difference between us and ourselves as there is between us and others’ (Montaigne, 2003, p. 296). Or, in a notably Heraclitean declaration, ‘anyone who observes carefully can hardly find himself twice in the same state. I give my soul now one face, now another, according to which direction I turn it. If I speak of myself in different ways, that is because I look at myself in different ways. All contradictions may be found in me by some twist and in some fashion’ (Montaigne, 2003, p. 294).

This image of human personality is in fact not at all unfamiliar when we consider our literary heritage. Indeed, it is more from literature than from philosophy that this alternative Heraclitean picture of human personality derives its support. We expect to find in the personality of any well-drawn literary character a large measure of division, unresolved ambivalence, confusion and disorder, and when we do not find it, we are liable to complain that we find the character alien, unrealistic, lifeless.

Heraclitus’s account of the place of conflict in the mind suggests an image of flourishing human community markedly different from the Platonist model. Appealing once again to the soul-city analogy, we can infer from the fact that conflict connotes no defect in the soul that it connotes no defect in the city. For Heraclitus, conflict in the soul is normal and often desirable; the same goes for the city. The Heraclitean community is a ‘back-turning harmony’, a community for which ‘war is common, and strife is justice’ (Heraclitus, 2000, F21 and F22 respectively). This picture is diametrically opposed to the Platonist account and jars awkwardly with our intuitions about what it should mean.
to belong. We think of communities as contexts of harmony and tranquillity, peace and quiet; the flourishing Heraclitean community is one in which conflict rages unceasingly. Precariously contained and perpetuated by political institutions, discord on this view plays a constructive, animating and even a unifying role in the life of the city.

Evidently, this image of community accords far more closely with the accounts offered by the dissenters from the prevailing Platonist interpretation, those like Ignatieff and Hampshire who emphasise the possibilities for belonging in contexts of moral dissensus. For example, Hampshire comes rather close to the Heraclitean notion of ‘back-turning harmony’ when he writes that ‘the competition between irreconcilable standpoints, and the consequent tension, may be the common and unifying factors . . . between conservatives and reformers’ (Hampshire, 1992, p. 3). He indicates that ‘one may dislike a class of persons for their seeming indifference to social justice and ordinary fairness, as one conceives them, and at the same time share with them a common political culture and a respect for the procedures that will elaborately manage these hostilities’ (Hampshire, 1999, p. 49).10

However, and once again, it is not primarily in the academic discourse that we find support for this image:

It is the painters and the writers, not the politicians or the social scientists, who have been able to find a language for the joy of modern life, its fleeting and transient solidarity. It is Hopper’s images of New York, Joyce’s Dublin, Musil’s Vienna, Bellow’s Chicago, Kundera’s Prague, which take us beyond easy laments about the alienation of modern life (Ignatieff, 1984, p. 141).

Consider, for example, Robert Musil’s strongly Heraclitean evocation, and celebration, of Vienna: ‘Like all big cities it was made up of irregularity, change, forward spurts, failures to keep step, collisions of objects and interests, punctuated by unfathomable silences; made up of pathways and untrodden ways, of one great rhythmic beat as well as the chronic discord and mutual displacement of all its contending rhythms’ (Musil, 1995, p. 4). Now of course this image of community, as constituted both by consensus and by discord, is entirely familiar in contemporary debates. What is less familiar, and what I mean to emphasise, is Musil’s perception of social conflict. Whilst we tend to view conflict as a defect of the city and as a potential threat to the possibility of belonging that must be mitigated or neutralised, Musil portrays the city’s ‘chronic discord’ as an object of celebration, and a potential source of civic belonging.

Our entrenched social metaphors support the perception that harmony arising from agreement on core public values constitutes a form of social ‘success’ (according to Kelly and Byrne) or ‘flourishing’ (according to Brown), whereas departures from this kind of social harmony, fuelled by conflicts of values, are signs of malfunction, of the sort of creeping ‘breakdown’ of society against which Cameron has warned. But the Heraclitean picture inverts these perceptions. Social conflict arising from

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discord is, on the Heraclitean perspective, a sign of a normal, and even of a successful or flourishing, society. Circumstances of relative social harmony, by contrast, in which a consensus on core public values has been secured, are a sign of malfunction, a deadening stillness that could easily lead to the demise of society; for ‘harmony and inner consensus come with death, when faces no longer express conflicts but are immobile, composed, and at rest’ (Hampshire, 1989, p. 189).

The social metaphors we tend unthinkingly to deploy on a daily basis reflect a particular perception of the place of conflict in the life of the human organism. In the previous section, I sought to show that this perception is not empirically verifiable and that it may in fact be shaped by an ancient political ideology. In this section, I have endeavoured to show that it is quite possible to conceive of the place of conflict in the life of the human organism in a radically different way and that so doing would fundamentally transform the social metaphors we live by.

