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**RESEARCH**

# Dialogue as Being With: An Antitoxin to Hate and Intolerance

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As the social and political landscape becomes more fearful, intolerant, and self-centered, the concept of dialogue offers a different path, a constructive way of approaching alien ideas and beliefs. Understanding the principles of true dialogue is the most effective way to foster inner and outer harmony, broaden one's horizons, and check aggressive, intolerant impulses. Dialogue's roots are ancient, related to a method of argument called dialectic. It is a special partnership based on mutual respect and humility. Dialogue isn't easy to engender. It requires four pre-conditions: 1) non-empirically verifiable topic; 2) two-way flow; 3) fairness; and 4) willingness to risk self-identity.

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His mission was to kill Jews. So said the white supremacist to police after he executed 11 congregants of Pittsburg's Tree of Life Synagogue in October 2018, the deadliest anti-Semitic attack in American history. The killer's rampage was preceded by a spate of anti-Semitic digital rants. A year later, in the hamlet of Monsey, New York, an assailant burst into a Hasidic rabbi's home during a Hanukkah celebration and stabbed five people. The knifings punctuated a week of 10 violent anti-Semitic attacks in the region. Just weeks earlier, three people were gunned down inside a Kosher grocery store in Jersey City, New Jersey. As *NBC News* reported, "The rash of anti-Semitic attacks gripping the New York-New Jersey area may feel like chilling coincidences, but statistics show they're part of a wave of anti-Semitic violence that has risen across the country over the past half-decade" (Chiwaya, 2020, para. 2). Anti-Semitic hate crimes totaled 938 in 2017 and 835 in 2018 according to the FBI's 2019 *Hate Crime Statistics* report (FBI, 2019). "While hate crimes were flat, they're getting more violent," said Brian Levin, director of the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino (Chiwaya, 2020, para. 7).

Symbolic violence against Jews has also been rising. An Anti-Defamation League tally of 2018 incidents found "high levels of white supremacist activity, including propaganda on college campuses and in communities, and hateful robocalls aimed at voters" (ADL, 2019, para. 4). The report noted 139 incidents of flier campaigns by white supremacists, and 80 robocalls unleashed by a single podcaster, Scott Rhodes, in support of California white supremacist Patrick Little's unsuccessful run for the U.S. Senate (para. 6).

Hate, racism, and threatened violence are now mainstream. In a March 2019 tweet, Rep. Steve King (R-Iowa)—an avowed white supremacist—mused about a new civil war between red and blue states: "Wonder who would win ... One side has about 8 trillion bullets the other side doesn't know which bathroom to use" (Budryk, 2019). Then there is Donald J. Trump, who "commemorated" the fifth anniversary of the murders of 20 children at Sandy Hook Elementary School by hosting National Rifle Association president Wayne La Pierre at the White House (Thomsen, 2017).

A profligacy of bullets and guns, but a dearth of reason and compassion. Political discourse has devolved into name-calling and preposterous fabrication. Infantile theatrics have replaced sober governance. Integrity and shame have fled the political arena. Symptoms of social and political decay abound. Fear and mistrust rule. Citizens have no clear and common understanding of reality and themselves. Is there a way out?

Perhaps. If so, a common understanding can happen only apart from party politics and mass communication. It must be kindled between *individuals*, through dialogue, a path cleared by Socrates and Plato before writing supplanted oral

discourse's primacy. However, dialogue—a method of critical inquiry and self-examination—is difficult to practice because it demands humility and the courage to risk self-identity.

For dialogue to take root four preconditions or constituent parts are necessary. I will parallel ancient and modern examples of these as I unfold the concept of dialogue by tracing it to its ancient origins. My thinking is indebted to Ehninger's (1970) analysis of argument as a mode or method of decision-making. I have taken facets and implications of his paradigm—and some of his language—in creating the four conditions I put forth, which carry a pronounced phenomenological and existential basis. I will begin by examining the origins of dialogue and its antecedent, dialectic.

### The Roots of Dialogue and Dialectic

Dialogue and dialectic are intertwined with Western philosophy's development and the concept of humanism. Dialogue is a malleable concept, adaptable to a range of situations or phenomena, i.e., dialogue with oneself, dialogue with a text, a work or art, or other objects. In its deepest sense, dialogue is a foundational—even primal—mode of understanding and affirming the Other that may be termed a type of “being-with.”

In its bare essence, dialogue is a question-and-answer form of inquiry practiced with integrity. Dialogic “truths” are existential and contextual, rather than fixed, such as mathematical theorems. Dialogue evolved from a way of arguing called dialectic, which is dialogue in skeletal form. Dialectic is bare bones and dispassionately logical, while dialogue is personal, more elaborate and ornate or rhetorical. The terms are somewhat, but not entirely, interchangeable, because dialectic is always structurally present in dialogue.

