

## Horizons of Listening

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I am doubly grateful for the opportunity to respond to Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon. On the one hand, I had her as a teacher for several courses when I was a doctoral student years ago at the University of Chicago. I think that, as a teacher, she models what she has argued today goes into the practice of listening. In my experience in her classroom, I never heard her jump to conclusions about a text or about a student's idea. She was a careful and patient listener to both texts and persons, and she was not hesitant to change her mind publicly. I am also pleased to have this opportunity to respond because I find the topic of listening as "the other side," so to speak, of dialogue, conversation, and communication writ large, to be both fascinating and pressing in our time, for so many reasons including the continued spectacle of a government that shows us all too well what it means not to listen.

In these brief remarks, I propose to sketch in some of the larger backdrop we might want to have in place in order to appreciate the significance of what I hear Haroutunian-Gordon trying to put on the table. If one of the aims of education is to fuel the capacity and ability of students and educators alike to listen to one another, with the complementary aim of, hopefully, fueling expanded listening in society itself, then I think it is helpful to recall that this kind of education in listening — to the extent that it takes places — is potentially going on everywhere, in all manner of ways, both inside and outside of schools and universities.

John Dewey, among others, advances this theme. He closes his well-known book, *Democracy and Education*, with the statement: "An interest in learning from all the contacts of life is the essential moral interest."<sup>1</sup> By "interest," Dewey does not mean an interchangeable possession as in the everyday economic language of "my interests" and "your interests." Rather, he means by the term a mode of engagement in and with the world. "Self and interest are two names for the same fact," he writes. "The kind and amount of interest actively taken in a thing reveals and measures the quality of selfhood which exists."<sup>2</sup> If there was more time, I think it would be pertinent to unpack each of these terms. For example, Dewey's deliberate choice of the verb "measure" alludes to Protagoras' influential and problematic claim that 'man is the measure of all things', and it corresponds with more recent claims by the likes of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty that moderns all too often do not know how to "measure" justly their very being.

The point here is that when Dewey closes his book with the words, "an interest in learning from all the contacts of life is the essential moral interest," he evokes an ideal of personhood in which a human being, by habit and by disposition, seeks to engage all that comes his or her way, the difficult and the challenging as well as the pleasant and the expected. He views this as an "essential" moral interest not because he believes in essences but because moral interest generates dynamic connections

with other persons and the world. Moreover, given Dewey's life-long engagement with the arts of communication, the capacity and ability to listen surely looms large in developing an interest in learning from all the contacts of life.

To pose the matter in the form of a question: in addition to the three modes of listening that Sophie derives from her reading of the *Theaetetus* — following or seeking to understand, resolving a question, and solving a quandary, modes which she associates with a challenge to one or more of a person's beliefs — are there other, perhaps related modes of listening that can fuel the cultivation of what Dewey calls moral interest?

For example, what is the mode of listening appropriate when persons are faced with a predicament? In other words, when they are faced not with a need to follow a line of talk until it is understood, or with a question which admits of a resolution, or with a quandary that allows for a solution, but rather when confronting an existential situation in which people perhaps understand each other all too well but cannot find a remedy or resolution. The predicament persists — as predicaments, as contrasted with problems, tend to do — despite people's best but ultimately fallible and limited capacities and abilities. Such predicaments may have to do with permanently inadequate resources to pursue multiple goods, with the dynamics of personality as bound up with differences in outlook (for example, in a family or in a faculty), and more. In theory it may be possible simply to exit the scene. However, if people do not want to leave, or if they have nowhere else to do, they must dwell together. Consequently, if the human condition leads persons, as Ralph Waldo Emerson once put, to be often "strangely mis-timed," what is the mode of listening that will permit them to carry on despite that all too real and all too unavoidable predicament? It seems to me the quality and shape of listening in such circumstances, to the extent that it has to be done and is done, has consequences for a society's way of life.

What about listening within practices, ranging from nursing, to doctoring, to lawyering? In particular, what are the modes of listening appropriate for teachers? I appreciate Sophie's choice of example in her address because of its pedagogical dimensions, and also because, as she says, it has a simplicity to it. Her point is not that the example is simple or simplistic, of course, but rather that it gives us access, as she demonstrated, to some of the complexities built into speaking and listening. Sophie focused on Theaetetus' listening, but she also hints that Socrates is listening in turn, although how well he is seems to me to constitute yet another element in the dialogue open to interpretation. (You will recall that this dialogue is where Socrates, in a celebrated way, describes himself as a midwife to others' ideas — but also, in a less celebrated way, speaks of his propensity for talking with others as a disease.) It seems to be true that any second grade, tenth grade, or university teacher who wants to engage students in some interactive manner is immediately faced with questions about the constitution of listening in those contexts. And when we ask, What is pedagogical listening? I think we must refer to more than the three modes that Sophie highlighted in her example — following and comprehending, resolving questions, or solving quandaries — although all of those modes surely (or, it is hoped) happen in abundance in classrooms.

