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An Immodest Proposal: Dialogue on Dialogue

"The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed." The students in our educational institutions are intellectually undernourished. Half a century ago Whitehead noticed the usual indifference to this problem.

> When one considers in its length and in its breadth the importance of this question of the education of a nation's young, the broken lives, the defeated hopes, the national failures, which result from the frivolous inertia with which it is treated, it is difficult to restrain within oneself a savage rage.

One wonders whether Whitehead could have restrained his rage if the shepherds were to profess a concern for their flock they do not have. The "blind mouths," as Milton called the corrupted clergy of his day, instead of feeding, want to be fed. There is nothing necessarily reprehensible in the conduct of professors or educators with desires for academic adulation and governmental or industrial financing — honor and gain. But if in feeding themselves they do so at the students' expense, they feed upon the students. Such cannibalistic gluttony, if it existed, would suggest "a modest proposal" *à la* Swift. Let the more succulent babes, the lambs, be fed to the depredators. Let the reigning policy be implemented more completely and cheerfully. Meanwhile the hungry sheep look down, and are fed up. Gluttony, however, is a sin; and sin is out of fashion. It is more comforting to treat our problem as a technical one, more soothing to look for the fault in the environment rather than in our own moral corruption or conceptual confusion. How charitable it is for the shepherds to think of themselves as only wanting the best for their students, and knowing what the best is; and bravely facing up to the impersonal, Malthusian problem of the student population increasing at a faster rate than the natural food supply. How delicious.

> 'It seems a shame,' the Walrus said
> 'To play them such a trick.
> After we've brought them out so far,
> And made them trot so quick!'

What we would feed our sheep if we could is now almost unquestioningly accepted as a panacea for educational ills, indeed social ills in general. Our students may need more intellectual understanding than our educational institutions have encouraged; hostility may exist between

the Arabs and the Israelis, between the blacks and the whites, between the hawks and the doves; idealistic college students may have become indifferent to the challenges of an American business career; human beings may have become alienated from one another, mindless of their religious heritage of a universal brotherhood: but we have hope that we can be delivered from such diverse evil; we have faith in an appropriate medicine, as beneficial to the soul as Berkeley's tar-water was to the body; and we have charity. The medicine is Dialogue. It may not always come stamped in the form of a cross, for we live in enlightened times; yet it has a miraculous efficacy belying its humble origins, which are presumed to be the quaint philosophical conversations Socrates had with his disciples. But now the congregation of philosophy students has grown large, and undergraduates especially may lack opportunity directly to eat of the flesh and drink of the blood of the Socratic tradition. If anyone has any suggestions for alleviating the situation, his proposal should be a modest one; for it would be considered foolish to propose bread and wine for our flock when the supply of bread and wine is decreasing at an alarming rate. Let them eat ambrosia and drink nectar!

Modesty might be said to characterize a pertinent proposal appearing in the preface to a recent series of books containing reprinted philosophical material. The books, which have considerable merit, are designed to make a dialogue of sorts possible for the philosophy student who, because of increased class enrollments, finds that the possibilities of engaging in a "dialogue" with his professor are becoming remoter. Each book in the series contains a collection of critical writings, especially relevant for the undergraduate, related to a single philosophical classic. The student is instructed to use the critical writings not as substitutes for the classic work but as supplements to it, so that "they will bring to bear on the problems raised by Descartes, Hume, or Plato that diversity of voices and viewpoints which is the heart of the dialogue." The hope is that this use of such a book "will prompt the student to add his voice to the discussion," that he will be provoked "into serious engagement with the text and the problems found there." The purpose of the proposal is to bring about in the student "philosophical understanding," which, it is claimed, "grows in the course of a dialogue where problems are discussed from diverse points of view by men who differ in experience and temperament."

In the proposal we are told that a proper use of the texts will bring about only a "dialogue of sorts" for which the texts can serve as models. What is proposed is a δευτεροα πλουν, a "second sailing," to borrow an expression used by Socrates in the *Phaedo*. When favorable winds have failed we are to use our oars; we are to try a "second best." If the professor were available, he would make the standard offer to play the two-hand game of Dialogue with his student, perhaps proposing that the student

first learn the game by watching the professor play it with another student — as when Socrates conversed with Meno's slave in Meno's presence so that Meno would have a paradigm. But the rules of the standard game require two players, each one expressing a different viewpoint; and the professor is seldom available to play anymore. So he modestly proposes that, when necessary, the student gamely try to get on without him by playing what appears to be solitaire. The student can learn the game by reading a book containing critical writings along with the philosophical text around which the criticisms are centered.

