Communion or Conversation? A Response to Rowe and Rocha

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It is a pleasure to comment on Brad Rowe and Sam Rocha's thought-provoking essay. Because I enjoyed reading and pondering their work, I am glad to have this opportunity to ask them to elaborate further its line of thinking. Basically, I am quite sympathetic to what I can understand of their concerns and proposals. My response, then, is mostly a request that they spell out a bit more the motivation behind the essay's main claim and consider whether a small revision of it might strengthen its appeal.

Rowe and Rocha's thesis appears to be that we should modify how we understand the nature of the relations that constitute education. I admit I am a bit nervous about this quite abstract way of putting things, since the kinds of relations to which they are referring are left unstated and remain rather vague to me. Are we talking about the relations between teacher and pupil, between politician and parent, between books and the objects of their discussion, between books and their student commentaries, or between books and other commodities? Is there really something that is both common and central to all these links that is distinctly and substantively educational? I am not sure—but I am willing to go along with this surmise for the sake of argument. At any event, theirs is that in order to affirm the dictum "no education without relation" more clearly and confidently, we should understand the latter term in an Emersonian fashion. They suggest we do this by following the path of Emerson's own intellectual development, which moves from a conception that stresses the "not-me" to one that stresses the "other me."

What is the difference between these two ways of understanding relation? The first focuses on the line that separates me, or any other self, from the external world that is largely beyond my control. Such a line opens up a stage for all the characteristic dramas of stoicism and its long aftermath, from Epictetus, to Descartes, to Kant. The second conception of relation focuses

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instead on the diverse lines that entangle me, or again, any other self, with all other beings. These lines cross and virtually erase the line of separation; they dissolve the first conception's emphasis on twoness into a oneness experienced as communion. Rowe and Rocha evidently want educators at the very least to acknowledge this communion as a central condition of possibility for their project, and perhaps furthermore to celebrate it explicitly in their work.

How should we respond to this proposal? I do not think it unfair to say that some of us may need to be more convinced of two points: first, that communion, in Rowe and Rocha's sense, is indeed the best way to understand our relations to other beings, and second, that this communion is in particular truly vital to the project of education. Presumably because of space constraints, Rowe and Rocha devote themselves in their essay mainly to exposition rather than to persuasion. They recount how Emerson revised his understanding of the not-me as a way of articulating the distinctiveness of the other-me relation. I accept their reading of his texts. But they beg the question of why we should follow Emerson. Specifically, they do not explain why pursuing his thinking in our very different, current situation would enable us to respond better to one or another problem that Emerson may never have had to contend with.

An account that does this would have to anticipate and reply to as wide a range of possible objections as possible. Because I have even less space than Rowe and Rocha, I will not even try to offer one here. As a stopgap, though, perhaps I can at least point to two contemporary concerns that may help establish the pertinence of their thesis.

One has to do with the intensifying divisiveness of our polity, which may be fueled by the continuing atomization of our society. Even as the us-them relation in politics becomes ever more brazen and ruthless, the rights that all sides appeal to become harder and harder to distinguish from simple self-assertion. So, at least, it can seem to some, which of course incites further polarization. If we grant that this is indeed a problem, then anything that can help us not lose sight of the fact that rights are rooted in a concern for the virtually infinite extent of society, and not for a particular "us," would be a valuable intervention. In this light, Rowe and Rocha's proposal that emphasizes lines of connection over difference may indeed be educational for our time.

This argument amounts to a negative critique of the not-me relation. On top of that, Rowe and Rocha more positively address a second concern: that of the widespread indifference among us to the nonhuman world and the environmental crisis that is threatening our planet's life. As long as this apathy and ostrich head-ducking persists, being encouraged by narrow and short-sighted interest groups, it is likely that attention to this crisis will be confined to protecting the welfare of humans who are already family to us. Even if such a response were not morally objectionable, it seems doomed to be practically ineffectual. More promising as a way to awaken a comprehensive sense of the gravity of the crisis, and to spur us into action that meets the real scale of its challenges, then, is an opening to the other, biologically diverse "mes." This perspective likewise educates us by encouraging us to identify with the beings who are already in peril at the crisis's front lines.

A reason, therefore, that we should follow Rowe and Rocha, and Emerson, in deemphasizing the not-me relation in favor of the other-me one is that doing so enables us to address in a more educationally effective way two contemporary challenges: first, the intensifying atomization and divisiveness of our society, and second, this society's indifference to an environmental crisis whose initial victims are nonhuman. I wonder if Rowe and Rocha would agree that spelling out this reason makes it clearer how their thinking addresses an audience marked by certain common concerns. Indeed, it connects the "us" formed by Rowe and Rocha to this audience—which may include you as well as me—precisely as an "other us."

