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### The Ghost of Dialogue

Dialogue is the ghost that haunts society, hanging over the heads of people who look more like bees, floating mindlessly from task to task, never looking up. Stringfellow Barr describes society's greatest flaw as the "breakdown of dialogue", that we are all "suffocating intellectually". This is a dangerous trap, "for we can never live wholly human lives without a genuine converse between men." Without the skill of dialogue, there is no way for ideas to generate and a society to progress.

Dialogue has been misconstrued into monologues, people use words beyond their own understanding to convey a concept with no substance. "It is possible that we discussants are oppressed by a subconscious suspicion that we are really saying precisely nothing, and that this nothing will only stand up in conversation if we say it elaborately."

Holding the right to free speech, it seems as if people have forgotten the freedom of dialogue. People have resorted to saying things mindlessly as if their words hold no power. They are easily influenced by the louder voices which speak too freely, forgetting the weight of their words. It seems the skill

of dialogue has deteriorated, critical thinking has been dulled into assumption, and ideas have fallen stagnant.

First and foremost I would like to introduce the word “dialogue”, in relation to similar terms, such as “*discussion*”, “*discourse*”, “*conversation*”, and “*dialectic*”. I will be referencing the reading “Dialectic” By Mortimer J. Adler as a primary source for outlining these terms.

What is the origin of dialogue? Language has been a part of society since the beginning of time. Communication began even in animals, in order to survive, but a human’s unique “metacognition”, the ability to think about one’s own thoughts, provided ground for us to develop more intricate communication.

These thoughts were able to be expressed in words, rather than only body language. This sparks the question, are there levels of language? As a person grows older, their ability to communicate expands. You wouldn’t talk to a child as if they’re an adult, just as you wouldn’t talk to an adult as if they were a child. The words and subjects discussed must be appropriate for a person’s understanding.

Socrates believed that dialogue should be postponed until adulthood, saying that “youngsters, when they first get the taste in their mouths, argue for amusement. Like puppy-dogs, they rejoice in pulling and tearing at all who come near them.”

But the problem lies in the mistake that one shouldn't discuss beyond their *own* understanding. This leads to the skill of dialogue being stunted, unable to expand further. And this same mistake applies to society. People become comfortable and content with their own level of knowledge, they forget the childlike curiosity of seeking it.

Children are a perfect example of wonder. Light in their eyes, every new word opening up a world of possibilities. Children are sponges, soaking in every interaction, every story, every conversation. At what point does a person lose this interest? It is when they feel they know everything they need to know. They know how to read, how to talk, they know the names of shapes, and what colors are in the rainbow. They know mathematics, science, and how to identify differences. They are able to solve problems that are black and white, problems that have no lasting effect.

But what occurs when problems arise that have no conclusion? Do people become bored when they feel there is no destination to their discussion? When there is no right or wrong answer, when there is in fact no answer at all? This is when the skill of talking falls away, and a person is left with the reality that they have no substance to carry on a dialogue. The conversation becomes stagnant, ideas no longer form, and society has no room to grow. Without proper dialogue, without challenge and controversy, this skill cannot be developed. And it is a dangerous cycle to be caught in.

Now that we have discussed the origin of language and how it has evolved—rather, de-evolved—I can introduce “Dialectic”. This term for many years was seen as derogatory, and negative, that it “plays with words, makes sport of contradictions”. Even people like Martin Luther and Francis Bacon considered dialectic as “the bane of medieval learning”, that it consisted in “no great quantity of matter and infinite agitation of wit”.

The dialectician was seen as a man who: “argues rather than observes, who appeals to reason rather than experience, who draws implications from whatever is said or can be said, pushing a premise to its logical conclusion or reducing it to absurdity.” Clearly, this term was viewed very negatively. Dialectic was seen as “sophistry”, a deceitful argument. A person who lacks the intelligence and experience to earn the respect of a conversation.