The modesty of the proposal is indeed curious; for it might be argued that the proposed game is infinitely more dialogical than the standard game.

Whereas in many contemporary proposals of Dialogue it seems to be presupposed that in using the word *dialogue* we know what we are talking about, in this proposal there is an explicit statement regarding the nature of Dialogue. The "heart" of Dialogue is its "diversity of voices and viewpoints." It is this essential feature which serves to recommend it for educational purposes. The pertinent pedagogical maxim may be stated formally.

> If x is a game having both (a) diversity of voices and (b) diversity of viewpoints, then x is good for increasing the philosophical understanding of student S under conditions c.

(One of the conditions, of course, is that the student provide one of the voices and one of the viewpoints.) This maxim, which places value on diversity, variety, or novelty, might be viewed either as an empirical generalization or as a derivative of the metaphysical thesis which A. O. Lovejoy in *The Great Chain of Being* called "the principle of plenitude." The principle of plenitude is the

> strange and pregnant theorem of the 'fulness' of the realization of conceptual possibility in actuality . . . [It is] the assumption that no genuine potentiality of being can remain unfulfilled . . . , that the world is the better the more things it contains.

Whereas metaphysically this is "the principle of the necessity of imperfection in all its possible degrees," axiologically it is the principle of the *desirability* of such imperfection. This axiological principle, which is the democratic ideal, is an appropriate foundation for our current pedagogical practices.

If we were to use our pedagogical maxim to compare the merits of the proposed game with those of the standard two-hand game of Dialogue, the proposed game would appear to be inferior to the standard game only as long as the proposed game is viewed as a game of solitaire. The game, like a game of chess played by mail, might give the deceptive appearance of solitaire because of the size of the spatial and temporal intervals between the players or their moves. Yet the proposed game is not quasi Dialogue, but arch Dialogue; not an emasculated version,

but one having the greatest fecundity. It is an ongoing game which develops more and more diversity by acquiring more and more players. The student, if he is successfully to model his own playing after his professor's, will want to "publish," perhaps at first orally, later in writing. Printed publication efficiently permits a player to make his moves known to a vast number of other players, even though they are geographically or historically remote. Although practically there are the librarian's problems of care, storage, and accessibility due to the population explosion in publications, theoretically even when a player dies his recorded moves are available to new players; and "the great conversation" is made possible. Yet the very fact of the unlimited number of voices and viewpoints might lead one to propose the game, though it be superior to two-hand Dialogue, only modestly; not because of the technical, Malthusian problem of the librarians, but because traditionally we conceive ourselves modelling the philosophical education of our students on the Socratic conversations imagined by Plato in his dialogue; and these conversations constitute only a two-hand game. If the wise and noble Socrates did not see fit to go beyond two voices, there might indeed be propriety in proposing arch Dialogue as only second-best.

One wonders, however, why the wise and noble Socrates restricted his game not only to two voices, but to the viewpoint of one player. What is even more bothersome, the viewpoint to which the game is restricted is that of the student. This rule of the game is made explicit in Plato's *Meno,* where Socrates contrasted his game with another. In the dialogue this occurs after Meno, in response to a model definition provided by Socrates, asked him what sort of answer he would give to a person who said that he does not know what Socrates' *definiens* is any more than what the *definiendum* is. To this Socrates replied that

> if we were a philosopher of the eristic and antagonistic sort, I should say to him: You have my answer, and if I am wrong, your business is to take up the argument and refute me. But if we were friends, and were talking as you and I are now, I should reply in a milder strain and more in the dialectician's vein: that is to say, I should not only speak the truth, but I should make use of premises which the person interrogated would be willing to admit. And this is the way in which I shall endeavour to approach you.

