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ABSTRACT

In an effort to increase moral dialogue on the campus of Burlington County College and in society at large, a project was undertaken to create dialogue through writing newspaper columns on moral issues. Following the publication of two initial columns, responses were solicited from students who had just completed a Philosophy 101 course. The project underwent a transformation, however, when the columns and student responses were presented to a Princeton Fellows seminar with a rationale that drew on Plato for validation. The seminar leader questioned the project's commitment to dialogue, suggesting that the columns were written to manipulate readers' sentiments rather than invite dialogue. A third column was presented to the fellows attempting to address the need for an adversary relationship in education, but it was realized that to do so would take a real dialectic. It was concluded that mass campaigns for injecting moral dialogue into college campuses should be suspect. A preferred and more effective approach would incorporate small group, or even one-to-one, interactions. This would be truer to the model of the Socratic/Platonic dialogues and would be much more effective than published columns at generating true dialogue or a dialectic. (The three columns and student comments are included.) Contains three references. (KP)

Generating Moral Dialogue on a College Campus

Francis H. Conroy

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Pemberton, New Jersey

Introduction

I am going to share with you a process that I went through during the course of a year thinking about, trying out, and reflecting on the matter of generating moral dialogue on a college campus.

It was a process that did not follow a predictable course. The original plan had to be partially abandoned. And yet, a genuine kind of learning did take place in a different way than the plan had envisioned, perhaps a truer (and more sobering) learning. To convey this, I need to communicate to you as straight-forwardly as possible. This dictates the tone and kind of paper that follows: a report on both failure and success, or perhaps more accurately on how I was taken beyond what we normally mean by success and failure.

The story of the year begins with a double agenda: on the one hand, with reflections on Plato's Republic and its example of moral dialogue, and on the other with the hopeful initiation of a plan to take moral dialogue beyond my philosophy classroom to the pages of the student newspaper. The focus was to be a column that I would initiate entitled simply "DIALOGUE," which each month (or semi-monthly) ended with the following explanation:

DIALOGUE is an occasional column that aims to promote moral dialogue in response to the crisis of values that many perceive in our society. Dr. Francis Conroy is Professor of Philosophy at Burlington County College. Responses may be addressed to Dr. Conroy, c/o this newspaper.

The story of the year ends, again, with a double event: on the one hand, with study of another of Plato's dialogues, the Phaedrus and its powerful warning about rhetoric, and on the other with a partial retreat from my newspaper column plan, accompanied by chastened reflection about truth, about dialectic (in Plato's sense), and about something Plato calls psychagogia, or leading of the soul.

How I Originally Conceived My Plan

"There is not enough genuine moral dialogue today on our campuses or in our society, even though there are plenty of moral issues that are important to people and that require concerted inquiry," I wrote in a planning statement as I embarked on my "moral dialogue" column project.

The near-collapse of marriage and the family;

the segregation of our poor in broken inner cities, like Camden, New Jersey;

the anomie, valuelessness, loss of moral direction in our obsessively secular public schools;

the troubling power of advertising and television programming -- haven't we let an enemy into our homes without enough consideration of its effects on our souls?

the ambiguous moral example of my own generation, the baby-boomers -- don't we wish that our kids would <u>not</u> do much of what we did in the '60s and '70s?

troubling questions about affirmative action, social and economic dislocation, and "the angry white male";

the "Oklahoma syndrome": the malaise in our heartland that somebody -- big government, foreigners, less-"American" ethnic groups -- must be to blame for our jobs' disappearing, our health coverage shrinking, our hopes for the future dwindling;

the starvation that many of us feel for community, in a society where more and more of us are realizing the dark side to individualism;

the everpresent warnings of ecological crisis;

the distrubing proliferation of violence and fear, particularly involving the young;

the ill-suitedness of the kind of elite that our society produces -- an elite trained in places like Princeton -- for making any difference in a society characterized by all of the above

problems:

such were the kinds of examples of moral and spiritual problems that I enumerated in my original planning statement as crying for public discussion. I also planned to write an occasional column reflecting beauty and gratefulness, almost like a psalm: for example on the canopies of yellows, oranges, and reds that graced the Northeast's 1994 autumn. But the more frequent focus was to be on problems: "Many people are aware of the problems," I wrote.

The difficulty seems to be that we have lost the sense of how to conduct a dialogue. If we once had a model for moral dialogue in our public culture, we have lost it. In the forgetfulness of whizzing machines, hell-bent careers, and solipsistic "personal journeys," we don't know how to talk to each other any more.

If and when we do try to say things -- or, more dangerously, even put them into writing -- people may "fry" us. We risk being quoted out of context, distorted, maliciously misinterpreted. The public atmosphere of the nineties has in it a lot of fear, power, competition, "sides." The choice of silence is tempting for many. We are not sure how things will be taken, so we don't say them publicly. And sometimes we don't even trust our own ability any more to put something we want to say non-contentiously, non-self-aggrandizingly, innocently. So schooled are we in "Image is everything" and "It's all a question of power" that we have lost our more innocent voice, our gameness to put forth "trial balloons," our will to launch first probes toward real truth.

