"CONVERSATION" AND THE ETHICS OF DISCOURSE

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Abstract

The author contends that the status of "knowledge" in the university is currently

uncertain, and that a principled approach, an "ethics of discourse," is necessary. The

proposed solution is an ethical arrangement based on the idea of "conversation." A

critical review of the writings of Michael Oakeshott, Richard Rorty, Jane Roland Martin,

and Jurgen Habermas provides the basis for the discussion. The conclusion is that

"conversation" provides an attractive and viable ethical response to the problem of how

to frame competing knowledge claims in the university.

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Introduction

Statement of the Problem

> ... the University becomes one site among others where *the question of being-together is raised*, raised with an urgency that proceeds from the absence of the institutional forms (such as the nation-state), which have historically served to mask that question for the past three centuries or so. (emphasis Readings, 1996:20)

My own experience in university classrooms has provided me with the opportunity to think about *"being-together"*—alas on a somewhat different plane than Readings, who starts with a premise about the decline of the nation-state. My sense of the current situation in the university is that over the last few decades the status of "knowledge" has been a heated and contested terrain. New insights and positions have burst forth in unexpected ways and places. The traditional interest of the scholar—"the theoretical interpretation of the world" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966:4)—has become increasingly problematic. Sarup agrees, adding "There have been a succession of new perspectives to understand and use" (1978:1) . In learning "to use" different perspectives, however, I am still left pondering the relationship between them, and about how to characterize the range of positions as a whole. I am interested in spelling out a principled approach, a way of *"being-together,"* that can help to manage the complexity of

discourse[1] when the status of knowledge is so uncertain.

For a fuller example of the sort of theoretical tensions I am referring to, consider this definition of postmodernism by Terry Eagleton:

> . . . a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation . . . it sees the world as contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable, indeterminate, a set of disunified cultures or interpretations which breed a degree of scepticism about the objectivity of truth, history and norms, the givenness of natures and the coherence of identities. (1996:vii)

Even though Eagleton is critical of postmodernism, he nonetheless offers a coherent and clear definition. There is no denying the influence and sober adoption of postmodernism as a starting point in contemporary theory. But when we pause to remember that much of the story of Western thought, particularly the Enlightenment, is very much about "rationality," "truth," and "progress," a tension appears to emerge for those who take both schools of thought seriously. It would seem at first glance that postmodernism is an antagonistic and exclusive starting point when compared to other, more traditional discourses in Western thought. How to deal with the situation of opposed and competing

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By "discourse" I adopt its standard sociological meaning as a "specialist system of knowledge" (Allan et. al., 1995:207) that has been used to talk about issues such as power, identity, and positionality.

discourses? Atkins writes:

> Still the question imposes itself: confronted by the bewildering array of theoretical
>
> possibilities (options? opportunities?), what is a reader to do? Even if *we* do not
>
> advance an argument for any of the theories represented here, *you* will ultimately
>
> have to make some choices, and choices entail consequences. And even if we
>
> choose not to *advance* here an argument for deconstruction or psychoanalysis,
>
> each of us has, in our own life and work, made a choice, and we may as well
>
> divulge our theoretical investments . . . . (emphasis Atkins, 1989:x)

While I find the themes of "choice" and "consequence" attractive since they highlight an

epistemological responsibility, I am not sure that we have to "ultimately" decide or that

the process of making a "choice" is all that transparent or simple. Could not ambiguity

and uncertainty be part of a "choice"? What are the implications of making an exclusive

choice in favour of one starting point over many others? Does being "invested" in a

theory necessarily include the deliberate dismissal of other theories? Atkins's description

of the reader's existential position is not helpful in providing readers with a useful

framework for thinking about that position in sufficient depth. What would an alternative

position with regard to seemingly incommensurable discourses look like?

Maxine Greene's essay "What counts as philosophy of education?" is an

impressive *tour de force* of contemporary theory that highlights the problem of how to do

philosophy of education when there are so many conflicting views about the status of

philosophy itself—its subject, methods, and goals. She opens with the words of Hélène

Cixous, who, asked to give an Oxford Amnesty International Lecture in 1992 and address

questions of social justice, shared her reservations in the journal *Critical Inquiry* (Winter

1993:201-219):

> And I asked myself who these questions were meant for. For a "philosopher"? If
>
> they were meant for me, for myself, what have I to say about freedom and the
>
> self? I wondered whether I should not point out that *all* the components of the
>
> philosophy of the self in the West have, on the one hand, had a liberating effect,
>
> since the values of freedom of expression, of opinion, and so on, have been
>
> associated with them; but point out too that this philosophy was undermined by
>
> aspects unforeseen and at the time unforeseeable, repressive aspects having to do
>
> with phallocentric and colonial patterns of speech. And so, if I were to work
>
> towards this philosophy, might it not be necessary to do two things at once: to
>
> emphasize both the permanent value of the philosophy of rights and,
>
> simultaneously, the inadequacy, the limits of the breakthrough it represented; to
>
> construct and deconstruct, to praise and criticize, at one and the same time.
>
> (Cixous, in Greene, 1995:3-4)

There are three points that stand out for me here. First, Cixous believes that

questions are "meant for" someone. Not just intellectual puzzles or theoretical adventures

for their own sake, the questions which philosophy poses, questions about "freedom" and

the "self" in particular, are connected to lived lives and are thus of great social import.

Second, Cixous refuses to identify herself entirely with one tradition. Atkins's notion of

"choice" here is cast in a more complex way in trying to wrestle with the relationship

between discourses in a manner that does not essentialize the viability of some against

others. Finally, she positions herself in a seemingly contradictory moment - "to construct

and deconstruct, to praise and criticize." Cixous feels it is necessary to respect tradition

but to invoke it with caution, be humble enough to admit the limits of her knowledge in

choosing not to identify with one paradigm, and connect the questions to real people and

consequences. Unlike Atkins, her stance opens and balances, rather than chooses and

closes.

Other scholars have expressed similar concerns about the problematic relationality

of discourses. Greene's interpretation of Cixous's problem reads as a "tension with regard

to a desire for the old standards and an acknowledgment of postmodern scepticism and

questioning" (1995:3). Jean-Francois Lyotard, responding to the question "What is the

postmodern?," reminds us that "the postmodern is decidedly a part of the modern"

(1992:12). Jurgen Habermas warns of the pitfall of ". . . the sterile opposition between

abstract universalism and a self-contradictory relativism" (1993:vii). Finally, Jacques

Derrida, in a candid interview, says that "I'm in favor of tradition. I'm respectful of and a

lover of the tradition. There's no deconstruction without the memory of the tradition"

(Olson and Gale, 1991:128). When taken together the concerns of these scholars provide

evidence for the argument that to engage in multiple discourses is not a simple affair.

Each of them alerts us to something different: Greene of the "tensions" between different

discourses, Lyotard and Derrida of their necessary connectedness, Habermas of the

dangers of dichotomous thinking and choice.

There is a great deal at stake here for those who recognize the complexity of discourse. If we recognize the wealth of discourses available that speak to our concerns then we must also be sensitive to their different, and sometimes even conflicting, assumptions and intentions. How to characterize the scholar's position? How to live with uncertainty while taking seriously our right to know more? How to ethically inform our stance? I want to respond to these questions by looking at how "conversation" can frame ethical possibilities.

Review of the Literature

Broadly conceived the idea of *conversation* is an old and persistent one. Classical examples are not difficult to find. Plato described the intellectual adventures of his teacher, Socrates, in the form of a series of extended dialogues. Aristotle's On Rhetoric was among the first systematic accounts of effective communication that inaugurated the venerable discipline of rhetoric. John Stuart Mill, in his essay On Liberty, defended what he called "freedom of the expression of opinion" (1991:59) by arguing that in silencing any opinion we run a risk in two directions: the suppressed opinion may be true or partially true, and only in open debate and discussion can a rigorous meaning be clarified and accepted. Modern examples are also easy to locate. Most recently, Tannen's The Argument Culture: Moving From Debate to Dialogue is a look at current North American culture and how "argument," with its winners- and-losers mentality, has corrupted the goals of sharing ideas and deepening understanding.

Some authors use the metaphor of conversation in a stricter sense as a way of thinking about the framing of discourse. For example, political philosopher Michael Oakeshott used the metaphor of conversation to talk about discourse in a way that I find very appealing:

> As civilized human beings, we are the inheritors, neither of an inquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of an accumulating body of information, but of a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and made more articulate in the course of centuries. It is a conversation which goes on both in public and within each of ourselves. Of course there is argument and inquiry and information, but wherever these are profitable they are to be recognized as passages in this conversation, and perhaps they are not the most captivating of the passages. It is the ability to participate in this conversation, . . . which distinguishes the human being from the animal and the civilized man from the barbarian. . . . practical enterprise is recognized not as an isolated activity but as a partner in a conversation, and the final measure of intellectual achievement is in terms of its contribution to the conversation in which all universes of discourse meet. (1991:490-491)

Oakeshott's comparison of discourse to conversation allows him the opportunity to talk about discourse in interesting ways. I am drawn to the notions of "partner," "participate," and "contribution". I am intrigued that Oakeshott feels that moments of argument are "not the most captivating of the passages." Oakeshott seems to have not only found a way around the moments of splintering polarity that I identified earlier, but to find those

moments none too interesting. There is no denying, however, that many issues still have

to be worked out, such as power in the form of access to the "conversation" (Who defines

the parameters? Is everyone able to participate? Are all discourses given equal weight?).

But as a starting point I am convinced of the fertility of Oakeshott's comparison of

discourse to conversation.

Richard Rorty gives explicit credit to Oakeshott for inspiring him to adopt the

metaphor of "conversation" himself. Where they differ, of course, is on how they use it.

Rorty's pragmatism seeks to challenge the traditional Cartesian-Kantian framework and

its obsession with certainty:

> If we see knowledge as a matter of conversation and of social practice, rather than
>
> as an attempt to mirror nature, we will not be likely to envisage a metapractice
>
> which will be the critique of all possible forms of social practice. (1979:171)

A significant part of his critique of the metaphor of "mirror" as a way of representing

knowledge is his argument for the adoption of "conversation" instead. Rorty insists that

the "mirror" metaphor has dominated philosophy for too long, and that themes like

"contingency" and "irony," arguably important to our moral lives and poorly represented

in the "mirror," can find better expression in a "conversation" based on hermeneutic

principles.