Rabelais expressed that dialectic is carried on “by signs only, without speaking, for the matters are so abstruse, hard, and arduous, that words proceeding from the mouth of man will never be sufficient for the unfolding of them.” Dialectic was seen as impossible. As more effective for the detection of error, than for the investigation of truth. Descartes believed that dialectic could only explain truths that had already been established, rather than discovering new truths: “The dialectician can proceed only after he has been given premises to work from. Dialectic provides no methods for establishing premises or for discovering first principles.” He believed that dialectic should

not be seen as philosophy, but rather as rhetoric. A way of speaking, and not a way of discovering truth.

However, Augustine discussed the exact opposite of this. He believed that what Descartes was referencing was in fact not dialectic, but sophistical. The “abuse of rhetoric in speech which only aims at vernal ornamentation more than is consistent with seriousness of purpose”. Dialectic, however, was “the art which deals with inferences, and definitions, and divisions, and is of the greatest assistance in the discovery of meaning.” While Descartes said that dialectic should only be concerned with explaining existing truths, this is exactly what Augustine described for rhetoric. He believed that rhetoric was sophistical, and that dialectic was the skill used in order to define and discover meanings.

Another important root of dialectic, was that it originated as a skill of argumentation, rather than conversation of ideas. It was seen as separate from philosophical conversations, which is perhaps why philosophers have such polarizing views on how the skill of dialogue should be used.

As this term developed, it became involved in science. Dialectic became the only science that needed no hypothesis. “As the disciplined search for truth, dialectic includes all of logic. It is concerned with every phase of thought; with the establishment of definitions; the examination of hypotheses in the light of their presuppositions or consequences; the

formulation of inferences and proofs; the resolution of dilemmas arising from opposition in thought.”

This further aligns with Augustine’s view on dialectic. That it is a skill designed to discover new truths through discussion. There was confusion between the terms “dialectic”, “sophistry”, and “rhetoric”. When dialectic was seen as a derogatory, negative term, it was because it was mistaken for the latter terms. Dialectic was criticized in the beginning for being too philosophical, and later for being too scientific. When in reality, it was the skill of finding the balance in between. “Intermediate between science and rhetoric, dialectic can serve both”.

But beyond all the logic, philosophy, and rhetoric of dialectic, I was interested in the subject of “natural dialectic”. Kant proposed, “There is, therefore, a natural and unavoidable dialectic of pure reason which arises because the mind seeks to answer questions near impossible to answer, such as how objects exist as things in themselves, or how the nature of things is to be subordinated to principles.” This relates to what I discussed earlier, this is the childlike wonder that is a missing puzzle piece in discussions.

People are afraid to discuss what they do not know, and so they resort to the simplicities of life that are easier to comprehend. They shy away from real dialogue, hiding behind their instinctual discourse around worldly topics. People have no issue spouting opinions on people, or on issues that directly infringe on their lives. And the irony is that in trying to preserve the

satisfaction in their lives, they are losing their grasp on life itself. People can talk forever about mindless, emotional things. But when it comes to issues that require more than a feeling, but rather critical thinking, the subject no longer carries any weight, and all passion seems to die.

A fundamental part of dialogue is the principle of opposition. No matter how polarizing philosophies have been around dialectic, they all have a common thread of conflict. "Dialectic either begins or ends with some sort of intellectual conflict, or develops and resolves such oppositions."

It is difficult for a society to tackle dialogue, when they fear true conflict. Aristotle had an interesting perspective, believing that dialectical opposition originates in the disagreements in ordinary human discourse. "Nobody in his senses would make a proposition of what no one holds; nor would he make a problem of what is obvious to everybody or to most people." Dialectic takes an "eye to general opinion", an aspect of social awareness and logic.

Hegel has a different perspective, that dialogue is not a result of conflict but rather the resolution of it. He talks extensively about "the Idea", and that if the entire world was rooted in one great idea, one absolute mind, then every moment in nature and in history is tied together through dialogue. "The principles of dialectic become the principles of change, and change itself is conceived as a progress or evolution from lower to higher, from part to whole, from the indeterminate to the determinate."