We need an atmosphere in which people feel more at ease to talk without recrimination. We need a model that assures us that what we say will not be pinned on us forever, not be used as a way to ridicule, isolate, or belittle us. We need genuine moral dialogue.

This was the starting rationale for my "moral dialogue" column plan. And furthermore I interpreted what I was doing within a longer philosophical tradition, one dating back to Plato. "There is such a model," I wrote,

in our cultural tradition: a model for moral dialogue both rigorous and generous, demanding yet welcoming. It is Plato's model, passed down in such dialogues as The Republic. In The Republic, he models for us an exchange among Socrates and several men who are concerned about character; specifically, about whether being a just person is worth the effort both to the individual and to the civic community.

Plato's Socrates (probably part Socrates, part Plato) who guides the dialogue takes care to create a certain atmosphere. Amidst an Athens that is, in 409 BC, in real trouble concerning both the character of the state itself and of its ideal types or role models, Socrates fashions a discussion on justice in our souls and in our society that unfolds in an atmosphere of liveliness and ease, yet also seriousness to the point of reverence.

I went on to praise Socrates' dialogical methods on several grounds: his commitment to self-reflection, to argument, and to truth; his attempt to navigate a path separate from considerations of appearance, ego, and power over others; and the space he always left for dialogue participants to change their minds, reassess, learn.

I suggested that Plato's exemplary commitment to writing dialogue could serve as a model for us today. "If we step back from specific examples in The Republic, I wrote,

to the theory behind Plato's writing in dialogue form, we find still more relevance to our own situation. Plato wrote in dialogue form because he believed that writing down thoughts on life's most important matters is inherently dangerous. The danger is that the words that one writes will inevitably be interpreted in ways that diverge from one's original intent-- and one will not be there to respond. On the other hand, by putting his important thoughts into the form of dialogues, Plato modeled for us that the statements we make are always provisional, and always in need of cross-examination or purification through the process he called dialectic. He modeled for us a situation in which people always move toward truth together, through this dialectic process. Therefore initial statements need not be perfect at all; trial balloons are totally appropriate. There is to be no "pinning" of one's initial position on one; indeed, later movement in one's position is assumed.

As I started writing "moral dialogue" columns, I conceived of myself in this tradition extending back to Plato and Socrates. I would say things publicly that I hadn't been willing to

say before, indeed that I wasn't fully ready to say. I would do this because the dialogue simply needed to be started. Moreover, for the same reason, I would write the columns before I was sure that the student newspaper or any other vehicle (e.g., the Burlington County Times) would be interested in publishing them. The genuineness of the venture, I felt, would lead to its finding its own way. I would keep myself open to any direction it took.

I proceeded to write the following two columns.

DIALOGUE

****************FRANCIS CONROY

(column #1)

A DEEPER LOOK AT THE GENEROUS SUBURBAN TAXPAYER

A smart young Volvo Republican, following the Newt Gingrich-led landslide, saw an opportunity to finally score a point with south Camden priest Michael Doyle at a recent social occasion.

"So, Father, I guess there you have it. The people have spoken. They're just sick of paying for Camden -- and all the other welfare pits we keep pouring our money into. Realistically, generosity has to have some limits."

Father Doyle smiled inwardly, while keeping an outward look of placidity. "What an opportunity!" he mused to himself. "He sure said that to the wrong person."

He began gently, in his soft Irish brogue: "Lad, what you say may be true. A lot of people seem to feel that way. But have you ever stopped to think ..." -- and he paused, wanting to make the most of a teachable moment -- "have you ever stopped to think how much Camden gives to you?"

"What? How's that?" the young executive asked, caught by surprise.

"Well, look at it this way. Think of that smell that is always in the air when you come down to Sacred Heart. You know, the smell from the South Camden sewage treatment plant. How would you like to have that plant in Haddonfield?"

"No, I'm sure I wouldn't. I couldn't stand it. I don't see how those people live near there."

"And how about the trash incinerator that serves the whole area. Do you think we could find a nice site for it, say, in Vorhees?"

"Uh, that doesn't seem suitable ..."

"We also have two large prisons in Camden -- one state, and one county. How about if we re-locate the state one to Moorestown, and the county one to Cherry Hill?"

"I'm beginning to get your point, Father. But ..."

"Oh no, we've hardly begun," he continued. "Then there are those nine low-income public housing projects that Camden provides. Oh, we could sprinkle these around, couldn't we. There's one for Collingswood, and one for Merchantville; one for Gloucester, and one for Gibbsboro; one for Haddon Heights, and one for Maple Shade. And, of course, Burlington County doesn't have a Camden, so we'd have one each for Cinnaminson, Marlton and Evesham.

"And let's not stop there," Father hurried on. "Without Camden, where would our region put its ten scrapyards? Why, I think we'd have to put a scrapyard each in all the various towns we've mentioned above.

"Oh, my golly. We forgot soup kitchens. Well, the smaller communities that didn't get scrapyards, housing projects, prisons, and refuse plants could each get a soup kitchen. Wouldn't that be fair?"

"I'm beginning to see what you mean," Doyle's yuppie friend muttered. "Camden does do an awful lot for us, doesn't it. When you put it the way you do, it's hard for me to envision what we suburbanites would do without Camden!"

