

# “Notes on Dialogue”



By Stringfellow Barr, Frederic Clarke Putnam, and Ali Schwab

## Notes on Dialogue<sup>1</sup>

by Stringfellow Barr

Perhaps the first obstacle to writing even these random notes on dialogue is that the very word, "dialogue", has been temporarily turned into a *cliché*. Everybody is loudly demanding dialogue, and there is not much evidence that most of us are prepared to carry one on. Indeed, to borrow a traditional phrase from professional diplomats, conversations have deteriorated. But both radio and television, whether public or commercial, remind us daily that a lonely crowd hungers for dialogue, not only for the dialogue of theatre but also for the dialogue of the discussion program.

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There is a pathos in television dialogue: the rapid exchange of monologues that fail to find the issue, like ships passing in the night; the reiterated preface, "I think that ...," as if it mattered who held which opinion rather than which opinion is worth holding; the impressive personal vanity that prevents each "discussant" from really listening to another speaker and that compels him to use this God-given pause to compose his own next monologue; the further vanity, or instinctive caution, that leads him to choose very long words, whose true meaning he has never grasped, rather than short words that he understands but that would leave the emptiness of his point of view naked and exposed to a mass public. There is pathos in the meaningless gestures: the extended chopping hands, fingers rigidly held parallel and together, the rigid wayward thumb pointing to heaven. A knowledgeable theatrical director would cringe at these gestures and would perhaps faint when the extended palms, one held in front of the other, are made to revolve rapidly around each other, thereby imitating and emphasizing the convolutions of a mind that races like a motor not in gear. And Mrs. Malaprop herself would cringe at those long, wayward words, so much at cross purpose with the intent of the speakers. Or at the academic speaker's strings of adjacent nouns, where all but the last noun modify adjectivally either the last noun or the nearest noun—it is anybody's guess. We are all suffocating intellectually, not from the ungrammatical language of Cassius Clay<sup>2</sup>, which is gutsy, forceful and eloquent. We are suffocating from a *fausse élégance* that scorns the honest, clear, four-letter word. And quite aside from the obscene ones, hundreds of splendid four-letter words are waiting to work for us. Is it possible that we discussants are oppressed by a subconscious suspicion that we are really saying precisely nothing, and that this nothing will stand up as conversation only if we say it elaborately? Is it this suspicion that forces us to speak in what our learned jargon recently christened "jargonese?" "Yoono Chinese, Japanese; well I am now speaking, yoono, jargonese." Our failure at dialogue is building a Tower, of yoono, Babel.

Nevertheless, back of this tormenting, and tormented, babble is a ghost we cannot lay, the ghost of dialogue. We yearn, not always consciously, to commune with other persons, to learn with them by joint search. This joint labor to understand would be even more exciting than the multiplication of our gross national product or the improvement of our national defense or even than the elimination of war from the face of the earth. For we can never live wholly human lives without a genuine converse between men.

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We human animals yearn so deeply to converse that we have discovered, or imagined, that the whole universe shares our longing, that the whole universe is not only "in labor," but "in dialogue." The epics of Hindu and ancient Greek alike, the sacred scriptures both of Jew and Christian, abound in dialogue between God, or the gods, and man. The heroic effort to achieve political democracy was an effort to increase dialogue between men, while that master of dialogue, Socrates, sought with Apollo at Delphi and died rather than cease from asking his fellow-Athenians awkward, important questions. We human animals are wistfully anxious to engage non-human animals in dialogue; we are persistent disciples of Aesop. Our children's books are crowded with talking animals and the

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<sup>1</sup>Downloaded from <http://www.stjohnscollege.edu/about/dialogue.shtml> (accessed 9 October 2008). Adapted by Frederic Clarke Putnam.

<sup>2</sup>The name of the boxer Muhammed Ali before his conversion to Islam.

same children talk confidently to domestic animals. How could they not feel confidence, they who have so recently passed from the status of dumb animals to the status of animals in dialogue? Our scientists try to understand the language of dolphins. On the other hand, they do not stop at possible dialogue with the animate; at least, metaphorically, their experiments question inanimate matter. So deep is the human faith in inquiry. Before we resent or reject the idea that the scientist is "in dialogue" with the object or objects he investigates, let us observe that, like Socrates, he is humble, patient, imaginative, and deeply attentive. He "listens" with all five senses and with "the mind's eye."

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Our century—or those two-thirds of it that we have now traversed—has been called the Age of Violence. But our century has been marked not only by a massive breakdown of dialogue, but by its massive growth, too. It is, indeed, the century of two World Wars, or revolution and totalitarianism, of cold inhumanity and genocide, of racial strife. It is also the century of Martin Buber's "I-and-Thou," of Teilhard de Chardin's daring restatement of cosmic progression, of Pope John's call to all men of good will, regardless of their particular religious faith, their race, their economic status, their nation, their political creed, or their technological development.