Dialectic was first systematically used by the philosopher Zeno in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C., in Elea, a Greek colony in Southern Italy (Russell, 1959). Socrates and Plato later adopted and developed dialectic. In the Platonic dialogue *Philebus*, dialectic is portrayed as the crowning glory of all the arts. It is, says Socrates, “the instrument through which every discovery ever made in the sphere of the arts and sciences has been brought to light.” He cautions, however, that the dialectical method is easy to describe, but “very far from easy to employ” (Plato, 1980, p. 1092).

Dialectic does indeed sound simple. Homer, for example, used “dialectic” to mean “to converse with oneself” or “deliberate” (Janssens, 1968). By Plato's time, it had come to mean a technique for argumentation or debate.

The structure of dialectic is basic: argument and counter-argument, or question and answer. This gives rise to a discursive spiral as contradictions—resolved or not—propel the inquiry forward. Two or more people hammer away at an idea and there is a clash of opinions. Sooner or later, the ideas that can't stand up to the pounding of questioning fall away, and the “truth” emerges: a person gains their bearings, is pointed in the right direction.

As Gadamer (2003) put it, the “essence of the question is to have sense. Now sense involves a sense of direction. Hence the sense of the question is the only direction from which the answer can be given if it is to make sense” (p. 362).

Questions are the essence of life's journey. The words “quest” and “question” have the same origin, the Latin word *quaerere*, meaning “to ask,” “to seek.” Questioning orients, gives a sense of direction, and mitigates anxiety. The use of questioning to discern the truth is innate, intuitive. Most people are familiar with young children's endless chains of “why” questions. More formally and systematically, the entire American justice and legislative system is built upon dialectic or question and answer. A trial is simply a formal procedure for asking questions, which are also foundational to deliberative bodies, such as Congress. The answers to questions raised in dialogue are rarely quantifiable or numerical. Rather, dialogic truths are judged by lived-experience, laced with emotions and memories. The answers are “felt” more often than calculated.

Of course, reason and intuition or insight don't preclude one another. Particular moods or states-of-mind are precisely what give rise to the two major modes of thought that Heidegger identified: calculative thinking, which is hurried and superficial, concerned with means and ends and rushes from one thing to another; and philosophical or meditative thinking, which is unhurried and deep, and may inhabit an idea or concept for years (Heidegger, 1966).

Plato reviled sophistry as the appropriation of the question-and-answer form of dialogue without its ethical underpinnings. The dishonest mimic dialogue for self-gain, which kills its spirit. In Plato, the dialogic search for knowledge and righteousness presupposes integrity and honesty. Plato thought face-to-face question-and-answer was far superior to writing. In his *Seventh Letter* he says that philosophical knowledge *cannot* be discovered on one's own, nor imparted through writing—even his own. Rather, it comes only “after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightaway nourishes itself” (Plato, 1997, p. 1659).

And elsewhere, Socrates tells his friend Phaedrus that written words are like paintings, “if you question anything that has been [written] because you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very thing forever” (Plato, 1997, p. 552). That is, texts are mute and finite, unable to clarify, elaborate, or address spontaneous turns of thought. In contrast, the Socratic dialogues famously and exasperatingly meander, taking surprising byways, while never arriving at definitive answers to the questions they pursue.

The *Dialogues* are significant as *method*, even though Plato never explicitly defined dialogue or set down any rules or parameters. His *Dialogues* contain only methodological contours, implications. All of his dialogues share several characteristics

that roughly correspond to the three things he lists in his *Seventh Letter* as necessary for the acquisition of knowledge: “first the name; second, the definition; third, the image” (1997, p. 1659).

The first two, name and definition, describe the structure or direction of his dialogues. The introduction names the object of inquiry, e.g., virtue, beauty, the good, the just; while the body details the search for definitions through questions, answers, and refutations.

From these implications and contours—in conjunction with my adaptation of Ehninger’s paradigm of argument (1970)—I will bring forth four necessary conditions for dialogue: 1) non-empirically verifiable topic; 2) two-way flow; 3) fairness; and 4) willingness to risk self-identity. For explanatory purposes, I list four discrete conditions. These, are, of course, abstractions. In actuality they are amalgamated and not experienced separately. Except perhaps the first condition, which is “external” and governs congruence of topic and method. The last three conditions are “internal,” describing states-of-mind and are especially fluid. Finally, and crucially, the question-and-answer method—dialectical or dialogic—is merely an empty shell without the right ethical disposition, frame-of-mind, or mood.