"Yes, Camden provides all that and more for you, my friend -- services which by your own value system would be almost beyond measurement in cost. Why, think of the environment in your neighborhood in Haddonfield, the environment that you chose and that you want to maintain for your daughters. If any of these things that we have discussed moved next door to you, all your planning would be lost, wouldn't it?

"Uh huh."

"Here's how it works, my friend: with all those poor people and waste facilities concentrated in old broken cities like Camden, you middle class people don't have to deal with any of it in your backyards. Isn't that how you have planned it?

"Uh..."

"Except there's still one problem, isn't there, my friend?" Doyle prodded.

"What's that?"

"Well, with so many of the poor grouped together in shattered neighborhoods next door to prisons and refuse plants, this set-up is apt to be breeding some unrest, isn't it. So that must

be why you're also voting to re-legalize those assault weapons, right? After all, you've got to protect yourself."

"Slow down, Father. This is sounding worse and worse. But what can we do? Surely you don't want to reconstruct Johnson's 'Great Society,' do you? Isn't that the alternative?"

"Compassion and humility, friend: keep those virtues close to heart; then you won't go far wrong," Doyle counseled. "And you might want to take another look at zoning laws," he added.

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And the second column:

DIALOGUE

**********FRANCIS CONROY

(COLUMN#2)

TOWARD A NEW INTERPRETATION OF THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

Sitting in the auditorium taking in my daughters' Friends school's Thanksgiving program last autumn, I found myself regretting the interpretation of the separation of church and state that has governed our public schools' culture since 1962. We need a new interpretation -- badly.

It wasn't so much the prayer in the 1950s (the Christian-biased Lord's Prayer) or the Bible reading (usually from Psalms) that was so important. Maybe a student got an occasional inspiration, or sense of security, from one of these. But I myself found them little distinguishable from the Pledge-of-Allegiance: a rote-learned blur, within which I only half understood where some words finished and other words started.

No, as I listened that day to the lyrics of eight-grades-full of warm and beautiful Thanksgiving hymns, I realized that it was in such small verses -- verses expressing hope, love and joy, of fullness, gratefulness and compassion -- that lay the glimmers of a hidden curriculum that in a very important way undergirded our subject lessons in those days before the Supreme Court action.

"Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee ..."

"Blessed are you, holy are you ... "

"Beside us to guide us, our God with us joining ..."

Such little verses -- and the Westfield Friends November 23 program included Native American and African ones, alongside the predominantly Christian -- were a kind of substratum to our lessons in the 1950s. Taken together, they provided an underlying hope. They gave us children a sense that at least a lot of adults believed there was a very Good force underlying this world. Such a hidden curriculum influenced our basic orientation toward life. Through this, I believe the door to nihilism may have, for many of us, been closed.

To focus deeper, the effect was that everything "secular" -- grades, money, careers (we, too, were interested in those!)-- wasn't ultimately important. Even as we strove for "the top," we sensed that here were deeper values that many adults quietly maintained. We sensed the gentle pull of an ever more perfect virtue, beauty, love.

Since 1962, what has replaced this? To use Cornel West's term from his essay on "Nihilism" in Race Matters, the former ethos has been replaced with a "market morality." The hidden curriculum that undergirds schools and life today is all about selling: about wealth and power, about image, careers and promotion. This underlying message, West points out, has in its more pernicious form driven the Black innercity underclass to nihilism, and in its mild form eroded the structure of meaning for much of the middle-class suburbs.

But wait: does this necessarily have to do with religion? Isn't it possible to build a structure of meaning to undergird our public life that is purely secular, thereby avoiding the problem of bias toward one religion? After all, our Constitution deliberately disallows the privileging of any religion.

As a philosopher, I need to report that the attempt by the Modern West to arrive at a secular philosophy that could take the place of Christianity -- or Judaism, or Islam -- to undergird public life has probably failed. Modern, secular, liberal thinking, i.e. the thinking of Hume, Kant, Jefferson, Franklin, Paine -- forefather of both today's "conservative" and "liberal" thought -- was supposed to generate a morality based on science and rationality. Instead it led to Nietzschean gloom, deconstructionism, fragmentation, and moral chaos.

Philosophers now are speculating that there may be no morality without specific moral communities; and the heart of specific moral communities seems to be an interpretation of the divine passed down through the generations. So, in a nutshell: if we continue to exclude these moral/religious communities from helping our schools, we may continue to reap a harvest of troubled young people.

We need new alternatives as to how we interpret the American commitment to keep church and state from forming an oppressive unity. We need to look at new models.

One might be this: allow each public school, depending on its students' religious make-up, to adopt a moral undergirding of its curriculum taken from a mixture of its constituent religious traditions. For example, a public school in a 70% Christian, 15% Jewish, and 15% secular humanist community might search for ways to reflect underlying values that, while they emphasizemore a Christian conception of the divine, also include generous attempts to voice alternative conceptions from Jewish and secular traditions. Programatically, this might involve readings to start the school day from the Beatitudes, St. Francis, Martin Luther King; the Torah and Martin Buber; and Albert Camus. It might involve a school performance of the Messiah at Christmastime, but also a Seder at Passover; and perhaps a celebration of humanist values on, say, the birthday of Darwin.

