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Today, colleges have come to think of students as customers, and as long as they do, we'll have the higher illiterates we see on campuses today.

—Stringfellow Barr

Stringfellow Barr
1897-1982

NOTES ON DIALOGUE

Stringfellow Barr

Perhaps the first obstacle to writing even these random notes on dialogue is that the very word, dialogue, has been temporarily turned into a cliché. Everybody is loudly demanding dialogue, and there is not much evidence that most of us are prepared to carry one on. Indeed, to borrow a traditional phrase from professional diplomats, conversations have deteriorated. But both radio and television, whether public or commercial, remind us daily that a lonely crowd hungers for dialogue, not only for the dialogue of theatre but also for the dialogue of the discussion program.

There is a pathos in television dialogue: the rapid exchange of monologues that fail to find the issue, like ships passing in the night; the reiterated preface, "I think that . . .," as if it mattered who held which opinion rather than which opinion is worth holding; the impressive personal vanity that prevents each "discussant" from really listening to another speaker and that compels him to use this God-given pause to compose his own next monologue; the further vanity, or instinctive caution, that leads him to choose very long words, whose true meaning he has never grasped, rather than short words that he understands but that would leave the emptiness of his point of view naked and exposed to a mass public. There is pathos in the meaningless gestures: the extended chopping hands, fingers rigidly held parallel and together, the rigid wayward thumb pointing to heaven. A knowledgeable theatrical director would cringe at these gestures and would perhaps faint when the extended palms, one held in front of the other, are made to revolve rapidly around each other, thereby imitating and emphasizing the convolutions of a mind that races like a motor not in gear. And Mrs. Malaprop herself would cringe at those long, wayward words, so much at cross purpose with the intent of the speakers. Or at the academic speaker's strings of adjacent nouns, where all but the last noun modify adjectivally either the last noun or the nearest noun—it is anybody's guess. We are all suffocating intellectually, not from the ungrammatical language of Cassius Clay, which is gutsy, forceful, and eloquent. We are suffocating from a *fausse élégance* that scorns the honest, clear, four-letter word. And quite aside from the obscene ones, hundreds of splendid four-letter words are waiting to work for us. Is it possible that we discussants are oppressed by a subconscious suspicion that we are really saying precisely nothing, and that this nothing will stand up as conversation only if we say it elaborately? Is it this suspicion that forces us to speak in what our learned jargon recently christened "jargonese?" "Yoono Chinese, Japanese; well I am now speaking, yoono, jargonese." Our failure at dialogue is building a Tower, of yoono, Babel. Nevertheless, back of this tormenting, and tormented, babble is a ghost we cannot lay, the ghost of dialogue. We yearn, not always consciously, to commune with other persons, to learn with them by joint search. This joint labor to understand would be even more exciting than the multiplication of our gross national product or the improvement of our national defense or even than the elimination of war from the face of the earth. For we can never live wholly human lives without a genuine converse between men.

We human animals yearn so deeply to converse that we have discovered, or imagined, that the whole universe shares our longing, that the whole universe is not only "in labor," but "in dialogue." The epics of Hindu and ancient Greek alike, the sacred scriptures both of Jew and Christian, abound in dialogue between

God, or the gods, and man. The heroic effort to achieve political democracy was an effort to increase dialogue between men, while that master of dialogue, Socrates, sought with Apollo at Delphi and died rather than cease from asking his fellow-Athenians awkward, important questions. We human animals are wistfully anxious to engage non-human animals in dialogue; we are persistent disciples of Aesop. Our children's books are crowded with talking animals and the same children talk confidently to domestic animals. How could they not feel confidence, they who have so recently passed from the status of dumb animals to the status of animals in dialogue? Our scientists try to understand the language of dolphins. On the other hand, they do not stop at possible dialogue with the animate; at least, metaphorically, their experiments question inanimate matter. So deep is the human faith in inquiry. Before we resent or reject the idea that the scientist is "in dialogue" with the object or objects he investigates, let us observe that, like Socrates, he is humble, patient, imaginative, and deeply attentive. He "listens" —with all five senses and with "the mind's eye."

Our century—or those two-thirds of it that we have now traversed—has been called the Age of Violence. But our century has been marked not only by a massive breakdown of dialogue, but by its massive growth, too. It is, indeed, the century of two World Wars, of revolution and totalitarianism, of cold inhumanity and genocide of racial strife. It is also the century of Martin Buber's "I-and-Thou," of Telhard de Chardin's daring restatement of cosmic progression, of Pope John's call to all men of good will, regardless of their particular religious faith, their race, their economic status, their nation, their political creed, or their technological development.

Moreover, regardless of big-power imperialism, of a precarious peace sustained by a "balance of terror," of a spreading backlash against the claims of racial equality, modern technology has enabled a new ecumenism to germinate. We are learning that the very word, ecumenical, has older uses than ecclesiastical ones. Like Robinson Crusoe, we are finding footprints on the sandy shore of what had sometimes seemed a lonely, desert island; and, like him, we are increasingly eager to meet our brother. Indeed, our century is a dangerous one to be alive in, but it is an expectant one as well. Shall we "search and destroy," or shall we engage in dialogue? Surely, this question does not apply only to Vietnam, or only to Americans. The Age of Violence—the century we live in—has been marked, let us recall here, by much searching and destroying, by many "body counts," by much "bagging" of prisoners, all over the globe.