V A LESSON FROM THE POLIS

It might seem rather odd that the bulk of my discussion of political community and the teaching of British values in contemporary society has been devoted to the articulation of an ancient philosophical dispute between Plato and Heraclitus about the constitution of the soul. My reason for adopting this unconventional approach is my belief that the ancient dispute contains an important lesson for us. The ancients knew something of community that we have forgotten.

There are, I have suggested, a number of striking similarities between the modern view of community and that held both by Aristotle and, more fundamentally, by Plato. Like us, they believed that healthy societies display a degree of consensus among citizens upon matters of public concern, and concomitantly that moral discord is a sign of defect tending to social disintegration and alienation. Like us, they also endorsed the teaching of shared values and common narratives in order to promote consensus and social harmony. But there is also, I have urged, a crucial dissimilarity. Unlike us, Plato and Aristotle were well aware of the contingency of the conceptions of community they defended and thus also of the strategies they recommended for the promotion of community. They knew that there was nothing inevitable or unavoidable about the claim that community is inhospitable to conflict. They knew that it was entirely possible to think of both the soul and the city quite differently, as Heraclitus appears to have done. Consequently, they saw their arguments as contributions to ongoing debates, debates that were heavily politically inflected.

From the ancients we may learn that the association of communal health with partial consensus is neither a purely empirical claim, nor a purely extra-political metaphysical claim. In fact, it is an ideological claim. Just as there is no certainly correct account of the human soul, there is no certainly correct account of human belonging and of the ethical status of conflict in social life. There is no pre-political benchmark against which to
measure our societies that will tell us whether or not they are real communities or real contexts of belonging. All we have in this respect are better and worse speculations, pictures that resonate with us and pictures that do not. And we would consequently expect the argument as to the appropriate character of political community to persist interminably, as Plato had imagined it would. But in fact the argument has not persisted. The Platonist perceptions of harmony and conflict in social life have endured across the ages that separate us from the ancients and they persist today remarkably well preserved in our system of social metaphors. But with the passage of time, we have also lost something. We have lost the sense of the contingency and of the fragility of these perceptions; we have lost sight of the possibility that conflict could play a more affirmative role in the life of a community; and, perhaps above all, we have lost the recognition that the question of a community’s proper constitution is unavoidably a political question. The value of returning to the ancients resides in their ability to remind us of what we have lost.

Now it might be said that it is scarcely surprising to discover that the metaphors informing contemporary political debates about community are politically inflected—this is precisely what we would expect of our politicians. Indeed it is not surprising, but our social metaphors extend far beyond the confines of political debate, and they penetrate our thought and language much more pervasively. Most people would not think of themselves as making an ideological claim when they speak disparagingly of a society ‘plagued by conflict’ or when they assume that disagreements about core public values are detrimental to civic belonging. But that is what they are doing, or so I have argued. Moreover, the real danger is that when politicians make such claims, we will not recognise those claims as ideologically charged assertions that are entirely open to contestation and resistance, but rather as statements of natural inevitability or ‘common sense’ that quite properly limit and constrain our social and political imagination.

There is also a lesson here for educational theorists. We might suppose that, in contrast to ordinary usage and political rhetoric, the academic context is one in which careful, non-ideological thought and argumentation prevail. For the most part, this is surely true. Nevertheless, and even here, there is a real and persistent danger of ideologically inflected metaphors infiltrating and potentially distorting the debate.

Consider, for example, the dispute over civic education between William Galston and Eamonn Callan (Galston, 1991 and Callan, 1997). Galston and Callan disagree quite radically about the proper form of civic education. However, they share a common motivation: they both fear that pluralism will function to undermine community cohesion and will fuel a sense of alienation among the citizens of liberal democracies. More specifically, they both argue that moral conflict among citizens will prompt those citizens to withdraw from the public sphere and into the background culture. And they both use the same striking terminology to describe this tendency. For Callan, the task for civic education is to construct ‘an attachment to political community that would contain the
centrifugal tendencies of pluralism’ (Callan, 1997, p. 100, my emphasis). Similarly, for Galston, the public acknowledgement of pluralism ‘may unleash centrifugal forces that make a decently ordered public life impossible’ (Galston, 2002, p. 65, my emphasis). For both authors, then, pluralism exerts a destructive centrifugal force on society.