At another school, the majority community may be secular, or Jewish; or there may need to be two equally shared traditions, say Christian and Muslim, at perhaps an inner city school in North Jersey. Parents could send their children to the school nearest them, or choose one farther away.

I think we would find that often parents would prefer to send their child to a public school with a moral undergirding from a different religious tradition, rather than to a school with the reluctant, watered-down liberal secularism we have known increasingly since 1962. I know that I would rather send my daughters to a school undergirded with Jewish, Confucian, or Buddhist values -- none of which is our own tradition -- than have them languish in the vacuum of Santa Claus and the Easter bunny -- secularism, psychologism, and market-morality - that we now see.

Even the schools that choose to be predominantly secular might be better: for they would have undergirded themselves with humanism as a positive, creative choice.

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I did receive responses. I had actively solicited them through a questionnaire given to students who in December had just finished my Philosophy 101 class. Some students just checked this or that block, but some took up my invitation to write a "Letter to the Editor"-type response. Here is a representative sample, first for column #1:

I really enjoyed reading your column entitled "A Deeper Look at the Generous Suburban Taxpayer." I feel that articles such as this one should be included in The Source, the student newspaper for BCC. It will add some substance, that it so badly lacks. -- **Michael A.**

It's unforgivable how often we fail to count our blessings. Cornel West might say that the Volvo Republican is a conservative behaviorist contributing to the nihilistic threat facing Camden. The young man should be grateful that his community wasn't victimized like Camden and its residents. -- **Margo D.**

I enjoyed your tongue-in-cheek article on Camden and the yuppies. I certainly agree too often we forget why our suburban life is so comfortable and pristine. Let's not forget how Camden helps us. -- **Rana S.**

Your column made me smile. I never quite looked at Camden in that way. I say, "Yea!" for Father Doyle. -- **Clare D.**

Father Doyle's conversation with the gentleman was an eyeopener. I never actually thought of what Camden did for me on those terms. Although I have always thought of myself as having compassion for the residents of Camden, I never thought of just how much these people do for me and my family. To put it bluntly, Camden keeps the "ugly" industry and "ugly" people away from my door. I feel terribly guilty as I pass through their streets seeing how they live and just fifteen minutes away knowing how the "other side" lives, myself included. Because they are poor they are prisoners in their own homes and neighborhoods. It takes an extraordinary person to be able to overcome such adversity and make a better life for themselves.

Let's put ourselves in their shoes. ... It couldn't feel so good to get up in the morning and breathe in air that reeks of the sewage plant next door. It wouldn't feel so good to worry whether your child was going to make it to school and back home again without being harmed by the gangs that live in the housing project across thestreet.

The suggestion of re-zoning is a good one. But I must be honest, if I were given the opportunity to have a sewage plant or a housing project in my backyard, I would not be in favor of it. So we're back to square one. I don't have an answer, but I do have compassion and humility for whatever that's worth. -- **Theresa L.**

A representative sample of the responses to column #2 is as follows:

I disagree with the idea of combining religion and school. I believe that the home is for teaching and expressing religious beliefs, and the school should focus on reading, writing and arithmatic. -- **Rana S.**

I don't believe in religion in public schools. There is no place for it. Churches of every denomination are a dime a dozen, so if you want to pray and be one with God, then do it in church. I am, however, in agreement that courses in the different types of religion be offered on a volunteer basis only. -- **John D.**

I believe that there is a need for some form of religion in the schools. I like the example of mixing it in the schools by religious percentages. -- **Shaneika J.**

I am a Christian and I believe the schools, students, teachers and education curriculum have suffered immensely since the removal of prayer and virtually of God. It is my opinion that the values of this great country should be reinstated. With this in mind, I also realize that the vast diversity of religious beliefs makes it difficult to insist on everyone agreeing on one belief system (Christianity). You would be hard-pressed to get me to allow my children to be subjected to any other religion....

Although I would like to insist on Christianity, I must agree with the idea of looking at the make-up of religious beliefs in a school. ... I do, however, strongly believe that a certain belief, whether or not it is in the majority, should neither be discouraged nor encouraged as better or worse than any other. -- **Mark H.**

I feel that children enrolled in Catholic schools should be taught Christianity, but also be taught about other beliefs and traditions. Since public schools are a combination of many ethnic groups, teachers should follow a calendar, and as days of observation appear each month a lesson should always occur. This will erase ignorance as to other people's customs. ... Erasing ignorance is a start in creating harmony among mankind. -- **Theresa Z.**

I am in total agreement with these beliefs. Children should have something to hold onto, such as

the idea of a "good force" in this world. The government shouldn't have the right to hamper education of any type. As long as all of the religions are equally used, who could this harm? I think it could only do good. -- **Leigh Ann E.**

I don't feel that religion in public schools would solve any problems. For religion to be effective in shaping someone's life, it must be chosen. ... There definitely needs to be some separation of church and state especially when it comes to public schools.

