

WHY DIALOGUE?

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It is right to follow what is common.
Yet, although the meaning is common to all,
many live as if they had their own insight.¹

My purpose in this essay is to focus on the idea of a dialogue common to all people, one rooted in nature and dedicated to serious action in all spheres of life. My goal is to answer two questions: What, exactly, is dialogue? In what sense is dialogue common or universal?

What is Dialogue?

Confusion arises from the tendency to mistake dialogue for other activities that resemble it but are quite different. Although dialogue can be either an oral or a written activity, the oral form usually comes first to mind, and the various activities with which dialogue is often confused tend also to be oral. I will focus on the oral mode, but the essential nature of dialogue is the same, whether in oral or written form. I begin by distinguishing dialogue from some activities with which it is sometimes confused.

Dialogue is not **conversation**. Sharing experiences with family or friends at dinner or cocktails, casual chat with neighbors, and informal talk about television, movies, sports, and politics, are examples of conversation. Generally these activities lack serious purpose, filling the time, amusing, and entertaining, but seldom with any definite aim or goal. Conversation is free-floating. Those who introduce serious topics with a definite goal or purpose into such contexts

will probably not be invited again. Though some philosophers have questioned its value,² this kind of communication performs an important function in lubricating normal social life.

Dialogue, is not **discussion**. Radio and television talk shows, political meetings, religious gatherings, and much of what goes on in classrooms at schools, colleges, and universities qualify as discussion, differing from conversation because they generally do treat serious topics and often have definite goals or purposes. They seek to instruct, inform, persuade, or convert. Discussion is also more formal than conversation, with tacit or explicit rules. If such protocol is violated, the participants run the risk of being cut off, silenced, or failed. Participants in discussion tend to speak from a particular point of view, usually trying to articulate and defend a given perspective, though with greater flexibility and openness than parties in a debate.

Dialogue is not **debate**. Debate differs from discussion in that the verbal exchange usually has a limited number of positions stipulated at the outset (such as affirmative vs. negative, liberal vs. conservative, or plaintiff vs. defendant), each competing with the others with the clear goal of winning the contest. Debate is a zero-sum game. If one side wins, the other side must lose. The goal in a debate is to win the verbal contest by persuading others, often without concern for the truth of the matter. It differs from discussion in its single-minded purpose of proving a pre-established position in order to win; to change positions in a debate is to lose the

¹ Heraclitus, Fragment 2 (Cf. Hermann Diels *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker: Griechisch und Deutsch*, trans. Albert and Lieselotte Anderson [Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1934], p. 151).

² Friedrich Nietzsche's writings are filled with attacks on the triviality of this kind of speech. Zarathustra, for example, would prefer silence to chatter: "Flee, my friend, into your solitude! I see you dazed by the noise of the great men and stung all over by the stings of the little men. Woods and crags know how to keep a dignified silence with you. Be like the tree that you love with its wide branches: silently listening it hangs over the sea. Where solitude ceases, the market place begins; and where the market place begins the noise of the great actors and the buzzing of the poisonous flies begins too" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, First Part, "On the Flies of the Market Place" trans. Walter Kaufmann [New York: Viking Press, 1954]). But Martin Heidegger, takes a more positive approach: "The expression 'idle talk' ['Gerede'] is not to be used here in a 'disparaging' signification. Terminologically, it signifies a positive phenomenon which constitutes the kind of Being of everyday Dasein's understanding and interpreting" (*Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson [New York: Harper & Row, 1962], p. 211).

contest. The adversarial method frequently employed by lawyers is one familiar form of debate. Although it is not necessary for the legal process to employ this method, when money and power are at stake it is not surprising that a win/lose strategy takes over.