Notice that this terminology is metaphorical. The appeal to mechanistic, centrifugal social pressures is an aspect of the metaphorical association of societies with machines. If the parts of a machine do not work together in unison, if there is conflict between them, then the machine is broken and may quite literally fall apart. So too in society: if citizens do not work together in unison, if there is conflict between them, then society is broken and is liable to fragment. In other words, then, the social metaphor of society as a machine operates in such a way as to support the claim that social conflict will cause social fragmentation. But such metaphors, as we have seen, are unstable. In the Platonist system, conflict and tension are destructive to machines (as they are to persons), but in the Heraclitean system, things are quite different. Heraclitus’s image of the bow is that of a (simple) machine that functions properly only because its component parts exist in a constant state of conflict and tension.12 It is thus possible that the machine metaphor may serve here to disguise certain aspects of reality. Certainly, it underdetermines the conviction that social conflict will fuel alienation and drive citizens from public life.

And the metaphors multiply. Within a couple of pages, Callan also invokes the metaphor of society as an orchestra (or choir) when he suggests that pluralism (and disharmony) may provoke a corrupting ‘cacophony’ or an off-putting ‘clamour’ (Callan, 1997, p. 96). This is swiftly followed by the metaphor of society as an organism for which conflict may set in motion processes of ‘civic decay’ which may cause the democratic order to ‘perish’ (Callan, 1997, p. 96).

To be clear, I am not suggesting that Callan relies on these metaphorical allusions to deliver his thesis; and, by highlighting their presence, I do not claim to have undermined his argument. Obviously, neither Galston nor Callan simply assumes that pluralism exerts a debilitating centrifugal force, and both provide arguments to defend their favoured pedagogical strategies. My aim is simply to emphasise the pervasiveness of these potentially distortive images, and to show that they infiltrate all areas of thought and language including that of the philosophers. These images are so deeply entrenched that it is probably impossible now to erase them, but we must at least see them for what they are, and concentrate on the facts behind the ideology.

To repeat, then, my aim in this article has not been directly to challenge those who argue for the cultivation of shared values in schools as a way of combating alienation. They may be right to do so. Rather, my aim is to unsettle the seemingly natural association of social harmony with normal and successful social functioning and thereby to broaden our sense of the possibilities for community and belonging in conditions of pluralism.

Broadening our sense of the possibilities for community and civic belonging in this way may help us to move beyond increasingly arid
discussions of shared public values and shared civic identities, and further to explore hitherto neglected languages of belonging that proceed in a more Heraclitean vein. One such approach is intriguingly developed in Melissa Williams’s discussion of the idea of a ‘community of shared fate’, the members of which ‘are not bound to each other by shared values or moral commitments, but by relations of interdependence, which may or may not be positively valued by its members’ (Williams, 2003, p. 229).

Another approach may be found in work on the idea of friendship as a political concept, which seeks to illuminate ways in which attachments of basic concern among citizens may persist alongside (and may even be fuelled by) conflicts of values (Kahane, 1999; Schwarzenbach, 2009; Edyvane, 2007b). All of these approaches are liable to transform our perception of the task of civic education, and to lead us away from the emphasis of the current public discussion upon the cultivation of consensus around core public and national values. But the Platonist metaphors we live by, which portray social conflict as dysfunctional, make it difficult for us to recognise these alternatives as live options. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the ideas of shared fate, shared vulnerability and civic friendship as potential bases for community and belonging remain relatively marginal in the theoretical debate and figure hardly at all in the public discussion.

VI CONCLUSIONS: EDUCATION, THEORY AND POLITICS

I offer three remarks by way of conclusion, the first a specific comment on the consequences of my argument for the Britishness agenda in education, the second and third more general reflections arising from the argument on the relations between philosophy and practice. My central claim has been that the Britishness agenda, an agenda that enjoys cross-party support in the UK, takes far too much for granted in its presumption that disagreement about core values tends inexorably to the failure of society, that the flourishing society is a broadly harmonious society. That presumption is the vestige of an ancient aristocratic ideology that has hardened over time into a kind of orthodoxy, and we must learn to let it go. The enterprise of teaching British values is doubly ideological: it is ideological in its determination of the values to be taught, the values taken to be constitutive of ‘Britishness’, and it is also ideological, I have argued, in its supposition that partial harmony is essential to the flourishing society. The first of these criticisms is entirely familiar, the second, less so.

Lakoff and Johnson emphasise the importance of understanding the political metaphors we live by:

Political . . . ideologies are framed in metaphorical terms. Like all other metaphors, political . . . metaphors can hide aspects of reality. But in the area of politics . . ., metaphors matter more, because they constrain our lives. A metaphor in a political . . . system, by virtue of what it hides, can lead to human degradation (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 236).
Recognising and understanding the ideological inflections of the social metaphors we tend unthinkingly to invoke could transform the way we think about moral education and the widespread ambition to educate for social unity. To be clear, I am not suggesting that these ancient metaphysical dogmas are solely responsible for our belief that conflict is anathema to community. On the contrary, I do not deny that there are well-founded reasons to be concerned about pervasive social conflict. My point is rather that an unacknowledged ideological veil has distorted the discussion of these important issues in a way that may have constrained our lives. Removing this veil could serve to enhance the political debate and broaden our appreciation of the possibilities for civic belonging in modern, multicultural societies.