What should be done following the Pledge of Allegiance is for there to be read words of inspiration and guidance. These words of inspiration could be from admired political leaders, sports figures, philosophers, and even religions (as long as it is not just one particular religion and not read as a prayer). I agree that something needs to be done about the public schools in this country, but prayer and religion will not solve the problem. If anything it is the disappearing and/or dysfunctioning family structure. -- **Richard P.**

The plan sounds like a good one, but it may be faced by a lot of negativity. Parents might feel their children are being forced into some religion, or the schools districts may argue that you would lose uniformity ... because each school would have to teach different (things).
-- **Michael C.**

If religion was brought back to the schools, perhaps we can create more morals. Today's youth need to belive in a higher being, right from wrong and development of the soul.

I think that today's children need spiritual guidance that they are not getting at home. We live in a plastic society. Children have to be taught, at an early age, about morality and values. A change must be made soon. If it isn't drugs it is AIDS that is destroying our children. I care for them deeply, and I wish I had the answers. The children are our future. I wish very much to help them develop to their full potential, and I am willing to teach and become involved in their development. -- **Mary S.**

I found your column to be interesting. Yet, being that I feel I lack insight to respond, I will not comment on it further than this: I agree with your argument of our children lacking morals and values. However I believe that the idea of changing schools individually to fit religious make-up is a bit idealistic. This morality should begin and and continually be enforced in the home

(which is not happening). Schools seem to be getting a bad rap for parents that are unable to do their jobs. -- **Daniel P.**

My response is "Yes!" I fully agree that knowledge of some kind of religion in a child's education is necessary, and much better than none at all, regardless of whose religion it is. I would gladly welcome the opportunity to have a well-rounded education and appreciation of all religions. In return, my child's life could be enriched with the promise and hope of meaning in life other than the shallow facade of materialistic desires. Furthermore, I would even allow my children to choose a religion which best suits **them** -- for their soul is not mine.

Thank you for accepting my response. I believe your issue is very impotant. I attended the public school system from 1969-1982, and if I was not given religious instruction at home, I know my life would be completely different -- because I sincerely believe that without God, I am nothing. -- **Nancy W.**

How a Different Learning Emerged

I date the beginning of the change in my project, or the transition to its unplanned second phase, as the day in February when I presented what I had done so far to the Mid-Career Fellows seminar at Princeton. The reason it was the beginning was because it was here that I was first experienced spoken, face-to-face responses to my work. It was here that conversation began: dialogue, or to use Plato's term "dialectic." And it would be about dialectic, and its differences from other forms of communication, that the most important learning that I experienced in this project would eventually take place.

I will try to convey to you that learning. But first, a warning: it ends not in any neatly wrapped up conclusion, as projects are "supposed" to end, but in aporeia -- perplexity, confusion, the stuff that sends us "back-to-the drawing board." My mental state at the end I would describe as perhaps more humble and more thawed -- but rather devoid of optimistic "next steps" or ambitious "plans." More yin, one might say, than yang. Yet as I will try to

demonstrate, this ending turned out to be all the more Platonic/Socratic, but in a different way than I expected. Instead of a confirmation of my dialogue project, I got a dose, perhaps, of what Socratic ignorance feels like.

Going back to February 7, I arrived at the Fellows seminar armed with some good rhetoric, i.e. the above two "Moral Dialogue" columns; with some evidence of "process" with students, i.e. the above responses; and with a rationale that drew on Plato for validation that "what I was doing was right." In retrospect, I almost succeeded in bowling everyone over, in getting the praise and recognition I sought and going right on with finishing the project without a hitch. In case the other Fellows didn't recognize the virtue of my columns, I brought along tributes from San Francisco Chronicle columnist Art Hoppe, who said he liked both of them.

Professor Rabb, however, brought in a note of caution. It was from an unexpected place. He questioned not my rhetoric, but my commitment to dialogue. Basically his point was that the universally popular "Father Doyle" dialogue manipulated us rather than inviting us to dialogue. Hence the responses were all positive -- who could not like Father Doyle? So, the first example of so-called professor-student dialogue amounted to not dialogue at all, but speech-making followed by applause, or at best followed by a flock of laudatory "mini-speeches." There was no back-and-forth, no raising of "hard" questions, and no evident passion for truth.

Furthermore, Professor Rabb lowered a second boom. He questioned whether the appeal for historical precedent to Plato's Socrates, to the Socratic method, and to Platonic dialogue was really much more than rhetoric. For one thing, I didn't seem to be headed toward real dialogue. But for another, I seemed to be invoking Plato and Socrates' names and doctrines in a way that once again betrayed an anxiousness to preclude discussion. Wasn't there actually a lot of controversy within the philosophic profession as to whether Socrates was (a) mid-wife to

others giving birth to their own ideas, or (b) master manipulator at getting others to buy his own doctrines? Wasn't there similar controversy about whether Plato was (a) exemplary promoter of freedom of thought, or (b) totalitarian advocate of censorship? What about, for example, the books of I.F. Stone on Socrates, and Karl Popper on Plato? Not that I had to accept their views, Professor Rabb made clear, or even give them equal time: but wasn't it strange, wasn't it manipulative of me, the self-proclaimed promoter of dialogue, to invoke Socrates and Plato in support of what I was doing as if this should be accepted without question or controversy?

