

The Bonds of Learning: Dialogue and the Question of Human Solidarity

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While today's society is moving toward greater global interconnectedness, local communities are becoming more culturally diverse.¹ These changes demand that we unite as a global community responsible for the stewardship of the earth and its diverse peoples. Our inability to imagine ourselves as part of such a community is reflected in the intractability of problems, including the dramatically disproportionate distribution of wealth and a dangerously depleted environment, as well as the rise in torture, terrorism, genocide, war, and religious sectarian violence. The urgent need for humanity to realize its interconnectedness and address global concerns is felt specifically in education, because as the next generation of adults, our children will be burdened with both the responsibility for resolving global concerns and the devastating consequences of our not doing so.

Anxiety about the future is detectable in mounting pressure on schools to ensure that students flourish as members of diverse communities that are simultaneously reliant on, and responsible for, a global environment: citizenship education, social justice, service learning, and environmentalism are now all emphasized. Many schools adopt a zero-tolerance policy toward offensive and potentially harmful behaviors such as bullying, new curricula must reflect the diverse demographic makeup of our communities, teachers must model tolerance of diversity in lesson planning and classroom management, and students must be exposed to alternative cultures within and beyond the school.

In this context, dialogue emerges as an important normative ideal and an invaluable pedagogy. As a normative ideal, dialogue assumes that the speaker and the spoken-to share "the same moral world";² it represents an open-ended, inclusive, and reciprocal relationship that permits pluralism and connection across difference. In the context of the classroom, dialogue is used to promote egalitarianism, tolerance, and mutual understanding. Teachers invite diverse students to share and listen to one another's stories, stressing receptivity and the absence of judgment. In Nicholas Burbules's terms, these conversations seek "a language and manner of communication that can make speakers comprehensible to one another."³

If dialogue represents the recognition of ourselves as participating in one moral world, then certain responsibilities and possibilities internal to this recognition are eclipsed by a concept of dialogue reduced to equal and reciprocal relations. Thinking about dialogue — and what is involved in the recognition of sharing the same moral world with another/others — has been dominated by theories that define this recognition as a matter of respectful reasonableness, empathetic "wide-awakeness," liberatory praxis, or an I-You, or caring, relationality. These theories make it difficult for us to learn about the nature of dialogue. They also limit what we can learn from

dialogue about recognizing moral interconnectedness; more specifically, they obscure those dimensions of dialogue that suggest alternative ways of conceiving this recognition. I propose conceptual teaching and learning as a dimension of dialogue that involves recognition of our moral interconnectedness *and* distinctiveness.

To clarify the role of dialogue in education today, in the next section I explain how thinking about the nature of identity and human solidarity has shaped conceptions of dialogue. This “broad brushstrokes” sketch provides a context for my third section and proposal that dialogue bears witness to our life with concepts and their lack of a final justificatory basis. An individual makes sense of a concept by coming into life with it: speaking, choosing, and acting “in ways that perhaps no one else would” in the hope that others will appreciate its intelligibility.⁴ This hope is inspired by what I am calling pedagogical eloquence: occasions when another’s life with a concept provides a standard for our own thinking by exemplifying the concept in its existential significance. I introduce Jonathan Lear’s discussion of Plenty Coups as one such illustration.⁵

THE QUESTION OF HUMAN SOLIDARITY AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO DIALOGUE

Until quite recently, the unity of the human species was seen as intrinsic. It was premised on humanity’s essential sameness. Over time this sameness has been understood in religious and secular terms, as either God, soul, or reason. In each case, the necessity of our underlying sameness throws into relief the contingency of our cultural differences. It assumes that socialization does not go all the way down. Individuals identify with the whole of humanity and strive to overcome the antagonism engendered by their cultural differences. Philosopher Jürgen Habermas provides a contemporary version of this view in his theory of communicative rationality and discourse ethics which relies on a post-Enlightenment conception of reason: reason is the ability to use language and action to articulate and sustain intersubjective validity claims. He locates rationality in structures of interpersonal linguistic communication, and claims that humans’ communicative competence gives them the unique potential for reason. He argues for the democratization of society in terms of the institutionalization of humanity’s potential for rationality inherent in communicative competence.