The Socratic game, then, is even more meagre than the standard two-hand version of Dialogue; for it is limited by the rules to two voices and the viewpoint of only one player. It does not even allow for the polarization of opinion characteristic of our contemporary "dialogues" in the civil-rights and peace movements — "dialogues" which are preliminary to, or part of, protest and resistance. Does Socrates' game, which he called "dialectic," even deserve the name 'Dialogue'? Further misgivings might arise after pondering the reason one would have a student play Dialogue, which is so that while defending his own viewpoint he may discover viewpoints other than his own, and the reason one would have a student play the Socratic game, which is merely so

that he may discover what his own viewpoint is. The Socratic approach, which is to try to get the student to learn what he would think, is reflected in Augustine's remark to his son in *De Magistro:* "Who is so stupidly curious as to send his son to school in order that he may learn what the teacher thinks?"

The word 'dialogue' once had only three senses, and indeed none of the senses is uniquely Socratic. Consider three types of portraits of Socrates which, respectively, the names Xenophon, Plato, and Aristophanes' might invoke: the historical, the literary, and the theatrical. In the historical portrait Socrates appears as an actual man whose conversations are being reported. Any conversation or colloquy involving two or more persons is "a dialogue." Surely there is nothing distinctively Socratic here, since others have conversed besides Socrates, and few conversations are Socratic. In the literary portrait Socrates appears as a character represented as engaging in conversations which are imagined rather than remembered. An artifact or work of this dramatic form also is "a dialogue." Again there is nothing distinctively Socratic, since dialogues have been written in which Socrates is not a character and the imagined conversation is not Socratic. In the theatrical portrait Socrates appears as a character played by an actor whose performance requires not only his participation in the action (as when he sits suspended above the ground in a basket), but also the speaking of Socrates' lines. The spoken element in a play is not "a dialogue," but "dialogue." Instead of using a term dividing its reference so that any referent comes pre-packaged, we use a mass or bulk term unfriendly to both the indefinite article and pluralization. Again this is not distinctively Socratic, since there are other roles for an actor to play besides that of Socrates. But these three senses of the word 'dialogue' — a conversation, a literary piece in dramatic conversational form, and the lines which actors speak — are old-fashioned now that we are recommending Dialogue for pedagogical and other social purposes. In the new, enlightened sense of the word sometimes *dialogue* is used as a mass term, sometimes not; which suggests that it has both all of these other three senses and none of them at once.

As history Dialogue is an actual reportable conversation or colloquy, a conventional act or "game" which, like a bet and unlike a dare, requires the cooperation of the two or more persons participating. As literature it is a dramatic fabrication which is publishable so that each player can communicate his moves in the game to spatially and temporally distant players and thereby establish the reputation requisite for his academic advancement. As theater it is the spoken element of a dramatic production staged by actors, its theatricalism suggested by Wordsworth in these lines:

> Then will he fit his tongue
> To dialogues of business, love, or strife;
> But it will not be long

Ere this be thrown aside,
And with new joy and pride
The little Actor cons another part.

Yet 'Dialogue' does not have just these old-fashioned senses, which are so ordinary and common. Its senses are more special. The pedagogical game of Dialogue is, first of all, a species of historical dialogue. This follows from the fact that to play pedagogical Dialogue is not merely to converse, which is generic, but to argue, which is specific. As a disputation the conversation must meet at least two special requirements: (1) that there be an issue for discussion, and (2) that each discussant take a side in the issue so that at least two different positions are represented. Pedagogical Dialogue is, further, more fragmentary in its composition than a literary dialogue. This follows from the fact that it is a literary fabrication only in its parts, not as a whole. A Plato, a Berkeley, or a Hume determines what each character shall say in one of his literary dialogues, so that the whole work is his fabrication. But anyone contributing to pedagogical Dialogue fabricates only the parts of "the great conversation." Pedagogical Dialogue is, finally, more provincial with respect to its audience than theatrical dialogue. This follows from the fact that, as in a psychodrama, its audience is properly limited to the players themselves. A symptom that the players seek to benefit directly only themselves is found in their permissiveness when each one tries to upstage the other.

The enlightened sense of *dialogue,* then, makes the game more special in its logical nature than an historical dialogue; more special in its composition than a literary dialogue; and more special in its geography than theatrical dialogue. Logically it differs from an historical dialogue by being less generic; compositionally it differs from a literary dialogue by being less integral; and geographically it differs from theatrical dialogue by being less cosmopolitan. To summarize, it differs from an historical dialogue, from a literary dialogue, and from theatrical dialogue in that it is (respectively) limited, fragmentary, and provincial.