Moreover, regardless of big-power imperialism, of a precarious peace sustained by a "balance of terror," of a spreading backlash against the claims of racial equality, modern technology has enabled a new ecumenism to germinate. We are learning that the very word, "ecumenical," has older uses than ecclesiastical ones. Like Robinson Crusoe, we are finding footprints on the sandy shore of what had sometimes seemed a lonely, desert island; and, like him, we are increasingly eager to meet our brother. Indeed, our century is a dangerous one to be alive in, but it is an expectant one as well. Shall we "search and destroy," or shall we engage in dialogue? Surely, this question does not apply only to Vietnam, or only to Americans. The Age of Violence—the century we live in—has been marked, let us recall here, by much searching and destroying, by many "body counts," by much "bagging" of prisoners, all over the globe.

It seems possible that the most relevant sort of dialogue, though perhaps the most difficult, for twentieth century men to achieve and especially for Americans to achieve is the Socratic. For this difficult form of dialogue, there are luckily a number of models in Plato's Dialogues. To model [our] dialogues on those that Socrates incited and took part in is a dangerous counsel of something precious close to perfection. But I would merely urge that Socrates' behavior "in dialogue" is a good star to hitch one's wagon to. At the minimum, it is a good guide to the reefs on which most really good dialogues are wrecked. All these reefs welcome hungrily those who substitute the kind of discussion Socrates called "eristic" as a substitute for the kind he called "dialectic." In Book I of Plato's *Republic* Thrasymachus uses eristic; Socrates, dialectic. Thrasymachus' purpose is to win points and to win applause. The purpose of Socrates is to try, through dialectical discussion with Thrasymachus and others, to understand better the essential nature of justice. Each of the two men makes a choice of weapons appropriate to his purpose. The rising voice, the personal accusation, the withering scorn, the crushing sarcasm, the panic at the possibility of being out-manuevered, the sweating, the unaccustomed blush of a normally unblushing champion sophist, the volubility that tries to shore up a crumbling argument and to ward off the disgrace of refutation, the love of one's own opinions precisely because they are one's own, the vanity that replaces love of truth with love for victory are all exemplified by Thrasymachus. What Socrates displays towards Thrasymachus is courtesy. He treats him not as an enemy, but as a valued colleague in the mutual search for understanding. Socrates is, as it were, the personification for purposes of discourse of the love for one's neighbor that Judaism and Christianity prescribe. And the same love sometimes infuses his courteous questions with irony, because such irony helpfully invited Thrasymachus to rid himself of the false opinions he harbored. So he is never fearful that he will "lose," precisely because he is not trying to "win," and does not meet these flat opinions with other flat opinion, but with the ironical question.

Just as we are taught to hate not the sinner but the sin, especially if it is our own, so Socrates never attacks Thrasymachus. Indeed, he never attacks his ignorance and presumptuousness. He merely dissolves the opinions Thrasymachus spouts so loudly, so rapidly, and so volubly. That Thrasymachus recognizes the mortal danger in Socrates' questions and, indeed, that painful scalpel, irony, that Socrates uses on his opinions (and consequently, given Thrasymachus' pride of authorship where his expressed opinions are concerned, on himself, his honor, and his fame as a sophist) comes out in Thrasymachus' sarcastic allusion to "your famous irony." That Socrates knew

that his irony “put to the question,” a euphemism the Spanish Inquisition would later in history use for the act of torturing the accused, is shown by his likening himself to a gadfly that stung the noble steed, the Athenian democracy. That the steed knew too is shown in Plato’s *Apology*, where Socrates was sentenced to death for putting Athens to the question.

The many dialectical conversations in Plato’s Dialogues suggest several rules of thumb that might be profitably used by [students], or at least more frequently followed. One hesitates to suggest rules of thumb for a kind of discussion that is essentially spontaneous. But it is hard to see how these particular rules could stifle spontaneity:

1. The exchange of declarative monologues tends to be dialectically unproductive. The effort to be too complete is often self-defeating. An adumbration often contributes more to dialectic than a rotund speech. Brevity stimulates dialectic.
2. I take it that Herodotus’ “anecdote” that the Persians deliberated while drunk and decided while sober implies that in the early stages of a dialectic exchange a “wild idea” is often more fruitful than a prematurely prudent opinion. The imaginative and the unexpected are frequent ingredients of Socrates’ style, though they are often introduced with an (ironic) apology. Since [students are] trying to see more deeply into current problems but are free of the burden of imminent, practical, political action, they might profitably stay “drunk” longer than the King of Kings and his royal counsellors could risk staying.
3. The Socratic dialectic has another code of manners than the dinner party, where religion and politics are sometimes forbidden for fear that rising passions may damage “social” intercourse, and where interrupting a speaker and even a long-winded empty speech, is forbidden. In dialectic, a quick question is analogous to “point of order” in political assemblies. “Do I understand you to be saying . . . ?” always has the floor.
4. Even these thumb-rules may seem guaranteed to produce bedlam. And, indeed, when they are first tried, they generally do produce it. But inexperienced dancers on a ballroom floor and inexperienced skaters on an ice rink also collide. Experience brings a sixth sense in Socratic dialectic too. The will of self-insistence gives way to the will to learn.
5. In dialectic, “participational democracy” consists in everybody’s listening intently; it does not consist in what commercial television calls equal time. When a good basketball team has the ball, its members do not snatch the ball from each other but support the man who has it, and the man who has it passes it to a teammate whenever a pass is called for by the common purpose of the team. But in dialectic, as opposed to basketball, the “opposing team” is composed only of the difficulties all men face when they try to understand. The point is that, in dialectic, it does not matter whose mouth gets used by the dialectical process, provided all are listening intently and exercise the freedom to interrupt with a question if they do not understand. On the other hand, reading or writing while “in dialogue” is a grave offense against the common purpose of all, not because they diminish the number of speaking mouths but because they diminish the number of listening ears. (Doodling ... [is a] permissible aide[s] to listening!)
6. Whatever the touted merits of pluralism in democratic society today (and pluralism is, minimally, better than shooting each other with mail-order sub-machine guns or even than legislating on religious beliefs), the agreement to disagree is a disgraceful defeat if it means surrendering the hope of agreement through further dialectic. Even Socrates, on rare occasions, countenanced postponement of the struggle to a more propitious occasion.
7. Perhaps the first rule of Socratic dialectic was laid down by Socrates: that we should follow the argument wherever it leads. Presumably, this means that some sorts of relevance that a court pleading should exhibit (and, even more the forensic eloquence that pleading encourages) are irrelevant to dialectic. The deliberate manner, and even more the ponderous manner, are mere impediments. The name of the game is not instructing one’s

fellows, or even persuading them, but thinking with them and trusting the argument to lead to understanding, sometimes to very unexpected understandings.

8. The chairman [of the Fellows of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara] recently abandoned the practice of recognizing speakers in the order in which their raised hands requested the floor. The abandonment of this device, so necessary in parliamentary procedure and even in small committees if they have not learned to discuss dialectically, was an immense step towards Socratic dialogue. The chairman, [like St. John's tutors] now has the more delicate task of intervening, preferably by question, only when he believes that there is a misunderstanding or an unprofitable (not a profitable) confusion, a confusion that in his judgment bids fair not to right itself.
9. [Students], however, will need to be close listeners, in the event that we take Socrates' advice; we shall, indeed, have to be closer listeners than we now are. We are likely, if we meet that obligation, to attain to a level of friendship that not many men attain to. Aristotle, we may recall, held that friendship could be achieved on three levels. The lowest level is that of what we Americans call "contacts," a level on which two men are useful to each other and exchange favors and services. On a higher level, two men can find pleasure in each other's company: they amuse each other. On the highest level, each man is seeking the true good of the other. On that level [students] would be, even more satisfyingly than now, seeking in common to understand. We share the friendship, or *philia*, that Aristotle thought must exist between the citizens of any republic if it was to be worthy of men. It would certainly exist, and without sentimentality, in any genuine republic of learning. And it would heighten the courtesy that any good and rigorous dialectic demands.
10. There is only one, final rule of thumb that I would offer: When free minds seek together for greater understanding, they tend to move, as the mind of Socrates so characteristically moved—with playfulness and a sense of the comic. This, perhaps, is because men are most like the gods when they think; because, nevertheless, they are emphatically not gods; and because, for godlike animals, this fact is so thoroughly funny. The truly relevant jest is never out of order, so long as we can pursue our dialogue with high seriousness and with relevant playfulness.

Were we to apply the ten rules of thumb sketched above, we would certainly produce many of those brief interludes of bedlam when dialectical collisions occur, even though these moments of vocal static would decrease in length and in number as we gained practice with free dialectic. Such static is not dialogue's worst problem. Plato and Shakespeare both speak of the mind's eye, that eye that alone sees intellectual light. I suggest there is a mind's ear too, a listening, mindful ear. I suggest that the chief reason that conversations deteriorate is that the mind's ear fails.