For example, what does it mean to listen for signs of a student's genuine question in his or her groping voice in the midst of a class, or in the hallway after class in those intense short minutes before teacher and student must go their separate ways, or in a faculty office? It may not be so much "following or comprehending" that's going on here, although that's an element, as it may be what Iris Murdoch calls attending:<sup>3</sup> trying to be attuned to the student, which means putting oneself in a position to discern, identify, and recognize the student's genuine question when it emerges (if it emerges). To take a related example, what does it mean to listen for the tone in a student's voice as he or she responds to a classmate's idea — perhaps a classmate with whom he or she quarreled angrily the day before in class? Moreover, what kind of listening on the part of the teacher is required, or called out, in order to respond to a student who says something offensive or hurtful to others, or to a student who says something inspiring and beautiful? Finally, consider an example from the classroom of a twelfth grade English teacher in which my colleague at Teachers College, Chris Higgins, and I recently spent ten consecutive days observing. This teacher says very little. His students are quite able and tend to talk up a storm about the literature they are reading. He does break in at particular moments with a question to a student or about the discussion thus far, or with a comment to a student or to the class as a whole, or to suggest the class read a passage. I think it is a useful question to ask what manner of listening this is that he is engaged in; the mode he enacts is complicated and somehow generative. The bottom line is that modes of listening in practices like teaching seem to have a bearing on the prospects for listening in and for a democratic society, since these practices are woven into the very fabric of such a society.

In addition to the terrain of predicaments and practices, what is the mode of listening appropriate to the sheer fact of being alive, to there being human beings, oneself and others, in the first place, beings who can and often do dwell together meaningfully even if at times fitfully or intermittently, as may be the best humans can aspire to? Posed differently, what is the mode of listening that accompanies wonder? Here I would include wonder at the way another person has shaped a phrase or idea, wonder at the emotion in a voice, wonder at the gesture that accompanies a word, wonder at the wonder on the face of the other person. This kind of listening might seem appropriate for artists, and perhaps especially poets, as when Rainer Maria Rilke says the following in a poem that constitutes, among other things, a consideration of how to listen in order to have something truthful about the world to say:

Voices. Voices. Listen, my heart, as only  
saints have listened: until the gigantic call lifted  
them off the ground; yet they kept on, impossibly,  
kneeling and didn't notice at all:  
so complete was their listening. Not that you could endure *God's*  
voice — far from it. But listen to the voice of  
the wind and the ceaseless message that forms itself  
out of silence.<sup>4</sup>

These lines are from the first Duino Elegy, and it seems to me significant that Rilke foregrounds there the place of listening rather than of speaking in the task of writing

poetry. The remaining nine elegies can be understood as what he has, so to speak, “heard,” in part by disciplining himself to pay heed to the world. And when Rilke refers to listening with his heart, rather than with his head, he points toward a mode of response to the sheer fact of human being, with all its reverberations for responding to concrete others.

A very different writer but from the same part of the world, Vaclav Havel, suggested in a speech last fall in New York City that he had drawn the lesson from his career that a poet of democracy should insist on making himself heard in politics, but cannot expect democracy to become a poem.<sup>5</sup> So it seems. I agree with Haroutunian-Gordon that when a person is challenged in the course of dialogue with others, the challenge may help set the stage for a generative change in belief via the modes of listening she calls following and understanding, resolving a question, or solving a quandary. I have sought to complement that perspective by suggesting that the modes of listening that are called out by predicaments, that are called out by practices like teaching, and that are called out by the experience of being, all play their role in the emergence of what Dewey says at the close of his *Democracy and Education*: “An interest in learning from all the contacts of life is the essential moral interest.”

Just as Sophie underscores the indispensability of other perspectives for the growth of our own thinking æ thereby lessening what she calls our ambivalence toward difference — so I hear in Dewey’s closing words an evocation of a sense of gratitude, and perhaps of awe, that we human beings can have contact with one another in the first place — a fact that despite its endless attendant difficulties and complexities remains, for all of that, a wondrous, poetic event.

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1. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 360.

2. *Ibid.*, 126.

3. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970).

4. *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage, 1982), 153.

5. Joseph Fitchett, “Dissident Writer’s Presidential Career Nears Poignant End,” *International Herald Tribune* (20 November 2002), 2.