Secondly, it has been an important implication of my argument that ancient, rather abstract philosophical arguments bear surprisingly directly on contemporary political realities. It is easy to dismiss philosophy as being far removed from the immediate and pressing concerns of day-to-day politics, but I have been arguing that political actors rely far more heavily on a dense network of philosophical assumptions and presuppositions than they might think: the politicians neglect the philosophers at their peril.

However, and thirdly, I have also argued that it would be a mistake to imagine that the philosophical enterprise stands somehow outside of, or prior to, politics. Philosophical speculation is unavoidably tainted with political conviction and the failure to recognise that can lead only to the deepening of confusion. Thus, whilst it is true that the politicians neglect the philosophers at their peril, it is also true that the politicians should be very wary of philosophers peddling blueprints for flourishing political communities. The politicians would be well-advised to heed the warning from philosophy that community may not be as closely bound to consensus as they have been inclined to think, but they must also know that philosophy has its limits. And when we reach those limits, the dirty work of politics inevitably begins.13

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NOTES
1. Citizenship education was introduced as a statutory subject in the National Curriculum of England and Wales in 2002. The National Curriculum emphasises the need to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for effective citizenship; it does not explicitly demand the cultivation of shared values. See Brighouse (2006) for a general survey of the ethical issues surrounding citizenship education.
2. Whilst he was the education minister, Alan Johnson explicitly made the connection between shared values education and community cohesion arguing that ‘schools should play a leading role in creating community cohesion’ and that this is to be achieved by ensuring that ‘pupils are taught more explicitly about why British values of tolerance and respect prevail in society’ (Johnson, 2007).
3. The sorts of ‘British values’ often cited in the political debate include those of fairness, respect, diversity, tolerance and liberty (see, for example, Brown, 2006). Standard criticisms are that such lists are either politically or culturally biased, so bland as to be basically meaningless, or not distinctively ‘British’.

4. The notion of Britain’s civic ‘breakdown’ is developed in some detail by Phillip Blond, who also invokes the metaphor of society-as-person when he writes of the need to resuscitate civic life (Blond, 2010, pp. 71–76 and 80).

5. This is not to suggest that there are no important differences between Plato’s and Aristotle’s views about community, but I believe that they are as one in their conviction that conflict poses a threat to the best kind of community (see Edyvane, 2007a, pp. 28–30).

6. This interpretation of Plato’s project is suggested (and linked with Spinoza’s project) by Michael Oakeshott in his, ‘Introduction to Leviathan’ (Oakeshott, 1975, pp. 62–3).

7. The following three paragraphs draw on an argument I have developed elsewhere (Edyvane, 2008, pp. 323–4).

8. This is, admittedly, a controversial interpretation of the Phaedrus. It is informed primarily by the account offered by Nehemas and Woodruff, who interpret the dialogue as dramatising Plato’s abandonment of some of his core metaphysical ideas (specifically the middle theory of the forms) and as emphasizing ‘that the activity of philosophy is more important than the specific views one holds’ (1995, xlvii).

9. As ‘Moi’ declares, ‘As I was listening to him . . . I was torn between opposite impulses and did not know whether to give in to laughter or furious indignation. I felt embarrassed. A score of times a burst of laughter prevented a burst of rage, and a score of times the anger arising rising from the depths of my heart ended in a burst of laughter. I was dumbfounded at such sagacity and such baseness, such alternately true and false notions, such absolute perversion of feeling and utter turpitude, and yet such uncommon candour. He noticed the conflict going on inside me and said: “What’s the matter?” . . . I [replied]: “Nothing”’ (Diderot, 1966, p. 51).

10. Chantal Mouffe is another prominent dissenter from the prevailing view. Like Hampshire, she also argues that conflict is a normal (and even desirable) feature of any functioning democratic community (see, for example, Mouffe, 2004, chapter 4).

11. See Archard, 1999 for a critical survey of their differences.

12. “They are ignorant of how while tending away it agrees with itself—a back-turning harmony, like a bow or a lyre” (Heraclitus, 2000, F21).

13. Previous versions of this article were presented at the University of Leeds and at the 58th Political Studies Association Conference in Swansea. I am grateful to both audiences for their comments. I am also particularly indebted to the journal’s editors and two anonymous reviewers for their extensive, constructive and extremely helpful comments and suggestions.

REFERENCES