But at this juncture a question occurs to me: is this relation best described as "communion," as "oneness"? My doubts presumably differentiate me from Rowe and Rocha, who write as if they have no such qualms. Does this difference, this lack of sureness on my part, matter in our relation? To be plain, I am affirming that we *are* related and not simply separated; this is why I understand myself to be writing in sympathy with their project. What happens, though, when our dialogue is interrupted by a question concerning one of its essential terms, such as "communion," "relation," or "education"? What exactly becomes of the "us"? The "me"?

To examine this issue, consider a classic moment in Plato that arguably

gives birth to the very discipline and millennia-old tradition of philosophy. An ambitious and confident young man, Meno, who is keen for debate, asks the elder Socrates about whether virtue can be taught. The latter replies, "I am so far from knowing whether virtue can be taught or not that I do not even have any knowledge of what virtue itself is."[1] As most of us of course recollect, Socrates goes on to expose that Meno too is ignorant of what virtue is. This shocks the latter because much of his dignity, his "me-ness," rests on his sense of himself as a virtue expert. When Socrates leads him into a state of aporia, of being at a loss, then, he cannot help but turn in anger on this tricky torpedo fish. At that point, their dialogue is on the verge of breaking down, as is anything like a relation connecting them.

That it does not is due to Socrates' insistence that it is precisely this lostness which may hold them together. They may search cooperatively for what is lacking in them both. The point I want to underscore is that the lack Socrates acknowledges he shares with Meno goes beyond ignorance of the true nature of virtue. I also hear Socrates realizing once more, and admitting to his partner in dialogue, that he too is far from being a complete self. It is as if when he sees Meno ready to walk away in a huff, he recollects times when he was that young man's age and accordingly followed suit, and how that brought him nowhere. That you cannot pursue self-knowledge on your own is indeed by now for us a truism. Perhaps a less familiar point, though, and one especially germane to our discussion, is that this self-knowledge concerns the lack of self we share. Even this formulation, however, may be misleading because it makes it seem that the lack is something like a congenital condition that we are simply born with. Obscured is the crystallizing eventfulness of Meno and Socrates running into each other. Maybe, then, we can put the moral of their aporetic moment together in this way: when we appear to each other as a radical question, we become each other's ill-fitting piece that reminds us the puzzle of our singular and communal lives remains equally unfinished.

Granted, this account of Meno's and Socrates' philosophical encounter is terribly sketchy and needs much more interpretive detail and argumentative engagement with other readings to be convincing. I offer it simply as the start of a reason to be hesitant about how Rowe and Rocha characterize educational

relation. Yes, Meno and Socrates are in some sort of relation at this moment in the dialogue. But is it best described as one in which each views the other as an other "me"? My contrasting suggestion is that they understand they cannot be "me's" at all because they are tangled up with pieces of each other. They are not one, they are partial. They do not commune, they participate in a conversation that is bound to solicit even more interruptive participants. Rowe and Rocha quote Emerson approvingly: "Nothing but God is self-dependent." I draw a divergent conclusion: the deconstruction of our experience of self-dependence means that God, or the conversation, must be understood in radically different terms. To put it somewhat fancifully, perhaps the god of this process is much less Emersonian, or Spinozan, than dialogically Bakhtinian through and through.

Now some may be wondering at this point if the difference between Rowe and Rocha, and I, is not merely verbal. Am I balking at their offer of communion simply out of defensive narcissism? I hope not—but of course the fact that the welcoming of an other "me" can plausibly feel to some like a threatening expansion of someone else's "me" should give us pause. This concern connects to the two others that I suggested may motivate Rowe and Rocha's thinking. Could the worry that their conception of relation grows out of an expansive "me" hamper their capacity to address the roots of the problem of social atomization and divisiveness? Could it hamper their capacity to recognize nonhuman beings that challenge our central sense of what is important?

These are my friendly questions to Rowe and Rocha. If they find anything valid about these concerns, they may want to consider revising their account of our relatedness so that it develops more explicitly out of the realization of the impossibility of being a "me." What relates us would be a conversation that is perpetually mixing together, and mixing up, its expanding participants. Even as our pretensions to selfhood, or to self-like community, are comically subverted, our responsiveness to each other may become more sensitive and serious, more philosophical. We may grow more used to the idea that the surprise of the other is part of what is precious about life. Hopefully, that could help pull us through the daunting times ahead.

1 Plato, *Meno*, in *Five Dialogues*, Second Edition, trans. G. M. A. Grube, Rev. John M. Cooper (Hackett: Indianapolis, 2002), 71a.