The brunt of Professor Rabb's unexpected criticisms would only hit me gradually. (He actually put them much more mildly and kindly than my restatement of them here.) At the time, I brushed by them as minor points that I would handle easily. I would insert a few lines about the "other" views concerning Socrates and Plato. And I would continue writing "Moral Dialogue" columns but with a bit more awareness that I needed to think through more honestly how they were expected to lead to genuine dialogue.

I wrote another column, this one a more controversial, experimental attempt. The new element was that this dealt with a struggle in which I myself was already embroiled: contract negotiations at my college. What follows is the first two pages of that column:

DIALOGUE
******************FRANCIS CONROY**

(COLUMN#3)
THE ADVERSARY RELATIONSHIP:
DOES IT BELONG IN OUR SCHOOLS?

When I have worn my "No Contract, Still Working" button to the philosophy classes I teach, students have sometimes looked worried. Are they going to be caught in the middle of a bitter conflict? And how does this square with the moral teachings that they are exploring in our class?

For example, Management threatens "no increase in wages" and "cut backs in health care benefits." The Union wants substantial salary increases -- even (or sometimes especially) for already-well-paid teachers, some of whom may have let their commitment to their vocation slide.

Management demands hidden cameras to watch the performance of teachers who have been reported to be "burnt out" or careless. Also it wants more required teacher time in offices and classrooms. The Union indignantly says it is "aghast" at the former -- "A threat to academic freedom!" and notes that the latter shows a lack of understanding of the academic vocation. Teaching, points out the Union, involves enormous responsibilities to keep up in one's field, to prepare, and to evaluate, all beyond the confines of classroom or office. And yet, what the Union may **not** address is the issue of self-policing. What about members who abuse the privilege of unscheduled time, who moonlight, etc.? Out of the union ethos usually comes little emphasis on maintaining a rigorous, self-vigilant professional community (like that of medical doctors or professors at top universities).

Management proposes the idea of doing away with tenure. The Union again screams "Academic freedom!" But can a union mentality even understand this very delicate issue of academic freedom (it is fraught with reciprocal responsibilities, and did not have its origins in the union movement)? Or is the line all-to-blurred, in the way Unions think, between "Preserve our academic freedom!" and "Don't touch our jobs!" -- which means don't touch them even when some teachers hide behind tenure to protect mediocrity and uncaring? Again, self-policing is missing.

I have cut out the last page of this third "Moral Dialogue" column, the page on which I went on to try to suggest solutions. This is because I was soon to recant my proposed solutions.

My course of action was to seek feed back on the third column from the other Fellows in the seminar. I came away chastened on two accounts. One, the solution that I proposed in the now-cut third page -- moving toward an American Association of University Professors model for faculty organization, to replace the National Teachers Association industrial-union model -- was revealed to be extremely problematic by several professors with AAUP experience. Two, the family model that I found preferable to the adversary model on the first page raised more

They are right to be worried -- not necessarily due to immediate issues (e.g., any imminent strike), but due to longer-range and deeper ones. For a key relationship that exists at the heart of Burlington County College, like other public institutions -- **the adversary relationship** -- actually violates the traditional ethics that we learn and are nurtured by in philosophy class. It violates the moral teachings of the Greco-Judeo-Christian tradition, and it violates much of the ethics of humanism in their Western form (e.g. Kantian) or their Eastern form (e.g. Confucian).

No, we educators don't seem to practice what we teach. But the situation that leads to this is complex.

To understand, we first need to consider the family. The family has traditionally been, almost everywhere, a model for how to run human institutions in general. In American society today -- dominated as it is by individualism, competitiveness, image, and self-interest -- the family sometimes seems like a relic of a previous era. As Robert Bellah points out in Habits of the Heart, within the family a different ethos survives: one of interdependence, care, and a sense that responsible guidance (by those who are, at least for the time being, "higher") needs to be paired with due respect (by those who are now "lower").

It is in Confucian humanism, perhaps, that the ethos is most carefully spelled out. Relationships are the key: parent / son or daughter; older sibling / younger sibling; higher administrator / lower civil servant. In each case, the initial responsiblity for making the relationship rightful and genuine rests with the "higher" person. If the parent does not act like a parent, the relationship is quite doomed from the beginning. If the administrator or trustee does not rather selflessly promote the common good, the lower civil servants are quite behind the eight-ball from the beginning in trying to fulfill their part. In fact, it is in just this sort of situation that they may turn to the union, or adversary-based, approach.

The abandonment of a family-derived ethos in favor of an adversary-based one is particularly problematic for the vocations of teacher and professor. For one thing, although the teachers are in the lower half of the administrator / teacher diad, they are in the upper half of the teacher / student one. Furthermore, this teacher / student relationship is a particularly central and powerful one for the whole community. It is where the community guides its young in learning to be human. Schools influence virtually everyone, from future top executives, to future clerks and future custodians.

Yet, consider what happens when an adversary relationship is built into our public academies. With the adversary ethos, we are not a family, or anything derived from a family, any more. We are now divided into "sides." And each "side" makes "demands."

dialogue" to (much more real) dialectic.

