

Excerpt from: "Notes on Dialogue" by Stringfellow Barr (St. John's College)

. . . . 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:

\* 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.

\* 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.

\* 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.

\* 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.

\* 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 and smoking are permissible aides to listening!)

\* 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.

\* 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.

\* 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.

\* [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.

\* 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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