The conception of dialogue that Habermas advocates is universalistic and deliberative. The ideal speech community is one in which the participants, all equally endowed with the capacities for discourse, engage in argumentative procedures that enable intersubjective agreement over universal norms. This community is roughly coextensive with the human community, or at least those within the human community capable of speech and action. Philosopher Seyla Benhabib argues that Habermas’s ideal speech community entails two ethical assumptions: first, that individuals capable of speech and action have the right to be respected as beings whose standpoints are worthy of consideration (the principle of universal respect); and second, that every standpoint is worthy of equal consideration (principle of egalitarianism).⁶ According to Benhabib, Habermas’s ideal speech community implies a utopian vision for a way of life that sustains the practice of conversation.

The idea that humanity is unified by its underlying sameness has lost ground in recent years to epistemological and logical criticism. Epistemically speaking, we lack indubitable evidence for the existence of an entity or faculty that secures human continuity across history and culture. For example, there are no evidentiary grounds establishing the theory that communicative competence and the potential for reason define what it means to be human. Logically, we know that the establishment of a human essence serves to devalue its binary opposites. To posit God, goodness, soul, mind, or reason as definitive human traits implicitly devalues other human attributes, including emotion, body, and nature. It is right to ask the quintessentially postmodern question: *whose values?*⁷ Or, whose values are being indefensibly generalized as the most basic human traits? The argumentative procedures of the ideal speech community are not neutral; they privilege a vision of the good life that centers on deliberation, justification, and judgment.

This vision of the good life reveals the naivety, and thus privilege, of its perspective: essentially that of wealthy, educated, western, European white males. Why? First, the theory does not acknowledge the fundamental role of culture in human socialization. This is indicated by its failure to entertain the possibility that there might be multiple “rationalities.” Second, in setting the agenda for what is considered appropriate debate, theories of communicative rationality sanctify the speech of some over others. As feminists (and others) demonstrate, the ideal speech community fails to effectively address the affective basis of our judgments and relationships. In addition, such universalist theories do not recognize the cultural construction of identity and fail to acknowledge how individuals embody the political, instrumental, and strategic relationships that exist between cultures and constitute real speech communities.

In uncovering the partiality of these so-called general interests with a view to redressing the balance, educators and academics acknowledge and celebrate the values of marginalized and racially diverse individuals through the study of nontraditional philosophies, histories, literature, and art forms. The new understanding is that although factors contributing to an individual’s socialization are contingent, socialization goes all the way down. Identity is racially, culturally, socially, sexually, geographically, historically, and economically determined. To embrace others in their humanity is to embrace their inherent diversity and radical difference. Individuals are not obliged to overcome natural feelings of cultural antipathy, but to acknowledge them, negotiate them, and tolerate others in light of them. The aim is not to create an overarching human super-culture that can absorb and compensate for the differences between cultures; rather the aim is for cultures to coexist equitably and adhere to principles of social justice.

A significant impediment to social justice is that individuals overlook the negative ramifications of their actions, in particular the suffering caused to different and distant others. Philosopher Richard Rorty recommends that individuals use conversation and the arts to recognize, overcome, and prevent other people’s suffering.⁸ In this context, dialogue is neither deliberative nor universalistic, but is construed as a consciousness-raising activity. Dialogue aims to give all perspectives

a hearing, and not just the culturally hegemonic ones; it allows voices to be heard and appreciated by a community of diverse others. Dialogue and the arts inspire what Maxine Greene describes as “wide-awakeness”: they prompt individuals to create personalized, self-reflective, and culturally critical perspectives.⁹ Encouraged by Rorty and Greene, educators use the arts and classroom conversation to educate students about the needless suffering caused by prejudice, political persecution, and war, for example. This approach has a potential risk, however. Unless the students’ exposure to stories of injustices is disciplined by a commitment to social critique, action, and change, then it risks fetishizing difference, inducing feelings of powerlessness, and inviting relativism and cynicism. In addition, it is questionable whether this approach provides sufficient grounds for the establishment of a unified global community.

Brazilian educational reformist Paulo Freire had such a concern.¹⁰ He became convinced that pedagogies directed at social justice must target the victims of suffering — with their internal contradictions and greater plasticity — and not its perpetrators. In Freire’s view, education of the oppressed involves *consentization*: a process by which the oppressed discover the contours of their oppression (minimizing the subjective effect of the oppressive culture) with a view to “renaming the world,” and also create a new determining subjectivity. With the advent of this new determining subject come fresh possibilities for action and the world. In the context of Freire’s view, dialogue and, more specifically, dialogical pedagogy constitute a form of praxis in the spirit of counterhegemonic resistance. Dialogue works against cultural hegemony by deconstructing entrenched notions of authority. When used in the classroom, dialogue invites participants to both speak and listen, giving all members the dual status of student-teacher. As a pedagogical practice, dialogue awakens participants to the internal resources of their power in the form of cultural critique, collective understanding, and the ability to act and intervene in the world differently.