As an English rhetorical trope metaphor has a rich history. Cassirer called it ". . .

the fundamental form of verbal *conceiving*" (Emphasis Cowan and Feucht-Haviar,

1978:i). Metaphor helps to convey things in a new light by positing a relationship

between two unlike things that have some relevant qualities in common. It is these common "qualities" that spark the imagination and are the catalyst for new insight and understanding. Both Oakeshott and Rorty clearly intend to use "conversation" in this way.

Yet another model of "conversation" is put forth by Jane Roland Martin, who is interested in "Reclaiming" a "conversation" about "the ideals governing the education of both sexes" (1985:7), arguing that an education informed by a plethora of historical participants is necessary if we want the best education for girls and boys. Martin uses the term "conversation" but it is invoked as a way to help her think about the political act of "reclamation":

> We need to know what thinkers of the past have had to say about women's education, but not in order to stand on anyone's shoulders. Whose shoulders would we choose? Each of the five historical parties to our conversation has insight into our topic, but each one also contains serious flaws. Moreover, none speaks in a late-twentieth-century tongue. What we want is acquaintanceship and conversation, not discipline and dogma. (Martin, 1985:175)

"Acquaintanceship and conversation" replaces "discipline and dogma" as a starting point for the ethical relationship between past theories and contemporary concerns.

Jurgen Habermas has a very different sense of how discourse can be framed. With Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action (1990) and the follow up, Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics (1993) Habermas has made significant and controversial contributions to the field of discourse theory. Here is how McCarthy, in

the introduction to <u>Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action</u>, defines Habermas's

project:

> If taking modern pluralism seriously means giving up the idea that philosophy can
>
> single out a privileged way of life, or provide an answer to the question "How
>
> should I (we) live?" that is valid for everyone, it does not, in Habermas's view,
>
> preclude a general theory of a much narrower sort, namely a theory of justice. The
>
> aim of the latter is to reconstruct the moral point of view as the perspective from
>
> which competing normative claims can be fairly and impartially adjudicated.
>
> (1990:viii)

What would "justice" look like in discourse? I am drawn to the work of Habermas since

he looks specifically at "competing normative claims" and how difference can be

negotiated. Habermas never uses the term "conversation" but, as I shall argue later, his

conception of "communicative action" is very much a type of "conversation," albeit a

highly formalized one.

Methodology

Each of the above authors utilizes the idea of "conversation" as a way to frame

discourse, some highly metaphoric, some more removed. I am fascinated with the idea of

conversation, and will focus my research on how it is used by these four authors, and

what we can learn from that use. How can we benefit from such comparisons? What is

the point of looking at how different authors use the same idea, but with differing, maybe

even conflicting, assumptions and intentions? In a peculiar way, as Martin's (1985) work

suggests, the nature of the subject justifies itself—how best to demonstrate the viability of conversation as a way of framing discourse than to put the authors in "conversation."

My strategy is to conduct a critical review of the literature to inform my discussion. The work of each author will anchor my writing. I address the material historically—moving from the earliest writing of Oakeshott to the most recent by Habermas—the justification being that the ideas of the four authors are conceptually related and each one builds upon the last. Hence Oakeshott's "conversation" will have an impact on how I draw on Rorty, and both in turn will influence my reading of Martin and Habermas. By taking up the relevant points in the literature, my ultimate concern is to provide an overarching argument in favour of a certain way of thinking about the framing of discourse that can inform our "*being-together*" in the university.

Chapter One - Michael Oakeshott and *Modes of Experience*

In critically discussing how Oakeshott utilizes the metaphor of "conversation" to

frame discourse, I want to proceed in three steps. First, in heeding a point made by Fuller

that an understanding of Oakeshott's later work is dependent on "the philosophical

understanding of human experience" which occupied Oakeshott's attention in his earlier

work (1989:2), I want to begin by outlining the theoretical assumptions that sound from a

distance, but loudly, in his later writings. Second, I will then describe the controlling

principles which Oakeshott insists can give his notion of conversation a broad purpose

and direction. Finally, I want to examine the specific types of activity that Oakeshott feels

ought to be going on in conversation. By working through the broad metaphysical

assumptions which provide the backdrop to Oakeshott's "conversation," and proceeding

to its thematic intentions and working mechanics, I hope to demonstrate how his notion

of "conversation" fits like the final piece within his detailed metaphysical puzzle.

Revealing that Plato and Hegel were his greatest teachers, Oakeshott is quick to

defend his philosophical allegiance to *Idealism* (1933:6). His first major work,

Experience and its Modes, was published in 1933; Rationalism in Politics and other

Essays, his next major contribution, in 1962. Despite the considerable time which had

elapsed between them, both texts (and all his later writings) remain firmly rooted in the

philosophical school of Idealism, which privileges the "mind" and its products, namely

"ideas" or "concepts," as some absolute or universal "reality":

What is achieved and is satisfactory in experience is a coherent world of ideas,

and this is satisfactory solely on account of its coherence, that is, its unity and
completeness. And again, what is satisfactory in experience is what is individual
and therefore a whole in itself. And once more, what is satisfactory is what is
universal and absolute. And these are the characteristics of what is real. Reality is
a coherent world of ideas, and it is real because it is coherent. This world is not a
world of mere ideas, because the world of experience is not such a world. In
experience, that is, there is always a reference beyond what is merely true to what
is real, because what is merely true—a coherent world of mere ideas—is, in the
end, neither complete nor absolute, but an abstraction. Reality is a coherent world
of concrete ideas, that is of things. Consequently, it is one, a single system, and it
is real only as a whole. (Oakeshott, 1933:58)

For Oakeshott there is no knowledge of things apart from concepts about them. Our

knowledge of reality is derived from our experience, necessarily a thinking experience,

since we only have ideas to work with. Truth is measured as a coherent world of ideas.

Unity and completeness are the criteria for better or worse interpretations of the real

which is universal and absolute. We all live within the "given," which is "a complex,

significant whole," (1933:29), where the abstraction of truth meets the universal and

absolute background of the real. The rational, which is equated with coherence, is

preferred everywhere over its opposite, the irrational, or incoherence. The individual thus

experiences reality as a thinking subject, partaking of some version of the truth in the

form of a coherent (rational) world of ideas, which, being abstract when compared to the

world of everyday experience, is nonetheless related to the universal and absolute world of the real.

The implication for Oakeshott's later formulation of conversation, once we understand his use of both a "universal and absolute world of ideas" and the individual pursuit of "truth," is that conversation will lie within the first while structuring the second. For Oakeshott the "world of ideas" is constant, foundational, and requires no further proof or analysis. The structuring of the differences between individual pursuits, however, does require further work—which is where conversation becomes central.

Different individuals will, of course, experience different realities as they pursue and live different versions of the truth. "Diversity" appears in the world no less than its twin, unity (Oakeshott, 1933:70). Oakeshott's first move in dealing with this diversity is to break up differing epistemological claims into "modes of experience," which are not parts of reality, but "the whole from a limited standpoint" (1933:70). Here is how Oakeshott describes the relationship between various modes of experience:

> No one of these modes of experience is, in any sense whatever, based upon or dependent upon any other; no one is derived from any other, and none directly related to any other. This does not, of course, mean that these modes of experience are merely separate and have no place in no universe, for that is impossible. They are abstractions from the single whole of experience, and consequently meet in the whole to which they belong. They arise from arrests in experience, and they derive their significance from their connexion with the totality of experience. (1933:76)

Science, as a mode of experience, to follow Oakeshott's reasoning, is in no way related

to, say, history, as a mode, but they are related in that they are both connected to the

"totality of experience"—the place where all modes of experience meet. The truth of a

mode is "relative," writes Oakeshott, "to the degree of completeness which belongs to its

world of ideas, its organization of reality" (1933:77). Notice how careful Oakeshott is not

to place different modes in competition for the right to claim the best organization of

reality, while still connecting them in the broader framework of experience.

But Oakeshott does not stop there. The connotation of Oakeshott's laconic

existential line about how the philosopher is "the victim of thought" (1933:2) receives a

fuller treatment much later, in an essay entitled "A Place of Learning":

> A human life is not a process in which a living organism grows to maturity,
>
> succeeds in accommodating itself to its surroundings or perishes. It is, in the first
>
> place, an adventure in which an individual consciousness confronts the world he
>
> inhabits, responds to what Henry James called 'the ordeal of consciousness,' and
>
> thus enacts and discloses himself. This engagement is an adventure in a precise
>
> sense. It has no pre-ordained course to follow: with every thought and action a
>
> human being lets go a mooring and puts out to sea on a self-chosen but largely
>
> unforeseen course. It has no pre-ordained destination: there is no substantive
>
> perfect man or human life upon which he may model his conduct. It is a
>
> predicament, not a journey. (1975:23)

If the individual is faced with an "adventure," a "predicament" even, with no model to

follow, then the framing of our collective adventures becomes essential. In <u>Existence and its Modes</u> there are moments of foreshadowing which predict the metaphor of conversation that would come much later. When Oakeshott writes that what is desirable is ". . . a point of view from which the relative validity of any world of experience can be determined" (1933:2), and thinking is "something we may engage in without putting ourselves in competition" (1933:7) there is the suggestion of some sort of meeting place where ideas are discussed and weighed, a place where competition is anathema and claims to knowledge are judged in relative terms. Oakeshott identifies "prejudice and confusion" (1933:10) as undesirable qualities of mind. But what is interesting is that his explanation of the genesis of such negative states reads as ". . . distinctions elevated into differences" (1933:10). Is there a place where distinctions could be put into play without elevating them into potentially harmful differences that lead to prejudice and confusion?

My intention thus far has been to demonstrate how Oakeshott's early writings help to spell out the theoretical assumptions that carry over into his later work on conversation. As a philosopher committed to Idealism and a certain view of both the human "predicament" and the place of "knowledge" within that predicament, it is not surprising that Oakeshott proceeds in the direction of the metaphor of conversation, which, as I want to show now, plays a huge part in his thinking.