The most important difference between dialogue and these other forms of oral exchange is its primary dedication to what is common or universal. Conversation often depends on the tastes and inclinations of the participants without an agenda or clear objective. Discussion and debate, by contrast, are dedicated to presenting and defending a specific position or point of view, usually determined by the context or the group being represented. Unlike these other forms of verbal activity, dialogue makes no prior judgment about the outcome of the process. It is serious inquiry that seeks to understand the nature and activity of whatever subject matter is being considered. It searches for truth rather than taking it as given at the outset of the inquiry. Participants in a dialogue are free to change their mind in the course of the exchange.

Dialogue employs a dialectical method dedicated to examining and questioning assumptions, especially the ones we usually take for granted. Sometimes dialectic is confused with eristic, a form of verbal dispute that does not seek a common or mutual goal. Debate favors eristic over dialectic. Confusion between eristic and dialectic arises from the rigor of the reasoning common to both, but the difference lies in their purpose. The purpose of dialectic is to reason through an issue, refusing to rest until the participants in the dialogue freely reach common ground. Those who practice eristic do not shy away from manipulation and deception if they are effective in achieving victory. On the other hand, dialogue is impossible if the autonomy and dignity of the participants are violated.

Dialogue as Universal

The fundamental purpose of dialogue is to promote the knowledge, insight, and wisdom that nurture the best possible life for the participants. These qualities unify rather than separate people. Although they are realized in the mind or soul of the participants, they are inclusive rather than exclusive. In a zero-sum game, the qualities are exclusive. For example, France's joy in winning the 1998 world cup in soccer could not be shared by the team from Brazil. Those values are not common or universal but are shared only by the members of one team and their supporters and fans. The members of the other team and their supporters and fans are, by the nature of the activity, excluded. On the other hand, if I help one of my students explicate, interpret, and apply the Allegory of the Cave from Book 7 of Plato's *Republic*, the benefit we both experience is inclusive. Rather than compete with each other, we join together in a common venture. Insight, understanding, and wisdom are not scarce resources. When my students and I engage in dialogue, my own understanding and insight increase. Plato's Cave Allegory helps students realize that education depends upon distinguishing illusion from reality, thus enhancing the freedom to choose, even if one only chooses the Socratic wisdom of not pretending to know what one does not know.³ Increased autonomy leads to increased dignity. When I dwell among autonomous, dignified human beings, my own autonomy and dignity are also enhanced. This is especially important for those of us who believe in democracy as the best form of government. Democracy dies without the autonomy and dignity of citizens.

³ "As I went away, I said to myself: 'Well, I don't suppose that either of us knows anything perfectly beautiful and good, but I'm better off than he is. He knows nothing, but he pretends that he does. I have a slight advantage over him, because I don't pretend to know what I don't know'" (Plato, *Apology*, 21, in Plato's *Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito*, trans. Benjamin A. Jowett, adapted by Albert A. Anderson (Millis, Massachusetts: Agora Publications, Inc., 1995).

To say that dialogue is universal means that it fosters a kind of education that promotes common benefits open to all. This is not true of all forms of education. If a person learns how to confront an opponent by killing or maiming more efficiently through the martial arts, that kind of education is unlikely to provide mutual benefit. We might draw an analogy with the principle of nuclear deterrents and argue that if everyone were to learn a martial art it might discourage others from attacking us. However, in the case of individual safety, differing levels of skill would probably encourage rather than discourage those who seek to display their prowess.

Dialogue, by nature, seeks the common good. But this does not mean that it depends on altruism or that it promotes selflessness. One of the important benefits of dialogue is that it allows all of us to promote our self interest by learning to think for ourselves and by helping us defend ourselves from those who would manipulate and control us and from our self-imposed dependence.⁴ This is the Socratic principle of soul tending, a kind of education best conducted by means of dialogue. People who participate in and benefit from Socratic dialogue enhance their individuality and develop essential aspects of their self, but they do that without detracting from other selves. When my students, my children, and my neighbors learn to think for themselves, I benefit by living in a community of autonomous individuals who have learned self control and who know what is needed to promote and enhance the common good. I am not calling for utopia. I know that even Socratic enlightenment will not automatically bring the millennium. But I think that dialogue promotes that kind of enlightenment. I further believe that such enlightenment is an important aspect of a good life for human beings.