It seems possible that the most relevant sort of dialogue, though perhaps the most difficult, for twentieth-century men to achieve

and especially for Americans to achieve is the Socratic. For this difficult form of dialogue, there are luckily a number of models in Plato's Dialogues.

To model [our] dialogues on those that Socrates incited and took part in is a dangerous counsel of something precious close to perfection. But I would merely urge that Socrates' behavior "in dialogue" is a good star to hitch one's wagon to. At the minimum, it is a good guide to the reefs on which most really good dialogues are wrecked. All these reefs welcome hungrily those who substitute the kind of discussion Socrates called "eristic" as a substitute for the kind he called "dialectic." In Book I of Plato's *Republic* Thrasymachus uses eristic; Socrates, dialectic. Thrasymachus' purpose is to win points and to win applause. The purpose of Socrates is to try, through dialectical discussion with Thrasymachus and others, to understand better the essential nature of justice. Each of the two men makes a choice of weapons appropriate to his purpose. The rising voice, the personal accusation, the withering scorn, the crushing sarcasm, the panic at the possibility of being out-man-euvered, the sweating, the unaccustomed blush of a normally unblushing champion sophist, the volubility that tries to shore up a crumbling argument and to ward off the disgrace of refutation, the love of one's own opinions precisely because they are one's own, the vanity that replaces love of truth with love for victory are all exemplified by Thrasymachus. What Socrates displays towards Thrasymachus is courtesy. He treats him not as an enemy, but as a valued colleague in the mutual search for understanding. Socrates is, as it were, the personification for purposes of discourse of the love for one's neighbor that Judaism and Christianity prescribe. And the same love sometimes infuses his courteous questions with irony, because such irony helpfully invited Thrasymachus to rid himself of the false opinions he harbored. So he is never fearful that he will "lose," precisely because he is not trying to "win," and does not meet these flat opinions with other flat opinion, but with the ironical question. Just as we are taught to hate not the sinner but the sin, especially if it is our own, so Socrates never attacks Thrasymachus. Indeed, he never attacks his ignorance and presumptuousness. He merely dissolves the opinions Thrasymachus spouts so loudly, so rapidly, and so volubly. That Thrasymachus recognizes the mortal danger in Socrates' questions and, indeed, that painful scalpel, irony, that Socrates uses on his opinions (and consequently, given Thrasymachus' pride of authorship where his expressed opinions are concerned, on himself, his honor, and his fame as a sophist) comes out in Thrasymachus' sarcastic allusion to "your famous irony." That Socrates knew that his irony "put to the question," a euphemism the Spanish Inquisition would later in history use for the act of torturing the accused, is shown by his likening himself to a gadfly that stung the noble steed, the Athenian democracy. That

the steed knew too is shown in Plato's Apology, where Socrates was sentenced to death for putting Athens to the question.

The many dialectical conversations in Plato's Dialogues suggest several rules of thumb that might be profitably used by [students], or at least more frequently followed. One hesitates to suggest rules of thumb for a kind of discussion that is essentially spontaneous. But it is hard to see how these particular rules could stifle spontaneity:

1. The exchange of declarative monologues tends to be dialectically unproductive. The effort to be too complete is often self-defeating. An adumbration often contributes more to dialectic than a rotund speech. Brevity stimulates dialectic.

2. I take it that Herodotus' "anecdote" that the Persians deliberated while drunk and decided while sober implies that in the early stages of a dialectic exchange a "wild idea" is often more fruitful that a prematurely prudent opinion. The imaginative and the unexpected are frequent ingredients of Socrates' style, though they are often introduced with an (ironic) apology. Since [students are] trying to see more deeply into current problems but are free of the burden of imminent, practical, political action, they might profitably stay "drunk" longer than the King of Kings and his royal counselors could risk staying.

3. The Socratic dialectic has another code of manners than the dinner party, where religion and politics are sometimes forbidden for fear that rising passions may damage "social" intercourse, and where interrupting a speaker and even a long-winded empty speech, is forbidden. In dialectic, a quick question is analogous to "point of order" in political assemblies. "Do I understand you to be saying . . . ?" always has the floor.

4. Even these thumb-rules may seem guaranteed to produce bedlam. And, indeed, when they are first tried, they generally do produce it. But inexperienced dancers on a ballroom floor and inexperienced skaters on an ice rink also collide. Experience brings a sixth sense in Socratic dialectic too. The will of self-insistence gives way to the will to learn.