I will be drawing heavily on what has become Oakeshott's most famous and often cited essay, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," which is one of the essays in <u>Rationalism in Politics and other Essays</u>, first published in 1962 and reprinted in

1991. Part of what makes this essay so effective is that Oakeshott supports his vision of conversation by demonstrating how poetry fits within it:

> ... the only apology for poetry worth considering is one which seeks to discern the place and quality of the voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind—a conversation where each voice speaks in its own idiom, where from time to time one voice may speak louder than others, but where none has natural superiority, let alone primacy. The proper context in which to consider poetic utterance, and indeed every other mode of utterance, is not a 'society' engaged in practical enterprise, nor one devoted to scientific inquiry; it is this society of conversationsists. (1991:534)

In building to this conclusion Oakeshott makes a number of salient points. He defines conversation as a "manifold" where "diverse idioms of utterance" have a "meeting-place". These utterances "take wing and play round one another," gently prodding the participants to "fresh exertions" where they may "differ without disagreeing" (1991:489). The "flow of speculation" is what powers this "unrehearsed intellectual adventure" where "certainties" are accepted as "combustible" (1991:490). "Excellence" in conversation is marked by a "tension between seriousness and playfulness" (1991:493). The multiplicity of voices to the conversation represents an "emancipation" (1991:535) from the assumptions and intentions of others.

In describing the ideal conversation and how poetry fits within it Oakeshott seems to be positing a positive, and, perhaps, overly ambitious design. Why should participants

to the conversation see their relationship in the way Oakeshott has argued? Are the

participants even capable of following these gentle and highly cooperative norms?

Oakeshott appears to anticipate these questions since he spends considerable time

explaining what he thinks conversation is *not* and describing the dangers involved when

we get it wrong.

Conversation is not an "inquiry or an argument,"—"there is no 'truth' to be

discovered, no proposition to be proved, no conclusion sought". Therefore an "authority"

(1991:489) is absent—"no symposiarch or arbiter; not even a doorkeeper to examine

credentials."

There is no "hierarchy" of voices. The goals are neither "profit" nor "prize" (1991:490).

The dangers to conversation if these precepts are not adhered to are considerable. First, all

voices are susceptible to "*superbia*," which Oakeshott defines as "an exclusive concern

with its own utterance." By reverting in this way to "dogmata" a voice may lose its

"conversability" (1991:492). Second, if the voices are heard primarily in terms of some

extrinsic merit, Oakeshott warns, those involving "practical activity" and "science" will

dominate. Even in 1962 Oakeshott could see this trend building, and he criticized the

conversation of the time—"to know and to contrive are our pre-eminent occupations"

(1991:493). Over time this pathetic situation can "take on the appearance of a virtue" as

other voices become "convicted in advance of irrelevance." Third, voices that are ignored

may either "take wing against the wind" and try to muscle their way back into contention

(threatening the integrity of the conversation by moving it in the direction of a dispute), or

they may try to copy the "monopolists," thereby gaining only a "counterfeit utterance" (1991:494).

Suddenly the ideal precepts carry a heavy price tag if ignored. The problems stem from any move to claim any sort of goal, authority, or superiority in relation to other voices. Once the conversation heads in this direction "conversability" suffers and attempts to redress the balance by the participants may only result in the furthering of their alienation from each other. For Oakeshott the only decent alternative is to engage in principled conversation. But how to do it? What exactly should the participants keep in mind if conversation, and not its ugly alternatives, are their goal?

In the third and final step of this chapter I want to explore the types of activities Oakeshott favours in his metaphorical conversation. Defining theorizing as an "unconditional engagement of understanding," the purpose of which is to inhabit a "less mysterious world" (1975:1), Oakeshott adds:

> Its principle is: Never ask the end. Of the paths it may follow, some (we may suppose) will soon exhaust their promise. It is an engagement of arrivals and departures. Temporary platforms of conditional understanding are always being reached, and the theorist may turn aside to explore them. But each is an arrival, an enlightenment, and a point of departure. (1975:3)

Continuity is more important to Oakeshott than finality. "Keep at it" he might insist, warning those who become too self-satisfied that the truth is a relative and fleeting condition that quickly dissolves the moment we accept the range of human

intersubjectivities which live in the universal world of all ideas.

More specifically, Oakeshott recommends four qualities to all those who wish to engage in the act of theorizing. First, it is essential to recognize conversation as a place of study which requires discipline and energy (1989:24). Second, theorists identify themselves primarily as learners (1989:24), and, third, as learners who see the myriad pathways of conversation as "invitations" to "look, to listen, and to reflect" (1989:29). Finally, the theorist is someone who is calm in times of tension and disagreement, a person "not disconcerted by the differences or dismayed by the inconclusiveness of it all" (1989:39).

Participants to the conversation are not only advised to be calm and mature theorists who identify themselves as learners and who accept invitations to learn by disciplined effort; they are also expected to be "rationalists," whom Oakeshott sketches as those who possess "independence of mind on all occasions," and who are therefore "the *enemy* of authority, of prejudice, of the merely traditional, customary or habitual" (1991:6).

Rational theorists of course must balance their free thinking with their ethical obligations—"moral activity may be said to be the observation of a balance of accomodation between the demands of desiring selves each recognized by the others to be an end and not a mere slave of somebody else's desires" (1991:502). Oakeshott sees conduct as the "self-disclosure of agents" (1975:50). Our behavior in conversation reveals a great deal about how we see ourselves, knowledge, and our fellow theorists. "What has

to be learned," writes Oakeshott, "is not an abstract idea, or a set of tricks, not even a

ritual, but a concrete, coherent manner of living in all its intricacy" (1989:151).

Now that the three steps have been taken it might be worthwhile to reflect on

Oakeshott's conversation as a whole. I am impressed by the depth of Oakeshott's

concerns and the amount of detail he devotes to each part of his proposed conversation.

He has taken great care to attend to almost all facets of a metaphorical conversation: there

is a tough metaphysical foundation, an elaborate set of guiding principles, and specifically

recommended ways of relating to other participants. It is a series of ideas that occupied

one person for almost 60 years in print. I have tried to humbly present these views as a

synthesis and a starting point to help me think about the framing of discourse.

There are many points which Oakeshott made, of course, that are open to further

questioning. One could challenge his philosophical framework of idealism and the

concept of a world of "absolute ideas." The objection could be raised that his

conversation serves primarily to support the status quo, and therefore can not be a place

to discuss significant social and political change, since it does not provide any

mechanisms for a strong critique and confrontation of the views of others. This objection

has the potential to have considerable force since Oakeshott has been invoked by liberal

philosophers of education like Hirst and Peters. Finally, a request may be made for more

detail on exactly how this ethical "balance of accomodation" will really work to ensure

that the participants play fair.

Right now I would like to leave Oakeshott and move to a writer who shares

Oakeshott's metaphor, even citing him as the inspiration for it in his own thinking, but whose assumptions and intentions are very different—Richard Rorty.

Chapter Two - Richard Rorty and *Liberal Irony*

The aim of this book is to undermine the reader's confidence in "the mind" as something about which one should have a "philosophical view," in "knowledge" as something about which there ought to be a "theory" and which has "foundations," and in "philosophy" as it has been conceived since Kant. (Rorty, 1979:7)

When I first read the above line from the introduction of <u>Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature</u> I was struck by its ambitious scope. My own educational residence had been located very clearly in the area code of both dead authors and living teachers who had mostly all shared the assumption that a "philosophical view" was at least an important perspective, sometimes even the privileged one, when talking about things like "mind" and "knowledge." A large part of what makes Rorty's work so controversial, therefore, is that he writes in broad strokes that in many ways deliberately paint over the traditional picture of philosophy. I want to begin with how he characterizes this traditional philosophical view and why he thinks it is wrong-headed. Then I want to review what Rorty thinks ought to be in its place. My reading is that Rorty uses "conversation" as a model of framing discourse that allows him to talk seriously about the relationship between individual action and community justice, the private and the public, and thus defend his view of philosophy against the charge that it is dangerous because it puts too much into play.

How does Rorty characterize traditional philosophy? How did he arrive at this

position? Rorty recounts that early in his study of philosophy he was "impressed by the way in which philosophical problems appeared, disappeared, or changed shape, as a result of assumptions or vocabularies" (1979:xiii). What was of particular interest was that it seemed necessary to take these assumptions or vocabularies very seriously in order to discuss philosophical problems. But is this seriousness justified?

Rorty argues that the sense of self-importance that philosophy has traditionally claimed is in large part due to the premise that philosophers think of it as "foundational in respect to the rest of culture because culture is the assemblage of claims to knowledge, and philosophy adjudicates such claims" (1979:3). This starting point requires a complex "theory of representation" (1979:6), one of the most enduring being that of the mind as a "great mirror," the task of philosophy being to make the representations more accurate by "inspecting, repairing, and polishing the mirror" (1979:12).

Being held "captive" by this approach, philosophers assume that their discipline is one where you can "touch bottom," "explain and justify," even "discover the significance of one's life" (1979:4). The desire, Rorty suggests, is for "constraint," in the forms of "foundations to which one might cling, frameworks beyond which one must not stray, objects which impose themselves, representations which cannot be gainsaid" (1979:315). This desire to "escape from history" (1979:9) involves the positing of a framework prior to any conclusions. But what is the nature of this framework? Is there something inherent about "reality" or the human "mind" that makes the mirror approach to understanding natural and obvious? Rorty is convinced that there certainly is not and he spends

considerable time detailing an alternative to what he calls "the traditional Cartesian-

Kantian pattern" (1979:9).

In trying to provide a philosophical vision that is "therapeutic rather than

constructive, edifying rather than systematic" (1979:6) Rorty makes reference to the three

writers that have influenced him most, —Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey, and of

their attempts to provide a new "context for thought" (1979:5). This context is one where

self-conscious human beings make meaning through language to deal with their life-

worlds, rather than one where systems of thought are erected and rearranged and then

staunchly defended as the "truth" or as "objective." For Rorty there are a number of

seminal ideas that he utilizes to flesh out his "context for thought" while self-consciously

admitting that this position is simply more "attractive," and not "truer" in any traditional

sense.

