

Dialogue and Its Discontents: The Cognitive and Hermeneutic Forms of Dialogue

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Delineations of dialogue within educational theory and philosophical literature often emphasize its transformative potential, whereby one is enabled to move from idiosyncratic or parochial responses and interpretations to more socially conscious and aware ones. In this essay, I examine the cognitive and hermeneutic forms of dialogue, and draw out the “fault lines” that may be evidenced in their delineations with reference to the above stated goal. I illustrate the cognitive through Ruth Grant and the hermeneutic through Rob Reich who draws on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s notion of a fusion of horizons. Each form of dialogue is linked to a particular understanding of affect that can be seen to influence educators’ understanding of how to tap into the transformative potential of students, especially in classes where issues of social justice and difference are addressed. Broadly speaking, the affective sphere indicates the human being’s capacity for receptivity, and the phenomena of one experiencing a surrender of agency; of being moved, stirred, or excited by that which is not the self.¹ I argue that the conceptions of affect within the cognitive and hermeneutic forms of dialogue are limited in that the movement of the not-self can be seen to revert back to the self or the Same, resulting in educators envisioning their educational arrangements and pedagogies in ways that may elide or stunt their students’ transformative potential.² My purpose is not to argue for a wholesale rejection of dialogue as a means to facilitate students’ transformative capacity, but to merely map out some of the difficulties for a transformative education with the above two forms of dialogue.

THE COGNITIVE FORM OF DIALOGUE

Typifying the emphasis on the cognitive, Ruth Grant, in her essay “The Ethics of Talk: Classroom Conversation and Democratic Politics,” posits that dialogue can make people better.³ She characterizes dialogue through the terms of logical activity and appraisal, where dialogue indicates following the dictates of reason, listening while others are speaking, critically evaluating different opinions, making distinctions, putting forth evidence with a view to reaching agreement on what comes forth as most reasonable, taking responsibility for one’s statements and opinions by supplying reasons and evidence for one’s views, and acting autonomously in terms of being “governed by an internal submission to reason,” which indicates yielding not to one’s conversation partner, but to the “unforced force” of the better argument.⁴ Grant emphasizes that the “rationalism” inherent in dialogue, unlike other “isms” opens up the possibilities for persuasion and conversation, rather than closing them down. Educators interested in cultivating the transformative capacities of their students may turn to the strategy that is implied by Grant’s conception of dialogue. They may emphasize that students follow the dictates of reason; they would have them critically evaluate different opinions, make distinctions, supply reasons and

evidence for their views, and accept the obligation to yield to the “unforced force” of the better argument.

However, utilizing Grant’s conception of dialogue is problematic if the goal is to open up students’ horizons to new or more responsive ways of being and thinking. The problem can be delineated on the basis of how affect is conceived of in this conception. The language of affect is evidenced through the “unforced force” of the better argument, where one is *moved*, *affected*, or *stirred* by the facts and evidence that back up one’s interlocutor’s statements and opinions, persuading one to accept the view or argument put forth. Corroborating this language of affect, Grant states, “Dialogue at its “best” is a self-effacing, self-forgetting experience — one gets lost in it and forgets the time. It is completely absorbing.”⁵ The experience of dialogue appears to involve a certain passivity and receptive capacity in the subject. One is moved by what is seemingly outside of one — the logic, facts, or evidence that are not determined by one’s own views, desires, or interests, which one might understand as the not-self. Further, part of the “unforced force” could indicate what S.K. Langer called the “‘feelings’ of symbolic activity,” such as “strain and expectation, vagueness and clearness, ease and frustration, [and the] ‘sense of rightness’ that closes a finished thought process.”⁶ After all, Grant emphasizes that one of the demands of dialogue is that one give reasons that others may find *plausible*.⁷ Our sense of what is plausible speaks precisely to our sense of an argument’s clearness, rightness, or to the ease with which it may be understood.