Although Freire’s philosophy seems genuinely liberatory, there is a question about whether the theory condemns humanity to endlessly deconstruct oppression without providing the resources for its eventual liberation. If there is anything to this concern, then the problem originates in Freire’s historicist insights. If oppression is the nexus of subject creation, then oppression encodes reality. Individuals approach reality with the view to deciphering its living code and themselves. This involves the perception of limits (where previously there were only limitations), but it is unclear how these limits are to be overcome through the production of realities that are free from oppression. Condemnation to the deconstructive moment is unsettling precisely because it implies the infinite deferral of a unified human community.

The philosophies of Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and Nel Noddings provide a welcome salve because they reassert a unified humanity by appealing to a relational metaphysics: cultural differences are held in check by a shared underlying vulnerability that each of us experiences in relation to one another.¹¹ Although divided into a world of “us” and “them,” humans are bound to one another in an I-You or caring relationality. This inspires the hope that our antagonisms can in fact

be overcome on a deeper level. It renews teachers' attempts to reach out to their students in their individuality and uniqueness. It invites conversations between students; they are encouraged to be present to one another across their differences, to feel the singularity of the face-to-face encounter with each and every individual in each new moment of time. In Buber's terms, students seek to experience the other as a "you," and not merely as an "it," and thus to give themselves over to the disclosure of that individual as an unbounded claim upon the whole of their being.

Although these theories are a welcome addition to the debate, they raise epistemic questions about whether it is possible to determine the truth of a theory of relational metaphysics. There is also the further question of how individuals recognize relationality within themselves and their experience of others. For example, how is an individual to know when s/he is responding to another person as a "you"? The individual may feel that s/he is, but theory informs us that even best intentions can masquerade as thinly veiled prejudice. The overriding question seems to be: by what criteria do we recognize an I-You relationship? Our tendency is to answer the question negatively rather than positively, defining relationality in terms of what it is not rather than what it is — but these definitions only provide us with necessary, and not sufficient, conditions.¹²

I began with the dichotomous relationship between a thesis about our underlying metaphysical sameness, in which individuals share a common humanity and their cultural differences are merely "skin deep," and a politics of radical difference, in which cultural differences "go all the way down," wholly constituting identity and inciting cultural antipathy. In the first instance, our essential humanity transcends the accidental arbitrariness of contingency; in the second instance, our diverse identities are entirely subject to, and determined by, contingency, and the possibility of a transcendental ground for a universal human community is rejected. This dichotomy served as the context for my consideration of the works of Habermas, Rorty, and Freire and some relational philosophies. I am not persuaded that any of these approaches provide an adequate representation of dialogue as the grounds for global human solidarity. In the next section, I explain my reservation and then propose a concept of dialogue that I think better serves new habits of human sociability.

DIALOGUE AS A WAY TO UNDERSTAND AND BE HUMAN

My deeper reservation about the aforementioned approaches is their assumption that the inherent ambiguity of human life can be resolved by seeking a final justificatory ground for human unity, irrespective of whether the existence of this ground is denied or affirmed. This assumption is not surprising given the central importance of dispelling ambiguity in inquiry and other human projects. I suggest, however, that to search for the ultimate foundational ground of community is to take flight from responsibility, because it eliminates the possibility that human identity and community are realized "on the move" and "in the middle of things." To definitively answer the question of human identity and community is to imply that it is the justificatory ground, or lack thereof, that determines who we become and the relationships that we forge, not us. Such a construal makes community not up to us

because it is governed by what are taken to be our most important conceptual features: either we are unified by a common nature, we participate in a relational ontology, or, as culturally determined identities, we can ideally look forward to a just, if uneasy, coexistence.

The idea that human life is inherently ambiguous is neither particularly radical nor new. For example, it is implied in Rorty's thesis that there is no such thing as a final language, and it is implied in René Arcilla's thesis that human life is unfathomable and that it eternally invites such skeptical questions as "Why am I here?" and "What is this all for?"¹³ Neither formulation heightens our awareness that individuals have to make sense of their history and possibilities against the background of life's mysteriousness: Rorty's emphasis on irony risks trivializing human meaning making by overlooking the role our desire for truth plays in the search for new self-understandings; Arcilla's emphasis on the profound lure of skeptical questions (as above) makes it seem that human meaning making is directed at only these questions. In my view, to say that we live dialogically is a more satisfactory formulation of the ambiguity of human life. It acknowledges our life with concepts, that our life with concepts is characterized by learning, and that our relationships are inherently pedagogical.