> Rorty describes his "holist" view of human understanding as a situation where:
>
> . . . we shall never be able to avoid the "hermeneutic circle"—the fact that we
>
> cannot understand the parts of a strange culture, practice, theory, language, or
>
> whatever, unless we know something about how the whole thing works, whereas
>
> we cannot get a grasp on how the whole works until we have some understanding
>
> of its parts. This notion of interpretation suggests that coming to understand is
>
> more like getting acquainted with a person than like following a demonstration. In
>
> both cases we play back and forth between guesses about how to characterize
>
> particular statements or other events, and guesses about the point of the whole

situation, until gradually we feel at ease with what was hitherto strange.

(1979:319)

Rorty casts us adrift, leaving us anchorless between the particular and the general, our growing understanding of each modifying the other. If this understanding is analogous to "getting acquainted with a person" then the focus is more on finding fellow ocean-goers and sharing languages and less on trying to discover (or invent) a new anchor. The tentative nature of "guesses" signals Rorty's support of a self-conscious tentativeness when encountering something "strange" that we seek to understand. This "strangeness" is not waiting to be imposed upon by our own schemata and then explained to someone else. The big project is to negotiate common languages of interpretation that allow our cautious attempts at understanding to bear fruit.

The sense of cautiousness which is exemplified in the connotation of a "guess" epitomizes for Rorty what he describes as "edifying" philosophy:

> The danger which edifying discourse tries to avert is that some given vocabulary, some way in which people might come to think of themselves, will deceive them into thinking that from now on all discourse could be, or should be, normal discourse. The resulting freezing-over of culture would be, in the eyes of edifying philosophers, the dehumanization of human beings. The edifying philosophers are thus agreeing with Lessing's choice of the infinite *striving for* truth over "all of Truth." (1979:378)

The normalization of discourse reminds me of Berger and Luckmann's (1967) notion of

the "taken-for-granted" and the dangers inherent in seeing everything in society with any sort of history as beyond re-evaluation. "Dehumanization" is a strong word, but for Rorty the "freezing-over" of culture, or people's attempts through language to make sense of their worlds, would be to seriously diminish their capacity as human beings to name and create their lives,—a naming and creating that gestures toward the "truth," not finding the one capital T truth for all time and all places.

"Systematic" philosophy, in contrast to edifying, tries to construct a "permanent framework for inquiry" (1979:380) where questions of justification are taken seriously and are replied to by citing better and better descriptions from a "privileged" domain, like science, where schemes to ensure "objectivity" are revered as unquestionable patterns of understanding and progress. The fatal move, Rorty adds, is that these schemes come to be seen as more than just patterns, more than just "the best idea we currently have about how to explain what is going on," (1979:385) but as schemes which demand a moral pledge of allegiance because of the goods they deliver—"Reality, Truth, Objectivity, Reason" (1979:385). We are advised to "be reasonable" and criticized for not "being objective," all the while the "truth" sits in the background as a representation of "reality," the final arbiter in the court of life. These concepts have become "normalized" in Rorty's phrasing, and any attempts at grasping them, regardless of how drunken in their stagger, are given the highest attention, moral authority, and powers of adjudication.

Before trying to explain how "conversation" fits into all of this there are two other concepts, found in a work published a decade after <u>Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature</u>,

which help to extend Rorty's thinking on these matters and make more robust just what

he is getting at. I will now look at both "contingency" and "liberal irony" in turn.

For Rorty the idea of contingency rests on a lesson from history—"truth was made

rather than found" (1989:3). One of the implications of this lesson is that there is no

"intrinsic nature" to be represented and catalogued. The "Truth," for example, is a

function of sentences, not of an essence beyond the human mind. To think that there are

essences beyond our attempts to describe them is to see the world as "the creation of a

being who had a language of his own" (1989:5). Given the range of what Rorty, nodding

towards Wittgenstein, calls "alternative language games" (1989:5), the existence of a

metavocabulary is a difficult idea to accept. Rorty questions whether the world really

"speaks Newtonian," arguing instead that human beings have found "Newtonian" a useful

way to talk about what matters to them right now. Imagination, a "talent for speaking

differently," has dethroned reason, or "arguing well," as the distinguishing human faculty

(1979:7).

A still further and perhaps more unsettling implication of recognizing

contingency as an alternative to the quest for certainty is the "recognition of the

contingency of conscience, . . . a picture of intellectual and moral progress as a history of

increasingly useful metaphors rather than of increasing understanding of how things

really are" (1989:21). Working with "how things really are" at least provides the comfort

and security of positing foundational ethical standards that can be used to praise or

condemn. But "useful metaphors" may appear to have a liquid quality about them that

may cause people to insist that there are "sacred" things made of concrete that should not

be put into such a metaphysical limbo.

Rorty, however, is unwavering, and in asking that we be willing to "face up to the

contingency of the language we use" (emphasis Rorty, 1989:9) he asks us to accept that

all the so-called "essential" things that language names (in particular conscience,

selfhood, and liberal community) are all "products of time and chance" (1989:22). Rather

than "worshiping the corpses" (1989:21) of our ancestors' metaphors, and "accepting

somebody else's description of oneself" (1989:28), Rorty extols the task of the "strong

poet" to:

> *demonstrate* that he is not a copy or replica . . . the need to come to terms with the
>
> blind impress which chance has given him, to make a self for himself by
>
> redescribing that impress in terms which are, if only marginally, his own.
>
> (1989:43)

For Rorty living a life is largely about "exhibiting a discontinuity" (1989:25) by finding

words to express our unique thoughts and feelings, as opposed to "finding continuities"

by trying to secure a metavocabulary that is beyond time and circumstance.

A critical moment has surfaced. If we are all supposed to follow the "strong poet"

does that not leave an ocean of discontinuities in the place of shared moral commitments?

Will novelty be more important than generosity? Is it not better to be a replica if it means

you can help others, rather than being a selfish "strong poet" ? How does Rorty think

about the relationship between the public and the private? Rorty's response is to

introduce the concept of "irony," an "ironist" being

> . . . someone who fulfills three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. (1989:73)

The "irony" here is that despite the recognition of contingency the ironist takes her moral life very seriously,—"The fundamental premise of the book is that a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance" (1989:189). A person is expected to both find new arrangements of words to express her individuality as a "strong poet," and to attend to her moral connections to others, despite contingency. Is this possible?

Rorty adds one final detail—questions of moral significance hinge on being able to "separate the question 'Do you believe and desire what we believe and desire?' from the question 'Are you suffering?'" (1989:198). The question of pain and talking about how and why we hurt supplants the question of whether we share the same vocabulary. Rorty believes that too much of how our moral lives have been conceived works on the premise that moral "rightness" goes to those who "get it right" by phrasing ethical

problems and solutions in certain ways. For Rorty the courageous "strong poet" meets the doubtful yet committed "ironist" to find new words for oneself and to avoid old words for the pain of others.

The model for the meeting place of ironists is none other than "conversation." In the last chapter of <u>Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature</u> Rorty makes explicit reference to Oakeshott's essay "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," saying that "it catches the tone in which, I think, philosophy should be discussed" (1979:389). Rorty's support for and elaboration of this "tone" is hard to miss. Rorty describes the "neo-Kantian" philosophical framework and the quest for "certainty" as a "wish to substitute *confrontation* for *conversation*" (emphasis Rorty, 1979:163), a wish which fails to recognize the social justification of belief. His view of hermeneutics is one that "sees the relations between various discourses as those of strands in a possible conversation" (1979:318). Ironists in conversation are more concerned with "differences in degree of ease in objecting to our beliefs" rather than an "unshakeable foundation" (1979:157). While the quest for certainty is abandoned, the "hope of agreement is never lost" (1979:318), as ironists take into account that "perhaps saying things is not always saying how things are" (1979:372). Ironists recognize each other as "conversational partners" (1979:372), who equate wisdom with the ability to participate in the conversation with a wide array of others. Ironists see human beings as the source of new descriptions, not as "truth" seekers but as fellow sufferers who use language to talk about their lives.

Rorty recognizes that the conversation has and will continue to change largely due

to "historical accident" (1979:391), either the result of social movements, like the French Revolution, where the opportunity is ripe for new metaphors to secure a foothold in society, or by the contribution of "strong poets" like Freud and Nietzsche who share their vision and their new descriptions. Rorty adds that metaphor shifts may occur "without human beings losing their reason, or losing touch with 'real problems'" (1979:392), since "real problems" for Rorty involve the description and alleviation of human suffering, not the interrogation of "foundations of belief."

Rorty closes Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature with the line "The only point on which I would insist is that philosophers' moral concern should be with continuing the conversation of the West, rather than with insisting upon a place for the traditional problems of modern philosophy within that conversation" (1979:394). *Continuing* the conversation, rather than constantly trying to appropriate it in order to meet previously rehearsed questions and problems, becomes the chief moral concern of ironists.

Rorty's use of "conversation" is daring and original. It is used to straddle the public and the private lives of "ironists" by providing an on-going meeting place for the sharing of languages about suffering. In this way Rorty can avoid the "mirror" of philosophy while steadfastly maintaining that our moral commitments are not jeopardized by abandoning accuracy of representation and foundational approaches to philosophy. "Conversation" for Rorty also fits in nicely with his contingency theme, for what is left if claims to epistemological superiority are given a backseat to the sharing of vocabularies?

In comparison to Oakeshott, whom Rorty surprisingly cites, there are bright

differences. Oakeshott's world of "absolute ideas" is the sort of cultural backdrop that

Rorty wants so much to dispose of. Oakeshott is even the sort of philosopher that Rorty

would say is held "captive" by his Idealist framework. Oakeshott, as a more systematic

thinker, takes great care to spell out an elaborate conceptual design for the construction of

"conversation". Rorty, by contrast, wants to shelve the philosophical engineering project

and focus on the social origins of belief. Perhaps the differences between the two can best

be expressed by borrowing a few lines from Berger and Luckmann, who wrote in the

Social Construction of Reality:

> . . . the philosopher is driven to decide where the quotation marks are in order and
>
> where they may safely be omitted, that is, to differentiate between valid and
>
> invalid assertions about the world. This the sociologist cannot possibly do.
>
> Logically, if not stylistically, he is stuck with the quotation marks. (1966:2)

Oakeshott, as a philosopher whose "conversation" mediates a discussion between various

"modes of experience," is probably not a fan of too many quotation marks. Rorty, by

contrast, would probably insist that they are almost always necessary.

