

People Will Talk

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That dialogue has so often recurred as a topic of interest in the history of Western philosophical inquiry says a great deal about the importance of Megan Laverty's project. Her contribution to this long line of inquiry is distinguished by its scope, passion, and richness. I am profoundly honored to respond to Laverty's essay and hope that my comments will be of some use as she continues with this fine and provocative work. Here I shall recount, in greatly abbreviated form, the three aspects of her essay that most drew my attention, and then I shall pose several questions about her analysis and about the scholarship on dialogue more broadly.

Laverty begins her essay with several closely related assertions: That changes occurring in the world "demand that we unite as a global community responsible for the stewardship of the earth and its diverse peoples"; that, "Our inability to imagine ourselves as part of such a community is reflected in the intractability of problems, including the dramatically disproportionate distribution of wealth and a dangerously depleted environment, as well as the rise in torture, terrorism, genocide, war, and religious sectarian violence"; and that there is an "urgent need for humanity to realize its interconnectedness and address global concerns."

Accounts of several theories of and perspectives on dialogue follow. The views of Jürgen Habermas, Paulo Freire, Richard Rorty, Maxine Greene, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and Nel Noddings are examined and criticized, each for its own particular weaknesses, and then criticized altogether for their failure to "provide an adequate representation of dialogue as the grounds for global human solidarity."

Next, Laverty sketches some of the qualities of her own conception of dialogue, whose practice is intended to foster human solidarity and thereby overcome what she takes to be a major shortcoming of the alternatives she discusses. This is a very skeletal account, as she notes, but judging from the available description, Laverty's conception of dialogue is in some ways very similar to others. It is manifested in speaking and listening, questioning and asserting, convergence and divergence, and so on. Laverty's analysis of dialogue can be distinguished from other alternatives, in part, by its explicit focus on "conceptual understandings." In the classroom, she says, "dialogue should be an opportunity for students to respond to, and judge, different conceptual understandings." In doing so, participants are urged to take conceptual judgments seriously and to approach them "considerately and cautiously." On Laverty's view, "dialogue [is] dedicated to gaining wisdom, speaking wisdom, and living wisely." Dialogical relations are held together, she argues, by participants' hope that they can "repeatedly receive and bestow the grace of pedagogical eloquence."

Laverty's critique and analysis, as well as her own idea of dialogue, are so interesting, in part, because of the questions they raise. These questions apply not only to Laverty's account, but more broadly as well.

First, there are questions about what Lavery variously calls “human solidarity,” “global community,” and “universal human community.” As she points out so clearly, such community has, to date, proved unachievable. Conceptually, one has to wonder about a “community” so vast as to be global. Can there be a community that excludes no one? But that question aside, one may wonder to what extent a global community might be desirable. Despite the positive associations most have with the idea of “community,” global or otherwise, a community may be held together by all sorts of morally reprehensible bonds as well as by morally commendable ones. Others would observe that the existence of many different communities is, generally speaking, deeply meaningful for the members of these communities as well as for members of other communities from which they are distinct, but yet in association. Many questions remain, not the least of which is how to cope with conflicts that arise when different communities’ interests conflict. One may hope, however, that these conflicts can be managed without obliterating the characteristics that partly define and distinguish communities in the first place.

Second, there are questions about descriptive, in contrast to normative, accounts of dialogue. At one point, Lavery observes that existing theories of dialogue “make it difficult to learn about the nature of dialogue.” But does dialogue have a “nature?” And if so, in what sense? What is gained, and for whom, when certain communicative interactions are called dialogue and others something else?

There is always an element of interpretation, of judgment, even when one merely tries to describe. For certain purposes, it may be helpful to classify particular kinds of communicative interaction as dialogue in contrast to, say, chitchat or oration. It may also be helpful to make even finer distinctions and identify different types of dialogue; as Lavery notes, Nicholas Burbules has made an important contribution along these lines. Communication, though, pervades human experience and takes all sorts of forms, and it can be very difficult to say, “Ah, here *real* dialogue begins and chatting or gossiping or speech making ends.” The more long-term one’s view, the more difficult this type of sorting out becomes, because discussants move in and out of different communicative modes which, taken as a whole, might be said to constitute a dialogical relation. Which characteristics might distinguish a specifically dialogical relation is far from clear.

While some commentators try to describe the different kinds of (usually) verbal give-and-take that are the hallmarks of dialogue, others pursue a much more explicitly normative tack. Freire, to pick a widely familiar example, says that true dialogue is animated by such virtues as love, faith, trust, and hope.¹ Freire makes his moral commitments clear and thinks that only communicative interaction enlivened by particular virtues is worthy of being called dialogue. Despite differences in the particulars, normative conceptions of dialogue generally argue that some good is inherent in, or results from, the kind of communicative interaction they have envisioned. Minus that good or goods, the communicative interaction is regarded as nondialogical, or, to use Freire’s term, “narration.”

Often descriptive and normative accounts are interwoven. This is the case in Lavery’s essay, where at some points, as mentioned previously, she focuses on

qualities of actual dialogues, at other points, on qualities that she thinks individuals ought to have in relation to dialogue, and at still others, on normative outcomes she attributes to dialogue.

Some degree of mixing description and normative judgment is all but inevitable, and is not necessarily undesirable in any event. However, in mixed analyses, it does seem especially important to clarify which sorts of claims one is making along the way. Which brings me to my final questions.

There are questions about the sort(s) of good or goods that are or ought to be attributed to dialogue. In her introductory sentences, Lavery seems to assume that, through dialogue, humanity can form itself into a global community, cemented by a common understanding of the world and its problems. Lavery's overarching criticism of existing conceptions of dialogue is that they fail to indicate how this form of communicative interaction should or could be implicated in the creation of global community. I share many of Lavery's concerns and moral commitments, but I question the extent to which any conception or practice of dialogue, including the one sketched by Lavery, will lead to the outcome she envisions.

Lacking space here, I will raise but set aside the question of what might bring people to dialogue in the first place when they are already divided by deep and longstanding hostilities. Threats of "talk, or else" are notoriously ineffective.

John Dewey remarked famously in *Democracy and Education*: "There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication. Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common."² While communication, including dialogue, enables us to hold things in common, it does not necessarily do so; and when it does, the result may not be a good one. In real life, people communicate in ways that look and sound a lot like dialogue as it is described in much of the relevant literature. Interactions marked by question asking, gesturing, asserting, nodding, listening, more asserting, pausing, and so on occur among people with great frequency. But the results of such exchanges meet the criteria of normative accounts relatively rarely, and even more rarely conclude in a predicted or predictable outcome. Firsthand experience tells us that the outcomes of dialogues range from laughter to tears, solidarity to estrangement, and everything in between. There are no guarantees.

None of my comments or questions are intended to detract from Lavery's provocative essay or to deny the educational potential of dialogue. Lavery brings great insight to this important topic and, in doing so, gives us much to think about and talk about.

1. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury, 1970).

2. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 4.