However, for the transformative capacity of students to be tapped, it is not enough that dialogue “move” one on the basis of the level of logic, facts, or feelings of symbolic activity. Why this should be the case may be exhibited if we imagine the following scenario of a dialogue about the justness of the death penalty. Interlocutors who lean toward the view that the death penalty is unjust, may cite statistics showing that a certain percentage of people who were put to death were later exonerated for the crimes; they may cite statistics that show the death penalty does not serve as a deterrent to crime; they may show evidence of redemptive capacity in criminals; they may argue on the basis of all human beings’ inalienably equal right to live to their natural term; they may highlight the racial disparity evidenced in the numbers of those who are executed.⁸ Those who lean toward the view that the death penalty is just may point to the incontrovertible fact that the condemned has been charged or convicted with a capital crime and is responsible for the willful death and suffering of others; they may point to the utilitarian argument that the execution of innocents, while a miscarriage of justice, does not warrant the abolition of the death penalty if the moral advantages of it (such as the saving of many innocent lives) outweigh the possible death of a few “innocent bystanders.” After all, the reasoning goes, human activities such as medicine, manufacturing, automobile and air traffic, sports, wars, and revolutions, all cause the death of innocent bystanders, yet they are still morally justified on the basis of their advantages outweighing the disadvantages; they may cite statistics that show there are deterrent effects of the death penalty; they may argue that the work of justice requires a distinction to be made between the worth of the life of a murderer and an innocent victim.⁹

What could the “unforced force” of the better argument mean in a conversation such as the above? If part of the criteria of the better argument is the “moving” and felt power of its logic, facts, evidence, and coherence, then it seems that opposing points of view often have an arsenal of the aforementioned for each to lay their claim as the better argument. Grant’s premise is that in dialogue even when we do not desire it, as rational beings we may be compelled to recognize the truth of our interlocutor’s argument. The moving power of the “unforced force” of the better argument is based on the assumption of one being a rational being who potentially has access to the same truths as all rational others. However, the problem with Grant’s assumption is that it does not account for the possibility that the sphere of logic, facts, and evidence is polyphonic and thus can be used to effectively and persuasively argue for views that do not point to the same truths. An argument’s moving power can flow from and remain circumscribed to each interlocutor’s embeddedness within certain social, cultural, or even generational contexts. In the dialogue about the death penalty, the evidence that “criminals may have redemptive capacity” may provide for one a compelling force for viewing the death penalty as unjust if it coheres with one’s broader worldview, one that may, for example, attach great importance to one’s religious beliefs. In contrast, the above evidence may not provide a compelling force for viewing the death penalty as unjust if one’s broader worldview is oriented towards a conception of justice as an “eye for an eye.” Thus, the “unforced force” of an argument would seem to derive its moving power not on the basis of one being a rational being who has the potential to access truths accessible by rational others, but because one already shares the framework or world view from which one’s interlocutor speaks. The transformative potential that is assumed to flow from one yielding to the “unforced force” of the better argument is put into question precisely because, in the end, one can still be seen to be moved by the self or the Same. In other words, though one may have in some form added to one’s viewpoint, such an addition can be seen to still fit in with one’s original worldview. Moreover, it could very well be the case that one’s sense of an argument’s rightness, clearness, vagueness, and so on, is indicative of one being moved by one’s habitual ways of viewing things.

Consequently, in educational settings, with a cognitive conception of dialogue, how one sets up teaching and learning situations may be narrowed. The focus on getting students to accept the obligation to yield to the “unforced force” of the better argument may serve to debilitate the educational process in the following ways. Educators may jettison or not recognize the need to at times trouble their own and their students’ social or cultural assumptions that color their very sense of rightness or clearness that drives their acceptance of an argument, or their very sense of frustration and strain that drives their rejection of it. Moreover, to maintain a heavy focus on getting students to provide reasons and evidence for their positions during class discussions may serve to ignore an integral part of the ethical dimension of classroom interaction — fulfilling one’s response-ability to the other in terms of one’s ability to be responsive to the other. Drawing on my own experiences as a student and teacher, I have noticed that students versed in the overriding expectation

of providing evidence and reasons for their positions too often focus all their attention on how best to cogently put forth their views, merely using what others say as a springboard to clarify their own views, or ignoring what others say altogether. Such a singular focus debilitates the educational process by truncating the possibility of students deeply listening to each other.