Now that we have gone through the different views and philosophies of dialectic, I'd like to move on into the question of, "How does an individual develop the skill of dialogue?" I will be referring to Stringfellow Barr's *Notes on Dialogue*. Socrates was a primary example of dialogue. He was set apart from Thrasymachus in his "dialectic" versus "eristic" approach to debates. The eristic strategy is concerned more with victory than with truth. It is aggressive, prideful, and "the love of one's own opinions precisely because they are one's own". Socrates on the other hand, was never fearful of "losing", because he was not trying to "win" and "does not meet these flat opinions with other flat opinions, but with the ironical question." And this brings me to the first tool in having effective dialogue. The art of asking questions.

In Plato's "Meno", we can see Socrates using questions to find a common ground, and eventually a conclusion. Even when Meno attempted to turn it back onto Socrates, he was not fooled, nor was he thrown off.

There is a problem in society, where dialogue has morphed into a battle of monologues. People are more concerned with "telling" than "asking". More concerned with voicing their own opinions, than opening their minds to new ideas. When a discussion is self-absorbed, when the desired outcome is simply to say their point without any concern for listening to the other side, it is destined to dissolve into nothingness. Discourse with such an intention is not worthy of being called dialogue. It is a mere jumble of words, convoluted and essentially pointless. "The exchange of declarative monologues tends to



be dialectically unproductive. The effort to be too complete is often self-defeating.”

The absolute best approach to a discussion is to view it as a conversation of ideas. To separate the idea from the individual is a necessary distinction. As soon as an individual attaches his ideas to himself, or his self-worth, the ideas become personal. So when that idea is tested, questioned, or pulled apart, a person’s defenses come up. Conversation becomes increasingly agitated, and at this point it is no longer dialogue. If an idea is under pressure and being challenged, all while a person feels they are tied to that idea, it is no longer viewed as dialectic, but a personal attack, whether that was the intention or not.

People have a tendency to get caught up in the heat of arguments, stubbornly refusing to back down or listen to the other side. It’s as if they’re standing on quicksand—digging their heels in the ground and dragging others down with them. The more desperate a person becomes in a discussion, the less likely anyone is to believe them. This dissolves any respect that either side would have for the other. Without respect, there is no willingness to listen. Without a willingness to listen, there is no understanding. Without understanding, there is no growth. A discussion should be on solid ground, not in a sinkhole with either side trying to pull the other in.

Dialogue thrives with active listening. This means closing your mouth, and opening your ears. Undivided attention, focusing only on understanding their words and ideas. Active listening involves curiosity, true curiosity as if you have something new to learn from every word. Bringing yourself back into a state of childlike wonder actually helps humble the pride and defense that can arise in conversation. Entering a discussion with the question of “What can I learn?” rather than “What will I teach them?”

Another tool in effective dialogue is clarification. “Do I understand you by saying...” and repeating your interpretation of their opinions, ideas, or feelings. More often than not, arguments escalate due to misunderstanding. Clarifying your understanding of the conversation not only eradicates unnecessary arguments, but tests how well you were listening, or how clearly they were communicating.

In “Notes on Dialogue”, one of the final rules set in place was the word “Philia”. This is a sacred, intrinsic love. When you enter dialogue with philia, you have already found a common ground, you have removed any judgment, criticism, and resentment towards them. You have reached at least a friendship and mutual understanding between each other. Recognizing that despite polarizing and triggering differences, being human is the only similarity needed. This is a love and respect for this person, simply because they exist. “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.”

In conclusion, dialogue as a skill is the only way for ideas to generate and a society to progress. According to Socrates, the skill of dialogue “can be used to find the truth implicit in the commonly expressed convictions of men and to lay bare errors caused by lack of definition in discourse or lack of rigor in reasoning”. To Aristotle, it is the skill of making and criticizing definitions, and in asking and answering questions. The ability to raise searching difficulties on both sides of a subject will make us detect more easily the truth and error about the several points that arise. It is challenging both sides in an argument, the “process of criticism wherein lies the path to the principles of all inquiries.”

Society has reached a state of “vocal static”, of stagnant ideas. The skill of dialogue will not only drown out this static, but Stringfellow Barr concluded his “Notes on Dialogue” by saying, “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.” The most effective way to approach dialogue is by closing your mouth through listening, opening your heart through *Philia*, and opening your mind. As soon as minds begin to open, true dialogue will spark, ideas will generate, and society will flourish.

## Sources

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