Dialogue is fundamentally characterized by a dynamic movement between elements in a binary relationship, including speaking and listening, self and other, assertion and question, convergence and divergence, and individual and community. It implies that humans live with what is familiar and foreign, with neither element prioritized over the other. This feature of our existence — that we understand experience as we experience ourselves in relationship with what exceeds understanding — opens up possibilities for learning, and is reflected in our use of concepts. The familiar and the foreign are differently constituted: sometimes comprehension is expansive, encompassing the once incomprehensible; and at other times the sovereignty of comprehension is overwhelmed and diminished by the incomprehensible. Shifts — enlargement and contraction — are principally reflected in conceptual change.

A concept is not just a classificatory term, designed to distinguish items that fall under it from those that do not. Concepts are porous membranes: they frame and are framed by experience. An individual feels compelled to replace one set of concepts with another, as in the case of a religious conversion; alternatively, s/he retains a set of concepts but understands them differently, as in the case of a paradigm shift; or, more commonly, an individual alters and deepens concepts over time. For example, John Bayley came to a fuller appreciation of what it means to love through nursing his wife, Iris Murdoch, as she succumbed to Alzheimer's disease.¹⁴ As Murdoch writes, "Repentance may mean something different to an individual at different times in his life and what it fully means is part of this life."¹⁵

Concepts make certain things intelligible to us, such as being "red," "loving," or "courageous," but this does not tell us what it is like for individuals to use concepts, nor does it reveal the place that concepts have in ordinary life. In Cora

Diamond's terms, "grasping a concept...is being able to participate in-life-with-the concept." She is speaking of all concepts — descriptive and evaluative — as the means by which individuals think about, act out, and assess their lives. Understanding a concept involves participating in the forms of life from which the concept derives. In an obvious sense, concepts are public: what an individual takes friendship to mean is governed by the cultural and linguistic practices of the communities to which s/he belongs. And yet, individuals inevitably engage with this conceptual inheritance, seeking to understand for themselves, for example, what friendship really means. As Diamond states, "although the terms we use will have a place in a network of evaluative thought, to participate in the life in which terms are used does not mean that one must share these evaluations."¹⁶

Although individuals come to conceive friendship differently, their conceptions need not be subjectively, or even culturally, relative; individuals feel that they are discovering a meaning for friendship that encompasses a universal community of fellow language users. This is because they do not choose what the concept means; instead its meaning emerges from a responsiveness to, and struggle with, experience, memory, reflection, and conversation. I wish to highlight only one aspect of this complex process. If we lack a final justificatory basis for our concepts, then it is principally with reference to the authority of how others think, speak, and live that individuals enrich their lives with concepts; individuals are reliant upon, and sites of, pedagogical eloquence.¹⁷

An occasion is pedagogically eloquent when it makes an authoritative claim on an individual's consciousness by evincing a concept's truer meaning. The individual feels that she understands, as if for the first time, what friendship is, for example, and her/his concept shifts in the direction of this better understanding. The image, activity, or spoken word transposes the self to a better understanding by exemplifying the concept in its existential significance. Lear's discussion of Plenty Coups, the last great Chief of the Crow Nation, is one such poignant illustration. The example of Plenty Coups's courageous leadership — his paradoxical and partially successful response to the arrival of the white people and decimation of traditional Crow life — claimed Lear's attention as authoritative. Sustained reflection on Plenty Coups's life and leadership enables Lear to determine that Plenty Coups exemplifies a vulnerability that we share as humans, and he compels us to respond to it with courage.

Cultures — forms of life and the means by which the individuals who participate in them understand themselves, their lives, and what it is to live well (an entire network of descriptive and evaluative concepts) — are susceptible to historical forces and ultimate collapse. Plenty Coups appreciates the devastation to Crow culture and yet, he does not despair or nostalgically retreat into Crow traditions. With a reputation for courage — an organizing principle of the Crow psyche — when the white people arrived, Plenty Coups already possessed an understanding of courage and ability to be courageous that was uniquely supported by the traditional Crow way of life. However, life on the reservation threw into question the Crow's previous way of life and its concepts, so much so that if the Crow proved unable to reconstruct

these concepts in the context of a new way of life, then the subjects that they recognized themselves to be would perish at the hands of white people. Lear describes how Plenty Coups sought a new, and distinctly Crow, formulation of human flourishing by engaging meaningfully and courageously with his new reality on the reservation. He embraced farming life and encouraged the young Crow to acquire the white man's kind of education, he unified the Crow chiefs to defend the rights of their people and negotiate with the U.S. government, he used Western rituals to mark the end of traditional Crow life and initiate new rituals of mourning, and he donated his home to the U.S. government so that it might become a state park.