THE HERMENEUTIC FORM OF DIALOGUE

Rob Reich references dialogue within the context of a liberal multicultural education as it is exhibited through the concern for addressing issues of social justice and difference through a hermeneutical pedagogy. Dialogue is described as taking place through the terms of comparative cultural study that occurs through “actual conversation between individuals” as well as through encounters with a “text, picture, or film.”¹⁰ Drawing on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s notion of a fusion of horizons, Reich argues that the pedagogy of liberal multicultural education “seeks to expand the interpretive and experiential horizons of individuals, aiming in the end to cultivate a cosmopolitan outlook in each student.”¹¹ By cosmopolitan outlook, we can understand Reich to mean a perspective that does not remain within the subjective sphere of either the other or oneself, but attains to a higher universality, and thus as that which is transformative. Reich aims to foster a fusion of horizons in students through their intellectual engagement with cultural diversity. He thus assumes the workings of a hermeneutic sensibility, as described by Gadamer, where prereflective understanding, that is, where one initially projects a field of meaning based on one’s cultural biases, is awakened and critically examined through encounters that challenge one’s foremeanings. In the hermeneutical pedagogy of liberal multicultural education, students study and try to understand cultural values or practices different from their own. But this indicates that students open themselves to the potential truth of other points of view and try to grasp meaning from the point of view of the other. This requires, as Reich states, “interpretive generosity that precludes knee jerk assessments of other cultures, cultural practices, or cultural products from one’s own point of view.”¹² But what exactly happens when we try to grasp meaning from the point of view of the other? In Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, such an experience is described through the terms of “being brought up short” by the text, as undergoing experience as *erfahrung*, an event that changes the person who undergoes it.¹³ The idea signified by Gadamer’s language of being “brought up short by the text” is implicitly assumed in Reich’s very description of the process of understanding that is initiated by the hermeneutical pedagogy of a liberal multicultural education. But as such, Reich retains the aspects of Gadamer’s thought that are problematic for positing the engagement of individuals’ transformative capacity. To see why a hermeneutical pedagogy cannot be unproblematically linked to transformative experiences for students, it is instructive to first briefly review and explore what Gadamer means by “being brought up short by the text,” and thus by undergoing experience as *erfahrung*.

For Gadamer, one may be “brought up short” by the text, where text indicates any literature, work of art, or what others say, when one’s anticipated meaning does not conform with what is presented in it. One is thus compelled to revise what one

thought the text meant. Such an experience is illuminated through the intransitive conception of play (relating to games, art, or drama), and it is here that affective phenomena is illustrated.¹⁴

All playing, for Gadamer, is a “being-played.” This indicates that we move in a certain nonautonomous, nonpurposive way, engrossed not on our intentions, but in the game’s moves, what it calls out from us or asks of us. Correlatively, to be “brought up short” by the text indicates that we do not blindly read into the text our own set views, conclusions, or standards, but let ourselves be directed by the text itself on how to interpret it. Our interpretive activity flows with the movement of the text’s own logic: fully engrossed in the text, we move with the contours of what calls for our response, of what takes hold of or seizes our attention. The assumption here is that our experience of the world is not just circumscribed to being mediated through our subjective leanings and tastes, but may be formed through direct contact with objects. But this direct contact with objects does not mean that the text is just there, fully formed, but as will become clearer further below, is there through our “production” of it. It will be within this productive aspect of hermeneutics that we will locate the grounds of our criticism of the transformative potential of a hermeneutical pedagogy.

Second, when we are “played,” there is a rupture, identity-wise, and transformation into something wholly else. What falls to the wayside is the identity of the person who takes on the role of player, (as actor, poet, composer, or playwright), and what is brought to the forefront is that which is represented or meant through the playing.¹⁵ Likewise, with the experience of “being brought up short,” the interlocutor’s or reader’s identity, values, or set of beliefs fades into the background and what matters is what arises from the movement of the conversation or reading, a movement which interrogates the stability and sameness of the self.

Finally, in play (exemplified especially through tragic drama), there occurs a rupture, perspective-wise, from where one was before. We as spectators are “played” in the sense of being taken out of everyday life not as an adventure, which is a temporary interruption of the customary course of events through transportation to some foreign place, and from which we eventually return to our ordinary lives, but rather, as that which brings us to a higher insight that authentically deepens our continuity with ourselves at a level different than where we were previously: as one who can now affirm certain truths previously hidden.¹⁶ Correlatively, to be brought up short by the text indicates that we are taken out of our everyday way of looking at things and brought into a way of seeing things that still resonates with us, yet essentially changes the framework with which we approach the text and the world.

Thus, what undergoing experience as *erfahrung* indicates is that it is only through affect as being moved through the tension and play between the familiar and alien do we make meaning and know the meaningful nature of things. Understanding does not take place when one blindly imposes one’s biases on the text or cultural field, nor does it take place when one effaces oneself and one’s interests and “puts oneself in the other’s shoes,” precisely because one cannot efface oneself and one’s

interests. Gadamer emphasizes the human beings' finite historical mode of being: always already finding ourselves as part of a tradition that is ongoing, not all of our biases can be thematized or brought to transparency. Hermeneutic inquiry indicates that while we follow the "logic" of the text, which opens up for us new vistas, we concomitantly make sense of these new vistas through the familiar. But, for Gadamer, the familiar is not necessarily synonymous with the parochial. What is familiar may show itself to us incrementally, through its variegated faces, all on the basis of what suggests a relation to it, thus retaining aspects of the not-self. An example may make the above notion clearer.