Now the Socratic game is, in its historical aspect, also logically specific in that it is not any sort of conversation; in its literary aspect, also compositionally fragmentary in that it is not an integral fabrication; and in its theatrical aspect, also geographically provincial in that it is meant to benefit directly only the two players, if that many. Yet it is, at best, a young and lisping version of Dialogue. It hardly qualifies as a disputation at all, nor as a full literary or theatrical production. It is a conversation which is not debate, but rather merely inquiry, an inquiry which ordinarily resists publication and discourages the acting talents of the student. Socratic inquiry, like debate, does indeed involve issues for discussion, but they cannot be used as a matter for disputation, since the rules of play prohibit the player who is teacher from continuing the game with any viewpoints other than those accepted by

the student. Socratic inquiry might indeed be pursued partly by means of published speeches and lectures, which can serve as records of what has happened, paradigms of what ought to happen, or suggestions for what could happen; but unrecorded extemporaneous questioning of the student is the preferred mode of play. Socratic inquiry does indeed require that the teacher, who is the questioner or dealer, be an actor capable of playing a variety of roles (admirer, midwife, ignoramus, forgetter, etc.) so that he may entice the student into playing the game as the answerer or declarer. The dealer wears a mask, at least for the declarer. But the student is not an actor. He should wear no mask for his teacher. Rather, he should commit himself. He is the agent who takes full responsibility for his own conduct no matter how inconsistent. In the dialogue *Protagoras* Socrates showed that he was capable of playing a genuine game of Dialogue when he gave a speech interpreting the poet Simonides, which provoked Hippias into wanting to provide his own interpretation and so add to the diversity of voices and viewpoints. The ability to play this game well, together with the willingness to do so and to teach others how to do so, had made Protagoras both rich and famous. Yet, for some reason, Socrates preferred his own game, which charity prompts us to characterize as "lisping" Dialogue.

The lisp is extensive enough, however, to be a source of irritation. First consider the historical aspect of genuine dialogue. For some protesters and dissenters who use dialogue as a political tactic, dialogue as debate is not merely an attempt to persuade, but persuasion itself as well. J. L. Austin distinguished "illocutionary" speech acts, such as denoted by 'to argue,' from "perlocutionary" speech acts, such as denoted by 'to convince.' They differ in that only the former are purely conventional. A person performing an illocution performs an act *in* saying what he does, whereas a person performing a perlocution performs an act *by* saying what he does. Illocutions have only a certain *force,* whereas perlocutions have *real effects* which have been achieved. But by calling the game "dialogue," playing the game can become the same as winning it. What Austin hath rent asunder, let Dialogue join together. So, too, some educators can turn wine into water by making playing Dialogue tantamount to bringing about philosophical understanding. To try to get the student to learn is to get the student to learn. Strife mystically becomes one with victory. Socratic inquiry, by contrast, connotes only trying. Though opportunities to learn presented themselves to, say, Meno, Anytus, and Alcibiades, they lacked either the ability, the willingness, or the tenacity. Next consider the literary aspect of genuine Dialogue. Printed texts have a mnemonic, informative, or suggestive function. As conventional signs or tokens they are trivial in themselves, sacred only relative to pious uses. Yet, like a taboo word, Dialogue can become an object of veneration in its own right, capable of arousing the utmost religious fervor. Academic-

ally "research," "keeping up in one's field," "publishing," "contributing to the knowledge explosion" — in a word, dialogue — have been not merely praised for their utility but prized in themselves. The sign mystically becomes one with the thing signified; the engraved image is worshipped as a god. Socratic inquiry, by contrast, cares little about publication itself; and fondles words only when concerned about their abuse. Finally, consider the theatrical aspect of genuine Dialogue. Although the actors in Dialogue address each other, each addresses an audience of anonymous persons in that there is mutual "I - they" confrontation. The audience for each player is in the third-person plural. Everyone, preacher and congregation alike, wears a mask. Yet those hearing the sermons or lectures, and reading the books or articles, have been urged to consider themselves not only personally addressed by the preacher in the second-person singular, but in their turn addressing the preachers in the same way. Whether the congregation is one man or so many men that closed-circuit television is used, the "I - they" confrontation is transubstantiated into a mutual "I - thou" confrontation. There is "communication" which is "total" and "meaningful." This means not just sermonizing, not just dual monologue, not even just genuinely listening as well as speaking. The observance of certain ritual forms of intellectual activity mystically becomes one with a spiritual communion in which our true humanity is revealed or "unmasked." This is perhaps like Martin Buber's conception of *Zweisprache* ("dialogue") except that, though mystical, Buber's conception still distinguishes the intellectual from the personal.