⁴ This ideal of thinking for oneself is shared by the Greek Enlightenment of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and the modern European Enlightenment of Kant's day: "*Enlightenment is our release from self-imposed dependence. Dependence is the inability to use our own reasoning. Instead, we rely on others to do our thinking for us. It is self-imposed not because we lack understanding but because we lack decisiveness: Sapere aude! Have the courage to think for yourself! This is the motto of the Enlightenment*" (Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" in *Kant's Foundations of Ethics*, trans. Leo Rauch [Millis, Massachusetts: Agora Publications, Inc., 1955], p. 1).

Because we cannot count on the altruism and universal good will of others, dialogue employs dialectic to expose and refute sophistry and eristic manipulation. This, too, has a common or universal application. Here the argument for deterrents is more successful than in the case of the martial arts. Learning to spot the fallacies in a political speech, uncovering false advertising, and recognizing religious brainwashing are effective means for avoiding deception. I may still succumb to the siren song of a Tartuffe, but dialectical education provides a strong line of defense against it. The more people acquire such skill, the less likely they will be to fall prey to such manipulation.

Dialogue in Action

Oral forms of dialogue as I conceive it can penetrate nearly every domain of human activity. It is especially important for general education, but it can enhance the arts, human relationships, the sciences, technological action, religion, political organization, medicine, and business. This is another sense in which dialogue is universal or common. It is relevant here and now for almost every endeavor and every field of activity. But its universality is also affirmed by finding it in other places and at other times. In ancient Greece Heraclitus envisioned the possibility of a meaning common to all, one that unites human beings with each other and with the natural world.⁵ It took another century for dialogue to emerge as a fully developed form of inquiry. Dialogue is not specific to any culture, to any gender, to any race, to any profession, or

⁵ “People fail to gain an understanding of the meaning presented here, both before and after they hear it. For even if everything happens according to this meaning, they act like novices whenever they test themselves against the words and deeds I explain by analyzing and dissecting each according to its nature and activity. Other people continue to remain unconscious about what they do after they awake, just as they lose consciousness of what they do in their sleep” (Heraclitus, Fragment 1). “Meaning” is an English rendering of the Greek word *logos*, which means “law,” as well as “word” and is the basis for the term “logic.” For Heraclitus *logos* is common or universal, uniting human law and natural law or, perhaps more accurately, never separating them. The distinction between *nomos* (human law detached from nature) and *physis* (natural law) emerges as Sophistic culture develops in the works of people like Protagoras, Thrasymachus, Gorgias, and Antiphon, all in the latter half of the 5th century B.C. Although Plato’s dialogues provide an elaborate account of the various Sophists, W.K.C. Guthrie offers an introduction to this culture in *The Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

to any nation. To illustrate this claim, I will turn to the best examples of dialogue in its written form—Plato’s dialogues.

Consider *The Republic*. The dialogue opens with a **conversation** between Socrates and Cephalus, a retired businessman who is a longtime friend. This exchange begins as chat, without a clear purpose or goal. Cephalus tells some stories about what it means to grow older, passes along some sage advice to the younger generation, but quickly retires when Socrates begins to steer the conversation toward serious topics for **discussion**. When Polemarchus enters, the concept of justice has been introduced as an important topic for reflection and definition. Polemarchus draws upon the ideas of the poet Simonides and tries to articulate and defend a specific position that he brought with him into the discussion: “Justice is the art that gives benefit to friends and injury to enemies.”⁶ Socrates questions that definition, forcing the exchange into a progressively rigorous examination; Polemarchus is reduced to silence when Socrates reveals its implicit contradictions.