The Phaedrus is an amazingly multi-layered dialogue, that seems at first to be about love (and has wonderful insights about it) but is ultimately about speechmaking or rhetoric. Socrates encounters Phaedrus, a younger man who is beside himself over the brilliance of a speech he has recently heard by Lysias. He entices Socrates out of the latter's usual city haunts to a brook in the countryside, with the speech as bait. He gives the speech to Socrates. The theme is that one should have sex with a non-lover rather than a lover. Socrates notes Phaedrus's total rapture with the speech. But Socrates remarks that the speech is not well made, and that he himself could make a better one, using exactly the same thesis. He does so, draping a towel over his head because he does not believe in what he is saying. Phaedrus is even more agog with this speech. But then Socrates, about to leave for home, discloses that he is getting his Divine sign again -- the sign that stops him whenever there is something that he absolutely can not do. What he can not do in this case is to leave the spot, a location enchanted by all kinds of divinities, without recanting. For he has insulted Love, who is also a divinity. So Socrates gives a second speech, an awesome speech, even better than the first, but this time in praise of having sex with a lover -- and more important, in praise of having the intercourse of words, conversation, dialogue with an an older, wiser person who loves you. Phaedrus is agog a third time. This speech leaves him even more "in love" than the other two.

Then Socrates confronts Phaedrus. How many times is he going to let himself be seduced by beautiful words? How many times is he going to fall in love with speeches? Is he forever going to be like an empty bottle, ready to be filled up by persuasive opinions, by irresistably attractive appearances?

Socrates challenges Phaedrus to reflect, to think: to think about what has just happened, to think about why the speeches seduced him, and to think about the issue of truth in all of this:

spectres than I had anticipated of patriarchy, of paternalism, of anti-democracy and despotism. The ever-present possibility of abuse of power, in the family model, seemed to cloud what I was trying to say. And, reminiscent of what had happened earlier in my handling of Socrates and Plato, my handling of Confucius and Confucians here bespoke manipulation rather than full invitation to dialogue. Within the Confucian tradition, I didn't mention, there is actually bitter debate as to whether the Confucian model of a family-centered ethos is wonderful, or terrible; is humane, or oppressive. The issues are actually so complex that even contemporary feminists well-versed in Confucian thought both like and dislike Confucian humanism: like it for its emphasis on relationality and family, yet abhor its legacy of hierarchy, especially of husband-wife hierarchy.

Actually, my intention in the "Adversary" column had been to propose a non-patriarchal, even partly matriarchal version of Confucian humanism. Yet to do so well would have required far more space than a column offered. In fact, perhaps no form of writing could have done it well. Only within a face-to-face seminar, where real back-and-forth interaction could have taken place, could the complex idea be properly aired. I was coming to perceive that perhaps what I needed was <u>dialectic,</u> the dialectic Plato himself argued beautifully for in his succesor to the <u>Republic</u>, the <u>Phaedrus</u>.

The <u>Phaedrus</u> was the dialogue with which, as chance would have it, I developed a renewed, intimate aquaintance late in the spring semester. This came about for two reasons: one, my Plato professor at Princeton, Alexander Nehamas, had just completed a powerful new translation of the <u>Phaedrus</u>; and two, my colleague Jane Kelly Rodeheffer from St. Mary's College in Minnesota had just chosen it for a course that she and I were to co-teach at an Adirondack mountain retreat in May. My encounter with the <u>Phaedrus</u> would complete my year's journey: from Plato (<u>Republic</u>) to Plato (<u>Phaedrus</u>), and from (rather fake) "moral

does it really not matter, as Phaedrus first guesses, whether a speech is concerned with truth or not?

Socrates goes on to teach, and show, Phaedrus that perhaps more valuble than all this speechmaking and speech-loving is the conversation that can now occur after the speeches: the conversation that they are having, the back-and-forth, at an intimate level, that reflects on the passion before. This, Socrates points out, might need to be led by one who knows the other person well. This makes it possible that this person, who Plato calls the dialectician -- the perhaps slightly older and wiser person who knows one's soul well, who loves it, and who is concerned for its growth, and who at the same time is a lover of truth -- can conduct the art Socrates calls "psychagogia," or soul-leading. This psychagogia turns out to be much more valuble than the art of speeches, or other forms of rhetoric -- in our time we might say, much more important than any "teaching" conveyed by television, advertising, film, theater, or even writing in general -- column-writing, for example.

Ultimately it is not in reading a column, listening to a speech, or watching a movie -- a column, speech, or movie no matter how good -- but in the intimate, usually one-to-one, discussion <u>after</u> that we can begin to move toward truth. Speeches, films, and columns all entail large elements of seduction. They simply are not in the right <u>form</u> to be vehicles for approaching truth. They manipulate appearances. They are made to attract admiration, to influence, to sway. The best of them <u>might</u> lead us in a helpful direction -- as Socrates' second speech did Phaedrus. In this case, what a "good" speech can do is to fill us up with what turn out to be "correct beliefs." But correct beliefs are not knowledge. In the Greek, <u>pistis</u> is not <u>episteme</u>. Beliefs, even if they turn out to be correct ones, are not something <u>grasped</u>, something you have a handle on conceptually -- something that is really yours. They are something with which someone else has filled you up. And a better manipulator of appearances

might always come along and fill you up with something else, even with their opposite. A person that can be so filled up, emptied, and filled up again, remains, like Phaedrus, little more than an empty jar. Such a person is susceptible to getting filled up with whatever some Lysias or Socrates -- or Conroy -- seduces him to.