> The life of dialogue is no privilege of intellectual activity like dialectic. It does not begin in the upper story of humanity. It begins no higher than where humanity begins. There are no gifted and ungifted here, only those who give themselves and those who withhold themselves.

There is no transubstantiation here; nor is there in Socratic inquiry, which is not even an "I - thou" confrontation except on the part of the dealer, who, by retaining his mask, prevents reciprocation. Since he is never required to declare except as a means of getting the declarer to do so, the game is at best lopsidedly personal. It is disqualified as a genuine case of Buber's *Zweisprache,* which dispenses with masks altogether.

The mystical identification of strife with victory, of sign with thing signified, and of intellectual with personal discourse tends to be found in genuine dialogue, but hardly in Socratic inquiry.

And if Socratic inquiry really were our model, what alternative would we propose if the teacher were unavailable? If we are to salvage any theatricalism for the new game, then the student himself, the agent, will have to take the teacher's role and be the actor too. There would no longer be two actual voices. There would only be the student conversing with himself, successively adopting the premises in each view-

point of the several seductive voices he manages to conjure up. As teacher he would expose irrationality where it is to be found; and as student he would take responsibility for those positions which he would declare as his own. In this way one could get diversity into this "second-best" game, a mere game of solitaire. But what value is there in the pedagogical game which ultimately dispenses with the actual teacher? Or, what comes to the same thing if the teacher becomes the agent as well as the actor, what value is there in the game which allows the teacher to learn more than any single one of his actual students? This assimilation of the teacher by the student or the student by the teacher is, ironically, nothing but cannibalism, which should be proposed as Dialogue only with circumspect modesty.

What, then, *should* be proposed? If the time has come for us to affirm less modestly the superiority of the proposed Dialogue "of sorts" to the standard two-player version of Dialogue, then the time is long overdue for us to affirm the superiority of both of those games of Dialogue to the outdated Socratic game. However, the antecedent of the conditional is a debatable matter; for it might be better argued than it has here that the proposed game of "second-best" Dialogue really is ironically superior to ordinary Dialogue. It seems worthwhile to propose here that we again enter into debate on the entire issue, a debate at least as old as Plato's *Protagoras.* What game shall the students play? In the *Protagoras,* presumably for the benefit of the eager young Hippocrates, Socrates displayed his game and Protagoras displayed his. Hippocrates had previously been disposed toward apprenticing himself to the wealthy and impressive Protagoras, but Plato fabricated the drama so that Hippocrates was confronted with a choice. We are not told what choice, if any, he made.

What is here proposed is dialogue on Dialogue. We make the proposal, we say, because of the present intellectual starvation of our students. But the proposal seems immodest. It is shameless to propose a policy which, if adopted, enlarges the very problem we claim to be solving. As readers of the *Protagoras* know, the young Hippocrates started out very eager to learn; but after being introduced by Socrates to Protagoras he was all but forgotten in the ensuing dialogue, never to be addressed, mentioned, or heard from again. Did he reach the distinction of his famous medical namesake of an earlier time? or even the distinction of the rival educators, Socrates and Protagoras, whose jockeying for position absorbed their energies? No, he reached the distinction of being ignored — swallowed up by his would-be teachers. If we will not nurture the Hippocratic directly, individually, and personally, why do we even bother to mention their hunger? Of course, in so immodestly proposing dialogue on Dialogue, we do disguise our desire to *be* fed rather than to feed. "We must devise new ways of learning, new ways of teaching," we say grandly yet fretfully as the

dreary economics of educating gets more and more grim. In the meantime we may yet hear from the Hippocratic, who have never been less insensible to the hypocritical. There are signs that the hungry sheep are becoming less sheepish. Will they learn — somehow — the final irony of devouring those who herd them?