Discussion is replaced by **debate** when Plato’s character Thrasymachus⁷ takes over. He interprets Polemarchus’ retreat as a form of losing the argument, and he cannot let Socrates win. Socrates’ relatively gentle questioning of Cephalus and Polemarchus is soon replaced by an ardent debate, involving both Thrasymachus and Socrates. The topic of dispute between Thrasymachus and Socrates is a serious philosophical issue, but those two characters in Book 1 are primarily interested in refuting each other, not coming to a common and mutually beneficial

⁶ *Plato’s Republic*, trans. Benjamin A. Jowett, adapted by Albert A. Anderson (Millis, Massachusetts: Agora Publications, Inc., 1997), 332.

⁷ Thrasymachus, Socrates, Polemarchus, and several of the other characters in *The Republic* (some who speak and others who are named but only listen) are based on historical individuals. But all of them, especially Socrates, are characters created by Plato. The relationship between those characters and the historical individuals requires considerable analysis and evaluation, but it is a mistake to equate Plato’s characters with the actual people with those names.

understanding or insight about justice. Socrates affirms the unsatisfactory nature of the exchange:

I'm like a glutton who snatches a taste of every dish brought to the table, without allowing enough time to enjoy the previous one. Before we even discovered the nature of justice, I left that question and started asking whether justice is virtue and wisdom, or evil and folly. Then, I couldn't help being diverted by the question about the comparative advantages of justice and injustice. The result is that I learned nothing. I still don't know what justice is, and therefore I don't know whether it is or is not a virtue; nor can I say whether the just person is happy.⁸

Book 1 contains important hints of the insights to come as the dialogue unfolds, but eristic dominates over dialectic in the mighty battle between Socrates and Thrasymachus. Even if we applaud Socrates' negative case as he refutes Thrasymachus' version of *Realpolitik*, the most this exchange offers is a good example of how dialectic allows us to defend ourselves against those who try to persuade us that injustice is superior to justice.

The positive account of the nature of justice and its ultimate relation to goodness requires several more books to develop. Although Book 1 of Plato's *Republic* contains good examples of conversation, discussion, and debate, the exchange does not become **dialogue** until Book 2, when Plato's brothers Adeimantus and Glaucon enter the exchange:

Glaucon: Socrates, do you really want to convince us that it is always better to be just than unjust, or do you merely want to pretend that you have convinced us?⁹

Socrates says that he really wants to convince them, and that opens the way for genuine dialogue (rather than conversation, discussion, or debate). This is not the place to follow that dialogue, nor is it possible to summarize what it achieves in a few words.¹⁰

⁸ *Plato's Republic*, 354.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 357.

¹⁰ I have developed this line of interpretation of *Plato's Republic* and several other Platonic dialogues in my book *Universal Justice: A Dialectical Approach* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997).

Conclusion

There is a form of speaking and writing, what Plato calls rhetoric, that cuts across the many differences that separate us and opens the possibility of a common venture that benefits all who participate. Universal dialogue should be distinguished from the various forms of exchange that limit themselves to the particular interests of subjective and relative contexts. I do not deny the presence and power of the particular, but I think there is great benefit if we seek what is common and universal. Plato's works provide examples of such dialogue, inviting us to replicate and emulate his method. It is not Plato that matters but the common dialectical quest in which he and his characters invite us to participate. The complex and fully developed dialogue, which many think is Plato's masterpiece, is not manifest until Book 7.

Callicles: I would make a distinction, Socrates. There are some rhetoricians who really do care about the public when they speak, but there are others of the sort you describe.

Socrates: That's good enough for me. Rhetoric, then, is of two kinds, one that is mere flattery and shameful rubbish; and the other that is noble, aiming at the education and improvement of the souls of the citizens. This second kind of rhetoric strives to say what is best, whether welcome or unwelcome to the audience.¹¹

¹¹ *Plato's Gorgias*, trans. Benjamin A. Jowett, adapted by Albert A. Anderson (Millis, Massachusetts: Agora Publications, Inc., 1994), 503.