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SPEAKING TO, FOR, WITH (NOT AT)  
 Brief Thoughts on Changing Our Conversation  
 by Frederic Clarke Putnam

Most of us think that we are called to teach, correct, instruct, and explain. Rather than ask, we tell; rather than seek understanding, we try to make sure that everyone else understands (and agrees with) ... us. This stifles genuine conversation because we are preparing our response (or have "checked out") rather than listening, (implicitly) correcting and teaching the rest of the group rather than trying to learn from others, viewing our own insights as greater than that of the group, and (above all) preferring the sound of our own voice presenting our own thoughts to anyone else's voice or opinion. This is a challenge to genuine conversation.

A second challenge is that the introductory clause "I think", which we tend to use as shorthand for "I'm really not sure about this" or "I'm not willing to stick my neck out and say this as though it were true". Despite our realization that this is what we mean, the words "I think ..." focus our attention on the speaker so that any response such a statement (whether one that agrees, disagrees, questions, or challenges it) is perceived as personal.

If we instead begin our comments with words like these, we will *encourage* each other to *participate* in the conversation, and *further* everyone's ability to *learn*.

Perhaps ...

What if ...?

I wonder if ...?

Could it be that ...?

What if we said ...?

Could we say that ...?

Could we think about it this way: ...?

Are you saying that ...?

Does that imply that ...?

Does that mean ...?

Would you say that ...?

Do you mean that ...

So what you are saying is ...

So you mean that ...

In other words ...

Is there another way to say that?

If that's valid, then what about ...?

How does that relate to what [member of class] said?

How does that comment/question relate to our  
text/passage?

How does that relate to what [the author] says in  
\_\_\_\_\_?

What would happen to our conversations ...

- ... if we viewed conversation as ballroom dance, in which each partner works to make the other look as good as possible, so that together we end well?
- ... if our goal were to make sure that we understand the other person, rather than worrying about whether or not they understand us, or "get" our point?
- ... if we listened until the other person finishes speaking, without using the time to prepare our response, and then waited in silence while we thought about what they had just said before we say anything?
- ... if we answered statements and questions with questions that encourage us to continue to explore the subject, rather than providing answers?

What would we need to change?

How would we need to change?

NOTES ON CLASSROOM CITIZENSHIP

by Ali Schwab

Greetings, and welcome! In order to sweeten your arrival and first few days in class, I have assembled five crucial pieces of advice I've received over the past two years on how to be an effective and helpful participant in tutorials and seminars. If a few people read this and manage to avoid making some of the pratfalls I did during freshman year, I will consider my work well done.

1. **Glue yourself to the subject at hand.** Always, always, always listen attentively to what is being said and stay on the same road as everybody else. If an idea occurs to you that has nothing to do with what is being said, save it. If a lengthy and twisted thought process leads you from something that is said to something farther fetched, make sure you turn it into something that can advance the current conversation before you let it out of your mouth.
2. **Don't be a naysayer.** An acquaintance of mine, who is no longer at the College, suffered from the handicap of a memory so good that he could think of a passage from the text to contradict just about any comment made by one of his classmates. He corrected the habit as soon as he was told about it by one of his tutors, but it is best not to form it. Sometimes seminar strays into regions of the hypothetical that violate some aspect of the text. Don't always be the one to burst everyone's bubble.
3. **While you are not the policeman for keeping others close to the text, it is important to police yourself.** The goal of seminar is not to broadcast your personal philosophy of the world to all those present. Whatever that goal is (and I won't be so bold as to try to nail it down here) it most certainly involves getting inside the text in a meaningful way. Keep this in mind for your papers, too, because every year you will be challenged to balance your original thoughts with what you glean from the text, and the balance usually involves more of the latter than you might think.
4. **Be open to that which is foreign to you.** If you have been seeing the world through the eyes of Stephen Hawking or Shakespeare or even J. K. Rowling for the past half-dozen years of your life, pocket your dearly beloved 'outside sources' when you walk in the door to seminar. The same thing goes for previous seminar readings to a lesser extent. If everything in Aquinas reminds you of something in Aristotle—duh. We know. What you should try to see is what is new about Aquinas. Whatever the goal of seminar is, it certainly involves exposing yourself to new things, and to heck with it if you find yourself agreeing to something your personal hero wouldn't.
5. **Love thy neighbor as thyself.** If you disdain your classmates and their comments, it will show whether you like it or not through the content of your speech, the tone of your voice, your body language, and the fact that you seem to be talking more than everybody else in the room. And then everyone will be asking themselves, "Who does she think she is?" Then the disdain will be aimed at you. Disdain propagates like that. But, luckily, so do love and respect. Devote considerable energy to backing your classmates up on what they say, and asking little questions to give them the opportunity to build their ideas. This will help you with the observance of points one and four, and what's more, the love you dish out will come back around.

May you all read great books,  
learn great things,  
and make great friends.