Therefore, no kind of speeches or video productions or columns should be confused with true dialogue; columns, etc., are not true dialogue even if they are answered with counter columns, rival advertisements, etc. True dialogue, dialectic, can only be on an intimate scale; can only exist with openended back-and-forth interaction, sensitively probing, regulairly checking on interpretations, always looking for distinctions that need to be made (Plato's "collection and division"). It must be unswayingly truth-directed. And, finally, it needs to be led by a skilled and focussed practicioner, a dialectician who is familiar with the condition of one's soul.

Dialectic, in the hands of a capable dialectician, can lead the "other" to give birth to him or her self. This is the sense in which the dialectician is deserving of the name "midwife."

Such is what I learned from a fortuitous, intimate study of the Phaedrus this spring, thanks to Jane Rodeheffer and Alexander Nehamas. Now, I want to return to my original plan -- for promoting moral dialogue on a college campus through the use of a column -- and try to apply this new learning, which seems to fit remarkably. It has struck me increasingly in the second half of the year that the original conception actually did not promote real dialogue. not dialogue in the sense of dialectic. In fact, it now seems to me that this plan, if promoted as if it were creating dialogue, might actually add to the problem rather than making a decisive turn toward a solution.

The problem is an appearance / reality problem. It is a problem that I noted, in fact, in my own original list of contemporary "moral issues":

the troubling power of advertising and television programming -- haven't we let an

all forms of writing as dangerous.) Or, it might just be that the answer lies in small group, even one-to-one, reflection after being subjected to "columns," or "speeches," or whatever else is out there in the bombardment of appearances and seductions that we call "communications." Perhaps it is in this small group reflection that true dialogue, dialectic, can occur. "Dialogue," then, would start when the column by that name, and when the answers to that column, recede, and the discussion about them begins. The beginning of true dialogue is perhaps the reflection on bogus Dialogue.

But then, doesn't that get us right back into the philosophy classroom? Philosophy classes -- love of wisdom classes, dialectic classes -- surely should be doing this work. Yet, ironically, the purpose of this "Moral Dialogue" project was to get dialogue on moral problems out of the classroom; I envisioned it as having a big impact on broad numbers of people. Yet true philosophy can only affect small numbers of people, even perhaps only one or two people at a time.

To complicate things further, our colleges are not funded for the dialectic kind of education, not even in philosophy classes. Our classes are, instead, under pressure to get bigger and more "high tech." Our administrations call for: Impact on large numbers! Measurable results! Use of high technology! Popularity with students! Getting high evaluations! Impressing money-granting agencies!

In conclusion, mass campaigns, or grandiose plans, for injecting moral dialogue into college campuses should probably leave us suspicious. Yet somehow all this should not leave us totally helpless; nor, if we take heed from Plato, should we be cynical. Dialectic is possible and can be encouraged, once we are aware of what it is and what it isn't. Perhaps dialectic is only possible in the shadows, however: in the corners and crevices not reached by the glaring light of

enemy into our homes without enough consideration of its effect on our souls?

Only the problem is even broader than this formulation indicated. The pervasive emphasis in our society on appearances -- hype, if you will -- presents large, humbling difficulties for the true philosopher, the true dialectician, the person who really would seek truth. For when we move toward dialogue, we are apt, out of cultural conditioning, to move at first toward only the appearance of dialogue. We know we need it -- but we need it so much that we can't even distinguish what it is from what it isn't. We mistake it for its semblance. And if we then persist in claiming that the goods we are peddling, i.e., the appearance of dialogue, is true dialogue, then are we not moving <u>even further</u> from the truth than where we began?

Put it this way: true dialogue is greatly needed by our society. Now, someone comes along using the word "Dialogue" and writing columns, or making speeches. He can get far -- a lot of applause! -- using the word "Dialogue" precisely because at least some people, including funding agencies, are aware that dialogue is what our society sorely needs. So this someone makes the claim that dialogue is what he is doing: dialogue is "writing columns, and asking for letters to the editor." But isn't a more accurate description of the "art" he is practicing something like this: he is calling attention to himself, and trying to seduce people to view him and his views favorably, all concealed behind the catch-phrase 'dialogue'? And as for what he is encouraging students to do, doesn't it amount to the same thing?

Where is the true dialogue? Where are the essential elements of dialectic?

But then is it better <u>not</u> to write the columns, not to write at all?

As in the opening stanza of the <u>Tao Te Ching</u> -- the tao that can be named is not the true tao -- the dialogue that can be named, the dialogue that publicly advertises itself, is not the true dialogue. But then what is the solution?

It might really be <u>not</u> to write columns at all. (Plato himself, after all, rejected almost

"real," "official" education, even official projects like "Moral Dialogue." Psychagogia happens, but it is something quite different from credit-hours.

In retrospect, it was only in those crevices, the dark spots where my official "Moral Dialogue" project began to fail, that the way was cleared for a much more modest real one to be born. Dialogue began to take place during my year, but not the dialogue I could plan or control.

Next year, perhaps, I should retreat from trying to be a moral columnist to trying to be just a better philosopher.

Or should I?

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