Let us say a Westerner is in conversation with another who adheres to the value of wearing the Muslim *niqab* (face veil). The former may enter the conversation with the view that the *niqab* symbolizes the oppression, voicelessness, powerlessness, and denigration of women in certain societies. However, by following the flow of the conversation (instead of leading it by asserting the rightness of one's views or insisting on certain points of emphasis or definitions), the Westerner learns the history of the practice of wearing the veil and encounters the view that for many Muslim women the *niqab* is a source of empowerment, signifying values of modesty and privacy. How could the Westerner understand the above three conceptions in the context of a non-liberal worldview? On the tenets of hermeneutical understanding, the notions of "empowerment," "modesty," and "privacy" in relation to the wearing of the *niqab* could only be understood through their application in relation to the whole of one's own meanings, that is, what is available to one through the stock of values, beliefs, and practices through which one makes sense of the world. The important point, however, is that by letting the "to and fro" of the conversation lead one, even the "familiar," the stock of values and beliefs with which I make sense of what I follow, may undergo change or expansion and thus retain its moving force as a form of the not-self. Accordingly, one may have originally understood empowerment to signify values and acts that raise one's self-esteem and speak against the internalization of shame. Thus part of the conceptualization of empowerment may have been linked with the idea of the freedom to show the "beauty" of one's body. However, on the basis of the "to and fro" of conversation, the Westerner may draw on other sites of meaning available to her, such as feminist or critical theory, which resituates the freedom to show one's body as contributing to the objectification of women. Here the notion of empowerment could then be tied to the emancipatory potential that is perceived through notions of modesty and privacy. Further, the very meaning of modesty and privacy could then be informed by some sense of the foreign other's portrayal of modesty and privacy. In this manner, the familiar is something that is produced, not just something there like an object, already externally given, developing without the input of human will or consciousness. Hence, it is precisely through the tension and play between the familiar and alien (the fusion of horizons) that purportedly each interlocutor's horizon of interpretation and evaluation is broadened, and a new, improved, and potentially common perspective that does not remain within any of the interlocutors' narrow subjective sphere may be attained.

However, Reich's hermeneutical pedagogy, which assumes the workings of a hermeneutic sensibility that can lead toward the productive and expansive movement of the familiar, proves to be problematic for establishing the engagement of individuals' transformative potential. Often times the familiar's repertoire may be limited such that what is foreign may not be able to lend itself to a relation with the evolution or any of the permutations of the familiar that could become available to one. Numerous voices in feminist theory, critical theory, post-colonial thought, and educational theory, attest to the possibility and existence of such a limitation based on the untranslatability or foreclosure of texts, reinstating the hermeneutical process as that which subsumes affective phenomena to the self.¹⁷ But it is important to note here that the possibility of foreclosure or untranslatability among texts can still be contested, based on a rebuttal found in hermeneutics itself. For Gadamer, "the basic nature of everything toward which understanding can be directed" is language.¹⁸ The familiar, which is interchangeable with Gadamer's notion of tradition, is essentially verbal in character. For Gadamer, there are three significant aspects of language.¹⁹ First, language has a speculative mode of being, that is, saying something always implies or means more than is said: the said refers to the unsaid, or the finite refers to the infinite.²⁰ Second, meaning is that which is experienced without relying on any author's or audience's intention and can be "experienced even where it is not the conscious intention of the author."²¹ Thus, the unsaid is that which in all situations is potentially linguistically accessible and intelligible for us. Third, not all of one's prejudgments can be thematized or brought to transparency due to human beings' finite historical mode of being. Therefore, the "unsaid" that may come to view on reflection as the "said," will never present to one a complete knowledge of all its meanings, but will always be partial. The above three aspects indicate that due to the polysemy of texts and productivity of language, the familiar's permutations are so open ended that it is conceivable that some time in the future it could lend itself to a relation with the foreign. If the "unsaid" can always be potentially experienced, yet once experienced cannot be enclosed into the "said," then the reality of foreclosure is undercut, and language can never be completely colonized by ideological distortion. Reich also acknowledges this Gadamerian emphasis on the open-endedness of the familiar's permutations.²²