Perhaps it is time to turn to a theorist who early in her scholarly career was not a

fan of quotation marks, but over the last two decades has found them quite useful and

natural. Jane Roland Martin is next.

Chapter Three - Jane Roland Martin and *Reclamation*

After hearing me respond to a public attack on the papers I wrote at the Bunting, a

man I had known for years said: "You are a different person. What's happened to

you?" I looked at him and wondered if I should list my new feminist scholar-

friends and explain that because I was now writing about education in relation to

marriage, childcare, daily domesticity, sex role stereotypes, a gender based

division of labor, and women's double-binds, I was long last able to identify with

my subject matter. "I finally know what I am saying," I replied. (Martin, 1994:1)

The above anecdote is from the essay "One Woman's Odyssey: To Philosophy

and Back Again." It is the introductory piece in a collection of essays by Martin spanning

nearly thirty years. In order to understand why and how Martin uses the metaphor of

"conversation" it may be useful to flesh out the anecdote and reflect on how Martin

describes the evolution of her thinking, how she reached a position where she finally felt

that her words were her own.

I would like to begin by trying to situate Martin's early thinking about education.

In The Analytic Ambition Charlton writes that the goal of analytic philosophy is to "gain

insight" by "logical, conceptual, and linguistic methods" (1991:5). Of course all

philosophical orientations are concerned with these methods. But Charlton suggests that

the distinctions between philosophical schools can go much deeper. In comparing

"Continental" practitioners to "analytic" ones, for example, he writes:

They differ in how they conceive the subject [of philosophy] and how it should be

conducted. For part of the time they consider different questions altogether; when they converge on the same topics it is from different directions; and they have different methods of argument, different criteria for judging the merits of a piece of philosophizing. (1991:2-3)

Charlton tries to explain these differences by a quick historical comparison between the British "taste for empiricism and formal logic" (1991:3) with the "Continental" flavour of writers like Nietzsche and Heidegger. The point is made that the divisions between different schools of philosophy can be quite sharp.

Martin's commitment to the "analytic" school early in her career is clear: "Clarification was my business, not the guidance of practice" (Martin, 1994:5). Her analytic philosophy courses had taught her to analyze concepts and arguments, to offer distinctions and reformulations of theoretical problems. In her first book, Explaining, Understanding, and Teaching Martin was explicit about her dual purpose: ". . . first, general clarification and illumination of the notions of explaining and understanding something; second, the application of such general clarification and illumination to educational issues and questions" (1970:iii). Martin writes in the next sentence that she considered that such analysis was positioned "independently of any discipline or subject-matter field" (1970:iii-iv). "Clarification," "illumination," and "independently" are all self-described virtues of a type of philosophizing that sees itself as immune to the lack of objectivity to which supposedly "egocentric" and "sociocentric" views are prone.

Years later her focus would change sharply. Recollecting a commentary she made

on a paper in 1979, Martin writes "... I rejected philosophical distinctions and analyses that allowed my colleagues and me to detach curriculum theory from empirical fact and from social and political philosophy" (Martin, 1994:6). A clarification through language that prided itself on being "objective" and "logical" had been replaced with a respect for qualitative research and a style of philosophizing that was more self-conscious about how power relations permeate analysis. For Martin the image of analytic philosophy as a form of neutral inquiry that made claims to argumentative clarity had become smudged and out of focus.

Martin pinpoints her reading of Rousseau during her sabbatical at the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College in 1980 as being a key experience that cemented her commitment to feminist thought:

> As I pored over Book V of Emile and immersed myself in commentaries on it. I began to understand just how deeply dependent on his philosophy of girls' education was Rousseau's philosophy of boys' education. ... I was electrified by the thought that if Sophie is brought into the equation, the standard interpretation of Rousseau's philosophy of education is proven wrong. Here was my first inkling that when girls and women enter the scene, educational thought itself changes. (Martin, 1994:6)

Martin was so "electrified" by her discovery of Rousseau's Sophie that the tenor of her work changed almost overnight. Martin began writing about educational theory from a feminist perspective, and five years later, in <u>Reclaiming a Conversation: The Ideal of the</u>

Educated Woman, wrote:

> . . . on at least three counts the disciplines fall short of the ideal of epistemological
> equality for women: they exclude women from their subject matter, distort the
> female according to the male image of her, and deny value to characteristics the
> society considers feminine. (1985:3)

For Martin the charge of neglect is compounded by the more serious charges of distortion and denial. Women are almost entirely absent from the discussion of education and when they are present their thought is placed in a male context or, even if read on its own terms, is denied any capital whatsoever.

One of the prime reasons for this impoverished situation is the inferior status that women's writing about education has been assigned in the literature. Citing Adrienne Rich, Martin agrees that when women *"receive"* an education rather than starting from the position of *"claiming"* one (emphasis Martin, 1985:2), their autonomy is compromised and the difference is one "between acting and being acted upon" (1985:2). When women are "mere receptacles" (1985:2) for previously authorized learning that largely excludes women's "experience and thought" (1985:2), "the implicit message is that women have never thought systematically about education" (1985:3). The disturbing implication here, continues Martin, is that when mainstream educational theory is invoked to help think about contemporary educational problems this message is inadvertently promoted. This is a disastrous situation for both men and women,—"How much illumination can be shed on the education of boys and men by a historical narrative that ignores girls and women?"

(Martin, 1985:5). This is a difficult and painful question since it is undeniable that the history of educational theory, like most histories, is dominated by male writers.

Before turning to Martin's conception of "conversation" I think it worthwhile to consider alternative schemes of framing discourse that Martin emphatically rejects. Her take on the idea of discourse as "debate"reads—"The term *debate* suggests that a single question is being argued and that there are two clear-cut positions. Our thinkers do not all focus on the same thesis, some defending and others rebutting it" (1985:10). In her view "there are no winners and losers" (1985:10), only different starting points and conceptions of educational questions. Martin sees debate as encouraging ideas to be "reactive rather than creative" (1985:175), since debate is based on "the fallacy of the false dilemma—either Sophie's education or Emile's, either an education based solely on gender or one having nothing to do with gender" (1985:176). "Debate" forces participants into binary oppositions that foster a defensive posture which discourages creative thinking.

How about seeing the development of educational ideas as "progress," where the search is for the best argument by an act of synthesis? Referring to the famous quote by Isaac Newton that occurred in a letter to Robert Hooke, "If I have seen further (than you and Descartes) it is by standing on the shoulders of giants" (Martin, 1985:174), Martin claims that this image assumes a "linear progress with knowledge portrayed as cumulative" (1985:174). Martin writes:

Having read *Republic*, book 5, Rousseau saw *differently* from Plato, not further

than he. Having read *Emile*, book 5, Wollstonecraft did not extend Rousseau's

vision, she altered it. *A Vindication* is not more inclusive than *Emile* and *Republic*

in the sense of incorporating the theories of both Rousseau and Plato. How could

it be when their theories contradict each other? (emphasis Martin, 1985:175)

For Martin the varied relationships between the ideas of different authors are not

reducible to a simple view of progress where each new offering builds upon the last.

Theorists may have read and learned from each other, but their own writing goes beyond

a list of previously encountered ideas. In this connection Rorty would say there is no

"metavocabulary" that grounds all other vocabularies. Oakeshott would claim that there

are numerous "modes of experience" that are related as part of the "world of ideas" but

not necessarily related in assumption, intention, or direction.

If thinking about discourse as "debate" or as "progress" is unhelpful for Martin

then it is equally unhelpful to gesture in the other direction and see discourses as entirely

unrelated, as atoms of thought floating randomly in the universe of all ideas:

Fresh, creative thinking about women's education is to be desired, but it is not to

be confused with de novo thinking. If it does not derive from discipleship, neither

will it emerge without acquaintanceship, especially when the assumptions with

which we approach our problem are so deeply entrenched in the culture that we do

not even recognize their existence. (Martin, 1985:176)

"Creativity" respects the places one has been, "de novo" suggests a deliberate dismissal

and pushing beyond for its own sake. Being a "disciple" connotes a sense of duty at the

expense of one's own judgment. Being an "acquaintance," on the other hand, allows for more autonomy and openness. Conventional ideas about the education of women are so "deeply entrenched" that it is only by being familiar with them while retaining one's creativity that new ideas can emerge. For Martin the place where interested thinkers become acquainted with the ideas of the past and then share their creative reaction is "conversation."

Martin's "conversation" is inclusive, psychologically "exhilarating" (1985:8), and is "circular in form, cooperative in manner, and constructive in content" (1985:10). Given that Martin feels that "acquaintanceship" with the past is important while simultaneously moving beyond it in terms of "creative" acts of interpretation that speak to contemporary concerns, it is not surprising that the idea of "reclamation" should emerge:

> The reader may wonder why we need to reclaim an earlier conversation about the
>
> education of women if our conversation today repeats its dominant themes. But,
>
> of course, that is precisely the reason we must reclaim it. To adopt one or another
>
> position of earlier generations without profiting from the intellectual examination
>
> to which it has been subjected is to project its weaknesses into our future. (Martin,
>
> 1985:10)

Martin wants to benefit from the "intellectual examination" that past ideas have been subjected, even if those ideas, like Rousseau's about the education of Emile and Sophie, are objectionable on various grounds. I find this perspective refreshing and courageous. Martin is not interested in dismissing the past or even in cursing it. Instead

she proceeds to extract from it the core ideas and arguments that for her provide the starting point for contemporary investigations. Martin's perspective is thus informed by a sense of history that sees good books and ideas as related in the sense that they can be read against each other to extract the most robust view possible. Rather than dismissing the idea of a "canon," Martin accepts it, working within it to try to extend its parameters.