Lear's experience of Plenty Coups is far more common and "ordinary" than first appears; instances of pedagogical eloquence arise in relationship with friends, family, teachers, students, neighbors, poems, novels, movies, and visual imagery. Although as individuals we cannot predict which experiences will have imaginative force and inspire conceptual understanding, we remain each others' guardians of meaning.¹⁸ In the context of the classroom, dialogue should be an opportunity for students to respond to, and judge, different conceptual understandings. The vocabulary of these judgments might include the terms: "shallow," "superficial," "sentimental," "fanciful," "humane," and "deep." Such terms indicate that these judgments are neither purely cognitive nor purely emotive; they rely on feeling *and* intellect to reflect the individual's sense of what life is and should be. Such judgments reflect the conceptual understanding of the individual responsible for making them. They also require the individual to exercise concepts internal to the thought being judged — sometimes an individual's ability to do this is limited and at other times the individual discovers a standard for her/his own thinking (as in the case of Lear's relationship to Plenty Coups).

This way of understanding and practicing dialogue discloses and heightens another vulnerability central to human existence: the conceptual and ethical authority of second-person normative judgments. There is no retreat from this vulnerability into a solidarity that asserts a "built-in" human sameness, stresses our responsibility for another's radical otherness, or cultivates a sensitive regard for others' suffering. Our answerability to the normative judgments of others does not imply that these judgments are necessarily justified, accurate, or free from psychological and cultural bias. Rather, it behooves us to make and respond to these judgments, keeping in mind that the stakes are high: human identity and community. We should take these judgments seriously, exercise them considerately and cautiously, and acknowledge that they reveal as much about us as they do about others. The search for a unifying common ground is not as important as improving one's judgments and remaining in honest and ongoing communication with diverse others.

The solidarity that individuals feel when others prompt them to deepen their conceptual understanding is a gift of grace bestowed upon individuals, for which they cannot claim responsibility. Such occasions of learning and solidarity inspire individuals to persevere in their efforts to participate in a community with diverse others, in the hope that they can repeatedly receive and bestow the grace of pedagogical eloquence. This version of dialogue is distinct from Habermas's ideal

speech community, Rorty's liberal-democratic conversation, Freire's counterhegemonic praxis, and the receptive encounter of relational philosophers. It is a dialogue dedicated to gaining wisdom, speaking wisdom, and living wisely. Given the nature of such an inquiry, the wisdom gained is only as good as the language, behavior, and community it enacts.

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1. I use "cultural" as an umbrella term to cover racial, social, sexual, developmental, economic, and religious differences.
 2. Cora Diamond, "Losing Your Concepts," *Ethics* 98 (1988), 273.
 3. Nicholas Burbules identifies four types of dialogue: conversation, inquiry, debate, and instruction, in *Dialogue in Teaching: Theory and Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), 113. The dialogue that I have in mind comes closest to what he classifies as conversation: it is divergent and inclusive.
 4. Diamond, "Losing Your Concepts," 268.
 5. Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).
 6. Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 23–67.
 7. René Vincente Arcilla, *For the Love of Perfection: Richard Rorty and Liberal Education* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 141.
 8. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 189–98.
 9. Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom* (New York and London: Teachers College Press, 1988), 23.
 10. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Continuum, 2003).
 11. See Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Macmillan, 1958); Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).
 12. For a more thorough discussion of the positive criteria for genuine interpersonal receptivity that have been suggested, see Ann Chinnery, "Cold Case: Reopening the File on Tolerance in Teaching and Learning Across Difference," in *Philosophy of Education 2005*, ed. Kenneth R. Howe (Urbana, Ill: Philosophy of Education Society, 2005), 204–7.
 13. Arcilla, *For the Love of Perfection*.
 14. John Bayley, *Iris: A Memoir of Iris Murdoch* (London: Duckworth, 1998).
 15. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), 26.
 16. Diamond, "Losing Your Concepts," 266–7.
 17. I take the phrase "pedagogical eloquence" from Donald Phillip Verene, "Two Letters on Pedagogy," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 33, no. 2 (1999): 19–32.
 18. I draw the expression "guardians of meaning" from David T. Hansen, "Creativity in Teaching and Building a Meaningful Life as a Teacher," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 39, no. 2 (2005): 57–67.