Nevertheless, even the above rejoinder does not get us very far if we grasp the nature of the concerns that often pervade a classroom where issues of social justice and difference are addressed and taught. Here, addressing such issues is tied to a sense of urgency in that we take action now, acknowledge now, address now, issues, for example, of content inclusion, inclusion or exclusion of religious beliefs, or culturally sensitive pedagogical practices. It is the call to revisit, rethink, and perhaps destabilize, in this present moment, not at some future time, the immersion in the social, cultural, and political status quo. Notions of respect, recognition, identity, cultural, and even moral survival that are intertwined with issues such as the above, have something about them that are intrinsically pressing. If one waits too long to re-visit them with "fresh eyes," then one can argue that in some form justice has been withheld. Therefore, even if, as Gadamer holds, and as Reich implies, that

due to the polysemy of texts and productivity of language, the familiar's permutations are so open ended that some time in the future it could possibly lend itself to a relation with the foreign, how can such a process help right now those who are marginalized, dominated, or disenfranchised? The process that marks hermeneutic understanding, while not necessarily closed off from a relation with the foreign, can proceed for a very long time without a relation with the foreign. While the familiar's expansion may lend itself to variegated meanings, all those meanings may, for the time being, remain resistant to the foreign due to the particular social, cultural, and political climate, or ethos of a society at a particular time. Consequently, dialogue understood through the terms of comparative cultural study that is to proceed on the basis of a "fusion of horizons," may not be able to tap into the transformative potential of students for long periods of time as the linguistically based relation with the different may be provisionally foreclosed.

I have pointed to the limitations that arise for an education that strives to be transformative when dialogue is linked to affect understood as being moved by the unforced force of the better argument as in the cognitive form, or the play of the familiar and alien that is sustained by language as in the hermeneutic form. However, what has been left unexplored in this essay is whether there are conceptions of dialogue that operate through other conceptions of affect that may be more amenable to transformative education.

1. I derive the broad definition of affect from Francis F. Dunlop, *The Education of Feeling and Emotion* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1984).

2. The meaning of the "self" or the Same is indicated by modern western philosophical thought as it works within variations of the theme that reality is "saved" as *cogito*, that reality is something that is essentially informed by and in some form constituted or modified by the activity of the thinking self, by our conceptual schemes and structures.

3. Ruth Grant, "The Ethics of Talk: Classroom Conversation and Democratic Politics," *Teachers College Record* 97, no. 3 (1996): 471.

4. *Ibid.*, 475.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Dunlop, *The Education of Feeling and Emotion*, 36.

7. Grant, "The Ethics of Talk," 478.

8. Hugo Adam Bedau, ed., *The Death Penalty in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). Concerning the death penalty not serving as a crime deterrent, see Anthony G. Amsterdam, "Capital Punishment," 346–58. Concerning the right to live till one's natural term, see Ernest Van Den Haag, "In Defense of the Death Penalty: A Practical and Moral Analysis," 332. Concerning the racial disparity of those executed, see Marvin E. Wolfgang and Marc Riedel, "Racial Discrimination, Rape, and the Death Penalty," 194–205.

9. Concerning the bystander argument, see Van Den Haag, "In Defense of the Death Penalty," 325. Concerning the argument for the death penalty as crime deterrent, see Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. Senate, "Capital Punishment as a Matter of Legislative Policy," in *The Death Penalty in America*, ed. Bedau, 311–17.

10. Rob Reich, *Bridging Liberalism and Multiculturalism in American Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 189.

11. *Ibid.*, 184.

12. *Ibid.*, 185.
13. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 2d rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1998), 346–62.
14. *Ibid.*, 101–34.
15. *Ibid.*, 111–12.
16. *Ibid.*, 133.
17. See, for example, Allison Jones, “Talking Cure: The Desire for Dialogue,” in *Democratic Dialogue in Education*, ed. Megan Boler (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 57–67; Huey Li Li, “Rethinking Silencing Silences,” in *Democratic Dialogue in Education*, ed. Boler, 69–85; Susan Mendus, “Toleration and Recognition,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 29, no.2 (1995); and Gayatri C. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.
18. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 474.
19. Matthew Foster, *Gadamer and Practical Philosophy* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1991).
20. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 469.
21. *Ibid.*, 282.
22. Reich, *Bridging Liberalism and Multiculturalism*, 188.