5. In dialectic, "participational democracy" consists in everybody's listening intently; it does not consist in what commercial television calls equal time. When a good basketball team has the ball, its members do not snatch the ball from each other but support the man who has it, and the man who has it passes it to a teammate whenever a pass is called for by the common purpose of the team. But in dialectic, as opposed to basketball, the "opposing team" is composed only of the

difficulties all men face when they try to understand. The point is that, in dialectic, it does not matter whose mouth gets used by the dialectical process, provided all are listening intently and exercise the freedom to interrupt with a question if they do not understand. On the other hand, reading or writing while "in dialogue" is a grave offense against the common purpose of all, not because they diminish the number of speaking mouths but because they diminish the number of listening ears. (Doodling and smoking are permissible aides to listening!)

6. Whatever the touted merits of pluralism in democratic society today (and pluralism is, minimally, better than shooting each other with mail-order sub-machine guns or even than legislating on religious beliefs), the agreement to disagree is a disgraceful defeat if it means surrendering the hope of agreement through further dialectic. Even Socrates, on rare occasions, countenanced postponement of the struggle to a more propitious occasion.

7. Perhaps the first rule of Socratic dialectic was laid down by Socrates: that we should follow the argument wherever it leads. Presumably, this means that some sorts of relevance that a court pleading should exhibit (and, even more the forensic eloquence that pleading encourages) are irrelevant to dialectic. The deliberate manner, and even more the ponderous manner, are mere impediments. The name of the game is not instructing one's fellows, or even persuading them, but thinking with them and trusting the argument to lead to understanding, sometimes to very unexpected understandings.

8. The chairman [of the Fellows of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara] recently abandoned the practice of recognizing speakers in the order in which their raised hands requested the floor. The abandonment of this device, so necessary in parliamentary procedure and even in small committees if they have not learned to discuss dialectically, was an immense step towards Socratic dialogue. The chairman, [like St. John's tutors] now has the more delicate task of intervening, preferably by question, only when he believes that there is a misunderstanding or an unprofitable (not a profitable) confusion, a confusion that in his judgment bids fair not to right itself.

9. [Students], however, will need to be close listeners, in the event that we take Socrates' advice; we shall, indeed, have to be closer listeners than we now are. We are likely, if we meet that obligation, to attain to a level of friendship that not many men attain to. Aristotle, we may recall, held that friendship could be achieved on three levels. The lowest level is that of what we Americans call "contacts," a level on which two men are useful to

each other and exchange favors and services. On a higher level, two men can find pleasure in each other's company: they amuse each other. On the highest level, each man is seeking the true good of the other. On that level [students] would be, even more satisfyingly than now, seeking in common to understand. We share the friendship, or philia, that Aristotle thought must exist between the citizens of any republic if it was to be worthy of men. It would certainly exist, and without sentimentality, in any genuine republic of learning. And it would heighten the courtesy that any good and rigorous dialectic demands.

10. There is only one, final rule of thumb that I would offer: When free minds seek together for greater understanding, they tend to move, as the mind of Socrates so characteristically moved—with playfulness and a sense of the comic. This, perhaps, is because men are most like the gods when they think; because, nevertheless, they are emphatically not gods; and because, for godlike animals, this fact is so thoroughly funny. The truly relevant jest is never out of order, so long as we can pursue our dialogue with high seriousness and with relevant playfulness.

Were we to apply the ten rules of thumb sketched above, we would certainly produce many of those brief interludes of bedlam when dialectical collisions occur, even though these moments of vocal static would decrease in length and in number as we gained practice with free dialectic. Such static is not dialogue's worst problem. Plato and Shakespeare both speak of the mind's eye, that eye that alone sees intellectual light. I suggest there is a mind's ear too, a listening, mindful ear. I suggest that the chief reason that conversations deteriorate is that the mind's ear fails. 🕮

January 1968

Stringfellow Barr, teacher, historian, advocate for the liberal arts, college president, and story teller was best known as president of St. John's College from 1937 to 1946. He was the co-founder, with Scott Buchanan, of the New Program, in which young men and women, together with their tutors, read and discuss the great books of the Western tradition, hone their skills and discover their capacities in the sciences, in mathematics, in languages, in fine arts, as they progress through a required, rigorous liberal arts curriculum. Mr. Barr was also Mortimer Adler's long-time friend and colleague.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

On June 20, 1950, Albert Einstein wrote a letter in English to Stringfellow Barr, then President of the Foundation for World

Government. In this letter, Einstein is responding to a report sent to him by the Foundation:

". . . the danger of general annihilation by war directly and simultaneously threatens the 'strong' and the 'weak' alike—perhaps the 'strong' even more than the 'weak'."

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR:

Dear Max,

I've just completed reading the tragedies of Sophocles. You told me I would enjoy them and that was an understatement. I had read them as a college freshman some 36 years ago and, as is the bane of many at that age, approached the reading as a chore. With this reading I experienced the power and emotion of the work. I now understand why these dramas are part of the Great Books.

I am now ready to begin the 4th reading for the first year of the program. Please send me the reading guide when it is convenient.

I hope all is well with you and that you are enjoying the freshness of Spring.

Thanks again for your help in this.

Francis Szarejko

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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