Martin's political act of "reclamation" has three related components. First, the "conversational circle" (1985:177) needs to be widened so that marginalized female thinkers, both past and present, are given a better hearing. Second, and more fundamentally, educational philosophy needs to learn to think differently about the education of women. Martin is clear that demanding the inclusion of previously ignored authors will be of little help if basic theoretical orientations remain the same. In this vein the third point, the "larger effort of reclamation . . .has important implications for the content, methodology, and structure of the history of educational thought" (Martin, 1985:178). This "larger effort" involves a careful re-investigation of "what counts as a bona fide topic of study but also what counts as a bona fide source of data" (1985:179). Martin believes that we should think about turning to "personal letters, diaries, pamphlets, newsletters, pieces of fiction, and to oral sources" (1985:180) as potential sources that could reveal a great deal about the education of women. Other disciplines, of course, like history, sociology, and anthropology all utilize such sources, and it is therefore not difficult to conclude that Martin is in favour of a blurring of the lines between academic disciplines. In this respect Rorty would agree with Martin, but

Oakeshott probably would not, arguing instead that each voice be allotted its own space rather than joining in chorus with others.

Martin concludes her book by arguing that her project of "reclamation" has a strong humanist theme since it is concerned not just with improving the range of thought in educational theory on the education of women, but also with developing a more humane and sensitive educational model generally:

> One of the unanticipated rewards of bringing women into the educational realm is that the study of the education of the "other" half of the population enables us to see all of education differently. The changed vision resulting from the acquaintance with the conversation reclaimed here makes our own journey of transforming the education of our sons and daughters possible. If we let it, it will also enable us to discern ways to bring educational practice into tune with the full range of people's lives and with the present perils to life on earth. (Martin, 1985:198-199)

Oakeshott wants to bring all "modes of experience" into the conversation so that it can be as robust as possible. Rorty is interested in the contingency of language and how we articulate our pain. Both theorists believe that one of the reasons their vision is more attractive is that it answers some need for greater compassion and understanding. Martin connects her efforts to expand the role of educational theory in regard to the education of women with a better education for everyone. In "transforming the education of our sons and daughters" Martin believes that the "perils to life on earth" can be dealt with more

humanely.

It is interesting to note, I think, that unlike Oakeshott and Rorty, Martin has a clear
political agenda in the sense that she believes that changes are necessary in how society
thinks about the education of girls and women. However what is truly fascinating is how
Martin's "conversation" provides her with a rich sense of discourse that both honors and
affirms the past while supporting movements toward deeper understanding and change
regarding the education of both sexes.

Perhaps it is time to leave the explicit notion of "conversation" entirely and look
at a theorist who, with the concepts of "communicative action" and "discourse ethics,"
has arguably conceptualized a formal type of "conversation" to frame our differences
within—Jurgen Habermas is next.

Chapter Four - Jurgen Habermas and *Discourse Ethics*

What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know:

language. Through its structure autonomy and responsibility are posited for us.

Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and

unconstrained consensus. Autonomy and responsibility together comprise the only

idea we possess a priori in the sense of the philosophical tradition. (Habermas,

quoted by McCarthy in "Translator's Introduction," Communication and the

Evolution of Society, 1979: xvii)

The above quote is from Habermas' inaugural speech at Frankfurt University in

June of 1965. McCarthy suggests that the speech marks an important evolution in

Habermas' thinking, the beginning of a movement away from the tradition of Neo-

Marxism as the basis of critical theory, and toward a theory of language. Evidence of the

correctness of McCarthy's claim is that "communicative action" and "discourse ethics"

have occupied Habermas' attention of late, with The Theory of Communicative Action

(1985), Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action (1990), and Justification and

Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics (1993) furthering the project first announced

at Frankfurt and made more explicit in "What is universal pragmatics?" (1979). My plan

will be to start with "What is universal pragmatics?" since it lays an important foundation

for what comes later, and then jump to the two most recent pieces of writing where the

freshest expression of Habermas' views can be found. I want to articulate how each

contributes to my search for a principled ethic of "conversation" by arguing that

Habermas, although he never uses the term, is working with a formalized conception of "conversation."

I would like to begin by looking a little more closely at the above quote from the Frankfurt speech. Habermas cites language as both the only entity that we can know, and the medium that raises us "out of nature," by which I assume he means a state of violence and competition akin to the classical "state of nature" found in the writing of social contract theorists like Hobbes and Locke. Our use of language is predicated on the intention to avoid this state, to reach instead a place of "universal and unconstrained consensus." Language is the paramount structuring device, the only a priori idea it "posits" being the tandem of "autonomy and responsibility." Thus the individual invokes language to avoid conflict and reach a state of absolute and open collective agreement, being constrained, as I will show later in my discussion of "discourse ethics," by the moral imperatives of individual autonomy and social responsibility.

In "What is universal pragmatics?" Habermas provides explanatory detail on how speech is to fulfill this goal of consensus, the purpose of "universal pragmatics" being to "identify and reconstruct universal conditions of possible understanding" (1979:1). Habermas admits that he is not concerned with communication that is "nonverbalized," and he relegates all forms of "social action," such as an organized strike or political protest, as "action oriented to reaching understanding" (1979:1). By ignoring "nonverbal" communication and placing "understanding" as the intent of all other forms of social action Habermas makes universal pragmatics more cogent, but he does so at the

expense of broad assumptions about serious aspects of social life: Is "reaching

understanding" really the point of a terrorist act? How about prolonged labor action that

results in a strike or lock-out?

Drawing on the work of Karl-Otto Apel, Habermas argues that any speech

communication concerned with understanding involves four universal "validity

claims,"—"*uttering* something understandably; giving [the hearer] *something* to

understand; making *himself* thereby understandable; and coming to an understanding *with*

another person" (emphasis Habermas, 1979:2). These claims provide the "normative

background" for "communicative action" (1979:3). The end point in this process is

marked by an "agreement," the signposts of which are "reciprocal understanding, shared

knowledge, mutual trust, and accord" (1979:3).

Habermas points out that communicative action is a guiding ideal. The process of

"*bringing about*" an agreement (emphasis Habermas, 1979:3) in real situations is always

prone to "gray areas"—"incomprehension and misunderstanding, intentional and

involuntary untruthfulness, concealed and open discord" (1979:3). Communicative action

starts with mutually accepted validity claims, and proceeds as long as the participants

believe that everyone continues to accept them. If some participants grow to doubt

whether others are adhering to these claims, then, Habermas says, "the task of mutual

interpretation is to achieve a new definition of the situation which all participants can

share" (1979:3). The entire process of communicative action is dependent upon the

success of this redrafting of a foundational starting point that everyone can participate

in—"If their attempt fails, communicative action cannot be continued" (1979:3). Of

course other forms of communication can be engaged in, like "argumentative speech"

(1979:4); or the participants can simply dissolve their initial agenda and not converse at

all.

These alternatives are simply unpalatable to Habermas. Having proposed

universal pragmatics as the "research program aimed at reconstructing the universal

validity basis of speech" (1979:5), he proceeds to draw on the work of different theorists

in the fields of linguistics, logic, and analytic philosophy to inform his analysis. His

committment to the possibility and concomitant advantages of communicative action

results in the drafting of a detailed system of linguistic communication, a system that

Habermas feels can help to better conceptualize the various nuances of communicative

action. For Habermas there is a great deal at stake here, since for communicative action to

have any theoretical viability the system of universal pragmatics that it relies upon must

be solid enough to support its weight. The distinctions he draws and the system he finally

settles on can perhaps be best represented by the following table that closes the essay

"What is Universal Pragmatics?":

Domains of Reality	Modes of Communication: Basic Attitudes	Validity Claims	General Functions of Speech
"The" World of External Nature	Cognitive: Objectivating Attitude	Truth	Representation of Facts

"Our" World of	Interactive:	Rightness	Establishment of
Society	Conformative		Legitimate Inter-
	Attitude		personal Relations
"My" World of	Expressive:	Truthfulness	Disclosure of
Internal Nature	Expressive Attitude		Speaker's Subjectivity
Language	_____	Comprehensibility	_____

(1979:68)

The second column is concerned with the "basic attitude" of the speaker, the other three with various relations to reality. When a speaker, for example, is using speech to state what she feels are the correct facts in a given situation, she is making a claim to "Truth," her attitude is "Cognitive," and she is referring to an "External Nature" that we all share. Another speaker's attitude in a different context may be "Expressive," and his concern will be to share his "Subjectivity," "Truthfulness" being the measure to what extent his "Internal Nature" has been accurately represented. For Habermas a combined understanding of the speaker's intent and the nature of the claim being made provide an attractive starting point to thinking more deeply about communicative action.

On first reflection the possible benefits of this model are numerous. If adhered to by all participants, misunderstandings may be reduced and a greater sense of clarity may be attained. Participants would be better able to organize their thoughts prior to speaking and have the self-assurance that their utterances will be received in a productive way

since others will also be familiar with the system. Breakdowns in communication can be resolved by returning to the model whenever necessary to help either rethink what someone has said, or help remind participants of the ground rules.

Of course all of this comes at a price. In designing this model of linguistic communication, Habermas has made numerous assumptions. His breaking up of each heading, while broad, is still arbitrary and is open to the charge that other arrangements may have been possible. For example, can the intentions of all human discourse really be divided into only three "Attitudes"? Can all human claims to knowledge be sorted into three types? Are there questions that could possibly span more than one category? More fundamental, of course, is the question of whether such a system of "universal pragmatics" is possible at all, given the ways that linguistic communication is troubled by perspectives like psychoanalysis and anthropology—disciplines that remind us that subjective interpretation and cultural circumstance make universal claims to communication difficult to defend.

This is made all the more mysterious given that Habermas became famous as a junior member of the Frankfurt School writing from a Neo-Marxist perspective. It is hard to imagine that <u>Knowledge and Human Interests</u> was written by the same person who wrote "What is Universal Pragmatics?" The last line of the opening paragraph of <u>Knowledge and Human Interests</u> reads "That we disavow reflection *is* positivism" (emphasis Habermas, 1968:1). Yet, recognizing that the goal of positivism is to "construct general laws and theories which describe and express relationships between

observable phenomena" (Allan, 1995:583) the project spelled out as "universal

pragmatics" can be deemed deeply positivistic since it makes claims to a universal

structure of observable linguistic communication. Like scientists who begin with the

premise that nature is uniform, Habermas proceeds with the belief that communication

can be. Perhaps the answers to some of these questions can be found in Habermas' most

recent works, where he has continued to refine his theory of "communicative action" and

defend it against criticism.

In moving from critical theory to universal pragmatics and communicative action,

Habermas shifts the traditional role of philosophy and its relation to other disciplines:

> . . . philosophy, instead of just dropping the usher role and being left with nothing,
>
> ought to exchange it for the part of stand-in. Whose seat would philosophy be
>
> keeping; what would it be standing in for? Empirical theories with strong
>
> universalistic claims. (1990:15)

The traditional role of "usher" which philosophy has traditionally claimed for itself in

showing all other disciplines where they are "seated" is, as we have seen, the primary

focus of Rorty's criticism. Where he and Habermas part ways is on what they conceive to

be the alternative. Rorty moves toward "contingency" and "irony," Habermas toward

what he calls the "reconstructive sciences," their goal being to "explain the presumably

universal bases of rational experience and judgment, as well as of action and linguistic

communication" (1990:16). The role of philosophy to "stand-in" signals a partnership

between "reconstructive" science and "transcendental and dialectical modes of

justification" (1990:16), philosophy thereby being the "guardian of rationality" (1990:20). Another interesting comparison emerges: whereas Rorty sees the "hermeneutic circle" as an inescapable condition which lends support to the contingency of a discourse's vocabulary and to the growth of understanding as a series of "guesses," Habermas sees any utterance with the aim of sharing understanding as being necessarily located within a scheme of communicative action that makes some claims to intelligibility (1990:23-24).

The relationship between philosophy as "stand-in" and the reconstructive sciences is exemplified in Habermas' invoking of Kohlberg's theory of moral development: ". . . I have used Kohlberg's theory for purposes of illustration in these methodological reflections on the structure of developmental-psychological theories where reconstructions of allegedly universal competences are built into the theory" (1990:41). Habermas' hunch is that if a developmental-psychological theory can pose "universal competences" and then empirically test them, it would provide considerable support to the ideas of universal pragmatics and communicative action. Kohlberg's theory is of particular interest to Habermas since it is a theory about the development of moral judgment, so Habermas can make a link not only between cognitive development and a universal basis to linguistic competency, he also can make one between linguistic competency and the development of moral judgment.

Habermas locates his program of philosophical justification, "discourse ethics," within the "Kantian" tradition, where "practical questions admit of truth" (1990:43). Cognitivist moral philosophers, working from this premise, "share the intention of

analyzing the conditions for making impartial judgments of practical questions, judgments based solely on reasons" (1990:43). "Truth" is possible for Habermas since universal pragmatics and the process of communicative action have provided an open field for mutual understanding. It follows for Habermas, like it does for his favorite cognitivist moral philosophers, that moral questions, those with an "'ought' character" (1990:44) are equally available to be theorized. Specifically for Habermas this means that via universal pragmatics a speech act with an "'ought' character" can be viewed as making a certain type of "validity claim," the discussion of which could be carried out by participants involved in communicative action:

> Discourse ethics, then, stands, or falls with two assumptions: (a) that normative claims to validity have cognitive meaning and can be treated *like* claims to truth and (b) that the justification of norms and commands requires that a real discourse be carried out and thus cannot occur in a strictly monological form, i.e., in the form of a hypothetical process of argumentation occurring in the individual mind. (emphasis Habermas, 1990:68)

The "ethics" here is that a participant to communicative action is required, first, to adhere to the model of linguistic communication outlined earlier and thus accept a universal and formal nature of argumentation. Second, she must also make an effort to engage with others in "practical discourse . . . a procedure for testing the validity of norms that are being proposed and hypothetically considered for adoption" (Habermas, 1990:103). This "procedure" involves the equal consideration of the views of all members of the discourse

community.

To recapitulate: starting from an ideal speech situation (universal pragmatics) Habermas argues that a specific type of discourse (communicative action) can be conducted according to a scheme of universal argumentation. Ethical "ought" questions are no exception since, as Kohlberg in particular has contended, moral judgment can also be theorized on a universal plane of psychological development. The essence of "discourse ethics" involves both a theoretical commitment to the universal grounds of argumentation that communicative action relies upon, and a practical commitment to engage with others and see their views as bearing equal weight.

In the preface to his most recent work Habermas writes "It is my hope that these essays reflect a learning process" (1993:vii). However it soon becomes clear that Habermas is standing firm on his earlier commitments, and any changes he has made are on finely tuned points and not in direction or spirit:

> The higher-level intersubjectivity characterized by an intermeshing of the
>
> perspective of each with the perspectives of all is constituted only under the
>
> communicative presuppositions of a universal discourse in which all those
>
> possibly affected could take part and could adopt a hypothetical, argumentative
>
> stance toward the validity claims of norms and modes of action that have become
>
> problematic. (1993:12)

The idea of "higher-level intersubjectivity" is new and leaves me wondering what

Habermas thinks a "lower-level" would be, but the remainder is consistent with his most

recent work.

In "Remarks on Discourse Ethics" Habermas responds to challenges to discourse

ethics made in terms of their opposition to "deontological theories generally," and to "the

particular project of offering an explication of the moral point of view in terms of

universal communicative presuppositions of argumentation" (1993:19). It is interesting

that Habermas sees these two objections to discourse ethics as the most serious. The first,

"against deontological theories," have generally assumed the shape of arguing that such

theories (Kant's notion of the "categorical imperative" being the classic example) place

the "right" prior to the "good" and thus cannot recognize specific socio-political

dimensions of a particular discourse situation. Contemporary communitarian and feminist

critiques of the sort of liberal project that John Rawls describes in <u>A Theory of Justice</u> are

of this type. The second insists that our moral lives cannot be discussed in the type of

forum that Habermas envisions, since the assumption of "universal communicative

presuppositions of argumentation" is simply wrong because it is impossible. As

mentioned earlier, the discourses of psychoanalysis and anthropology, among others,

deeply trouble this assumption by theorizing the ways that individual psychological

development and cultural elements make use of the phrase "universal" suspicious.

Given what has been said of Rorty here, it is not surprising to us that he has

critiqued Habermas' project. For Rorty any move toward what he calls "Kant's

transcendental standpoint" is a "basic mistake" (1979:382):

From the point of view of epistemological behaviorism, the only truth in

Habermas' claim that scientific inquiry is made possible, and limited, by

"inevitable subjective conditions" is that such inquiry is made possible by the

adoption of practices of justification, and that such practices have practical

alternatives. But these "subjective conditions" are in no sense "inevitable" ones

discoverable by "reflection upon the logic of inquiry." They are just facts about

what a given society, or profession, or other group, takes to be good ground for

assertions of a certain sort. (1979:385)

For Rorty "universal pragmatics" and "communicative action" are simply one

justification scheme and one prescribed set of discourse practices among others.

"Practical alternatives" are possible since there is nothing "inevitable" about them that

"reflection" can vouch for, their adoption instead being based upon social interests and

aims. Rorty would describe Habermas' invoking of Apel and Kohlberg as an attempt to

ground his ideas by reference to seemingly irrefutable linguistic and psychological

research.

Rorty's criticisms aside, the objection could be raised that in the first three

chapters of this thesis the metaphor of "conversation" has been used to think about the

relationship between tradition and contemporary concerns. In contrast, Habermas's

vision of "discourse ethics" is that it is a real conversation that is not explicitly concerned

with the past. What Habermas contributes to my thinking here, I argue, although he never

uses the actual term, is a scheme of "conversation" that is based on highly formalized

principles that attempt to both theorize discourse possibilities and provide an explicit

guiding ethic for all participants. For these interesting and valuable contributions, I argue,

Habermas deserves a place.

It is time to reflect on what I have learned from these comparisons and add my

own voice to the conversation about "conversation."

Conclusion - *Bringing the Voices Together*

Having carefully examined the views of four very different writers on the ethical

possibilities of a discourse arrangement of "conversation" I want to share a sense of

satisfaction at having at least partially hammered out for myself a way of thinking about

"being-together" that is less confused than it was. In recommending "conversation" I also

accept my ongoing questions and concerns about its ultimate viability. Therefore I want

to do two things in this conclusion. First, I want to try to situate my own "voice" by

offering some ruminations on the process of thinking and writing about the complexities

of "an ethics of discourse," and second, I would like to revisit the Hélène Cixous example

from the introduction and reflect on a number of personally salient themes given the

contributions of Oakeshott, Rorty, Martin, and Habermas. Specifically, I would like to

examine four distinct yet conceptually related tangents: the role of tradition, the

relationship between history and ideas, the politics of identity, and finally the tension

between strong conviction and uncertainty. I ultimately want to clarify my own position,

however tentative, name my questions better, and leave with a firmer sense of why I

wrote this essay and what I have learned.

My key starting assumption in writing this thesis has been that how we frame our

epistemological differences has a direct bearing on how we work together in the academy.

I also assume that ignoring each other and maintaining an attitude of indifference, a "live

and let live" policy, is the very type of relativist position that I am writing against since I

believe that it is complicit in all manner of tyranny. This point made, it is also the case, as

each of the authors examined in this thesis have shown, that it is not necessary to continually seek out and name points of incommensurability and begin the search for a compromise or resolution. But as this thesis has also taught me, formulating a clear position on something as complex as an "ethics of discourse" is a difficult affair, for at least three reasons.

First, even staying within the idea or metaphor of "conversation" there are, as I have hopefully demonstrated, many possibilities. The range of ideas that have been explored in this manuscript is quite vast. To a large extent each author has been informed by different and even competing traditions. Yet there are places where the views of one theorist critique or even appear incommensurable with another, while still maintaining some shared commitments. For example, Rorty admits to being influenced by Oakeshott and his adoption of "conversation," yet it is clear that his version of pragmatism cannot tolerate Oakeshott's idealism. When I begin to play the authors off of one another in this fashion interesting questions emerge: Is Martin's sense of "reclamation" dependent on a Habermasian "universal pragmatics"? To what extent could Rorty's "liberal irony" answer Oakeshott's description of the "human predicament"? What are the differences and similarities between Oakeshott's "modes of experience" and Habermas' "communicative action"? Such questions demonstrate the vast possible theoretical connections that the authors could have with each other, and the difficulty in trying to get clear about what these relationships mean and where they might lead.

Second, each of the authors have undergone some shifting of their theoretical

commitments, some more, some less. While Oakeshott has remained consistent in his application of idealism, the formulation of that application occupied his attention for over half a century. The learning of the others has taken a much more unpredictable path. Rorty and Martin, both trained in schools of traditional philosophy, have ended up in very different places, yet both would agree that the philosophical view they inherited was deficient in some way to meet their concerns. Habermas, making the most mysterious move of all, has shifted from a critical theory informed by Marxism to one informed by developmental psychology and linguistics. What theorists decide to pay attention to, what they come to identify with, the areas that they feel inform their concerns, and how all these commitments can change, comprise a fascinating set of questions which speaks to the need in a discourse ethic to allow for the unpredictable path of learning and discovery.

Third, it almost goes without saying that some writers have found alternatives like "dialogue" or "community" or "liberalism" to be more attractive starting points than a "conversational" one. In a more foundational sense how each of the authors takes up their "conversational" arrangements is quite a secular, rational, Western one. Other cultures have different metaphysical assumptions that draw a very different picture of what it means to engage with competing claims to knowledge. The terms "discourse" and "claims" would even be irrelevant in many cultural settings. The Maori tradition of a "Hui," with members of the community voicing their opinions in a procedural circle that keeps going until an issue has been resolved, is just one example. It might be tempting to compare the "Hui" to Rorty's "hermeneutic circle," but this is not necessary and would obscure my point that different cultures have arrived at answers to the framing of

differences that may or may not share similarities with those in a liberal Western context.

Given the range of ideas vying for our attention, the shifting nature of a theorist's interests, and the existence of other starting points, it may seem as if an attempt to cover even a small portion of the field may be deemed exceedingly risky. My guess would be, however, that any attempt to sketch a principled stance toward an ethics of discourse in a Western context would have to address certain basic issues. In what follows I make some judgments and name some questions about various points raised throughout the thesis. I am interested in thinking about "*being-together*," but not in a purely applicational way where I didactically advance a specific concrete approach. I would like to address four starting points or themes as part of a theoretical project that can help inform a sense of discourse ethics, not necessarily dictate one for classroom use.

I would like to start with some reflections on the nature of the liberal Western tradition. In the introduction I briefly touched on the situation of Hélène Cixous and her uncertainty about what to say at her Oxford Amnesty International Address. Cixous used the line "to construct and deconstruct, to praise and criticize, at one and the same time" as a possible approach, and it is one that has a great deal to recommend it. The polarized positions of seeing the canon as being comprised of works of undisputed "genius" or as an ideological instrument of "indoctrination" fails to appreciate the diversity and complexity of over two thousand years of recorded thought and the richer, more nuanced reading that such a tradition deserves.

As we have seen, each author has a different sense of the place that tradition occupies in their "conversational" arrangements. Oakeshott's "modes of experience"

clearly depends upon an accumulated body of ideas that acts as a starting point for discussion, while Rorty's "strong poet" is clearly trying to move beyond it and search for new metaphors and vocabularies. My own sympathy here lies with Martin and the balancing act of becoming "acquainted" with the canon while also seeking to "reclaim" it so that it is more inclusive and speaking more clearly to contemporary concerns. In this way participants can learn from the past and appropriate it in a functional way. Rather than a dead and received body of thought, the canon becomes a living treasure in the service of lived lives.

Central here are assumptions around exactly what an "idea" is and the work it does in "conversation." Martin's view is that an idea can have serious implications for how we think about social justice. Rorty's position is similarly dynamic in that ideas are tentative "guesses" in the "hermeneutic circle" that help us become acquainted with both the specific and general characteristics of how others suffer. For Oakeshott and Habermas respectively the concern is more in the direction of either a structure of concepts ("the world of absolute ideas"), or a process of sharing them ("communicative action"), prior to any instrumental goals of justice or the alleviation of suffering. I suggest that one way of distinguishing between different discourse arrangements is whether they are beholden more to a unifying structure that locates possible ideas—a process that involves communicating them—or to one that tries to transcend both process or structure in the service of some goal. For example, in Martin's case, a more "humane" education, and in Rorty's, a greater attention to the "suffering" of others. I want to qualify this suggestion by noting that Martin and Rorty also have a sense of how ideas are communicated and

shared, but that it is decidedly thinner than that of Oakeshott and Habermas, where it is clear that the structure or the process is primary. It also may need to be said that Oakeshott and Habermas believe that their discourse schemes may include the possibility of working toward social goals like "justice."

This leads to my second point about the relationship between history and ideas. When Cixous remarks that the Western tradition has also contained "repressive aspects having to do with phallocentric and colonial patterns of speech" I read her as expressing a tension between the ethical promises of liberal thought—freedom, progress, universal understanding—and a lived reality that for many has been one of neglect and domination. But of course it is important to distinguish the thinker from the political realities enacted in their name. Marx, for example, would have been the person most appalled at the atrocities committed by Stalin under the banner of Communism. Should Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz have to forever bear the mantle of criticisms that are leveled against the political inequalites of "modernity"? In the Woody Allen movie *Hannah and Her Sisters* one of the characters responds to the rhetorical question "What would Jesus Christ do if he returned to present day United States?," with the line "When he saw what was being done in his name, he would never stop throwing up!" The conclusion is that ideas have taken political forms entirely separate from the intentions of their originators.

This point made, it has nonetheless been my experience that a discourse situation where someone is extolling the virtues of an idea that someone else associates with a deliberate marginalization has the potential for an explosive confrontation. My choice would be Rorty's "liberal irony" here since it would allow discourse participants to

maintain their commitment to a given paradigm while recognizing the contingency of that investment. Also the question "how are you suffering?" could slide over to an examination of how people feel which might help facilitate discussion. I think that Rorty's conception of "liberal irony" is the most open and inclusive of the arrangements because it provides a space for the articulation of pain and celebrates the courage to find new ways to describe a situation. It also avoids the thorny problem of "true, justified belief" since it incorporates a hermeneutic epistemology that only asks of participants that they maintain a tentative "guess" orientation to encountering the views of others.

I also wonder whether Habermas' scheme of universal argumentation in the form of "communicative action" might be of some help here, particularly the relationship between the "domains of reality" marked by " 'our' world of society" and " 'my' world of internal nature." By combining the "interactive" and the "expressive," the virtues of 'rightness" and "truthfulness," maybe something good might happen. My suspicion however is that it would alienate people even more and make those who have felt marginalized in the past feel even more so as they struggle to adhere to a strictly regulated discourse structure. Martin's "reclamation" might be helpful since it squarely addresses the sharing of intersubjectivity, particularly that of women, but some people may feel that the focus is too much in the past and they may be inclined to be dismissive of the canon and its trappings.

My third point of interest, the politics of identity, is expressed by Cixous when she writes "And I asked myself who these questions were for. For a "philosopher"? If they were meant for me, for myself, what have I to say about freedom and the self?" It is

interesting that only Martin delves into the identity of the participants to her discourse situation, and her concern is entirely with gender. My reading is that Habermas assumes that the linguistic and psychological foundations of "communicative action" transcend culture, in perhaps the same way that an international political body like the United Nations claims to by translating different languages and offering a procedure of engagement that everyone adheres to. It is not that Oakeshott is not sympathetic to different cultures, there is simply no evidence that his "conversation" was meant to include traditions other than the liberal Western one. When Rorty criticizes traditional Western philosophy for thinking itself "beyond time and chance" there is a sense that he is talking about different cultural paradigms, but with the question "are you suffering?" he returns to a universal conception of the human subject coping with life through different "paradigms of humanity."

Post-colonial scholars in particular have tried to demonstrate the ways that cultural identity, however defined, influences how people see the world. The opening up of different "subject positions" has resulted in the relationship between "reality" and "subjectivity" being taken as a serious issue that has deep roots in feelings of historical mistrust, guilt, and even despair. Since none of my authors explicitly mentions the issue of culture I am left with a lingering question about the possibilities of a "conversational" discourse ethic that could serve as a meeting place for people from diverse cultural backgrounds. I will say that when Cixous asks "what have I to say about freedom and the self?" she opens a necessary space between theoretical reflection and the lived lives of real people. In discussing "freedom" and the "self" it is important to remember that the

questions are genuine and the answers urgent for many people.

Finally, there is the tension between conviction and uncertainty. In a way this is the broad problem that Cixous faces—how to name her position(s) on issues of social justice while admitting her uncertainty and continuing doubt about the very possibility of containing such complex concerns. On the one hand there is the desire to "take a stand," to think of oneself as an ethical person with a strong sense of principle who will not sit idly by while bad things are happening. This is where our faculty of judgment is called into service to criticize the thoughts and actions of others. On the other hand there is an awareness of the limits of our knowledge and the partiality of our individual experience and judgment. Berling describes this awareness, citing Hollenbach, as "epistemological humility" (1993:9). But where is the right balance between the two? How to live ethically while maintaining a sense of humility?

The attraction of "conversation" in any of the guises offered in this essay is that it responds to this last question by providing a way to frame our epistemological differences by both allocating a space for participants to name what they think, while encouraging further growth in understanding by an act of listening. "Conversation" becomes its own reward, but that reward costs too much when participants feel that they are not being listened to when they tell us what they know. In that case discourse breaks down and the resulting hurt feelings and alienation is representative of a failure to engage with others in a productive fashion. Taking a strong ethical stance is as much about listening as it is about asserting.

To conclude, what I have found most compelling about the subject of this

essay—the problematic nature of discourse and the schematic possibilities of "conversation"—is the way that Oakeshott, Rorty, Martin, and Habermas have articulated a range of positions which have helped inform my thinking about how to structure our *"being-together"* in the university. To return to Readings' concern from the opening paragraph, *"being-together"* is becomingly increasingly unstable and up for discussion as the role of the nation-state in directing the university fades, and, in my view, the range of discourses continues to present complex demands on their framing. What is required is a principled response. What is required is "conversation."

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