Before I continue, a word about Ehninger’s paradigm, which re-classifies argument as “corrective” rather than “instructive,” or a way to extend knowledge. In delineating the methodological assumptions his paradigm implies, Ehninger asserts that corrective argument requires a special partnership devoid of coercion, which also welcomes the examination and rebuttal of both positions. Furthermore, he maintains that corrective argument is appropriate only when demonstrable proof is absent.

### 1) *Non-Empirically Verifiable Topic*

Ehninger terms argument a “corrective process.” He says  
the correction advanced by the arguer ... is enforceable neither by fact nor by fiat. Instead, it rests upon the unstable ground of probabilities and values .... Only when the evidence falls short of demonstration is argument an appropriate tool. (1970, p. 103)

This “unstable ground of probabilities” is precisely the domain of rhetorical or dialogical truth. In other words, not all topics lend themselves to dialogue, which deals neither with established “fact” nor demonstrable evidence. Rather, dialogue deals with non-empirically verifiable topics—although documents, witnesses, and other types of evidence can augment dialogue.

The questions raised in dialogue can’t be verified through the senses—sight, touch, taste, hearing—or by extension, through microscopes, telescopes, scales and other such instruments that extend the scope of our sensible range. It would be dishonest to treat verifiable questions or established facts as non-empirical or debatable, e.g., climate change data, toxicology reports, carbon dating, etc. In contrast, dialogic truths are humanistic, flexible and context-based. One path may be optimal for one person, time or place, but not for another. Dialogue takes up questions for which there are no ready, definitive answers or any apparent means of measurable proof. For example, what is love, or piety?

Or courage, the topic of the *Laches*, named after a distinguished Athenian general, who is Socrates’s main interlocutor. In trying to fix courage to a definition, the discussants proffer historical examples of battlefield valor. They agree that standing ground during battle is courageous, as is fighting in retreat, but only for horsemen, such as Scythian charioteers. No, not just cavalymen, says Socrates. Spartan infantrymen ran from the wicker-shielded Persians, but this retreat allowed them to win the Battle of Plataea. “You are right,” concedes Laches. “Then what are courage and cowardice?” asks Socrates. “This is what I wanted to find out” (Plato, 1997, p. 676). This is the denouement of an inconclusive strand of questioning occupying one-third of the dialogue. Socrates and the generals Laches and Nicias then flit through a range of definitional possibilities. Is courage a type of virtue? Endurance? Wisdom? Soothsaying? Knowledge? As the dialogue concludes, Socrates says, “Then we have not discovered, Nicias, what courage is” (p. 685). No, they have not. The topic proves impossible to pin down.

Courage also figured in a contemporary dialogue between talk-show host Tavis Smiley and the poet Maya Angelou. They deliberated the question of which virtue is the greatest for 28 years! (Angelou’s death ended the dialogue.) Said Smiley,

for the entirety of our unlikely friendship, we debated whether love or courage was the greatest virtue .... I argued love; she argued courage. I argued that it takes love to animate courage. She argued that it takes courage to love. (Smiley, 2016, p 9A)

The length of their exchange attests to the topic’s non-empirical nature. It also characterizes dialogue’s “cousin,” philosophical or meditative thinking, which is never rushed. Perhaps the best name for this mode of thought is “slow time,” coined by the artist Erika Osborne, who *looks* at objects for two years in executing some works (Osborne, 2019).

### 2) *Two-Way Flow*

The Angelou-Smiley dialogue also exemplifies what Ehninger termed “bilateralism,” as distinguished from unilateral, “coercive correction.” In bilateral argument

the protagonist enters into an agreement of a special sort; and this is to give his opponent an opportunity to correct him, not only by presenting the other side of the issue but also by probing the pertinence or wisdom of the correction urged. (1970, pp. 102–3).

I've renamed Ehninger's bilateralism the "two-way flow" to stress that each person has a chance to say their piece without being rushed, interrupted, brow-beaten or ridiculed. One must affirm the other by listening. Dialogue flows in at least two directions. It is not unilateral or top-down. Rather, to engage in dialogue means entering into a "special type of partnership," as Ehninger put it, to discover the truth. The goal isn't to "win" the argument. In fact, it doesn't matter who wins—or even if there's a winner. What matters is that a person holds up their end honestly and sincerely, either by asking or refuting questions.

Those engaged in dialogue must avoid coercive methods of winning. Instead, interlocutors enter into "a special sort of agreement," becoming active participants in a corrective process. Each participant must also subject their own ideas to rigorous, critical inspection, rather than only taking aim at the other's ideas. Engaging in argument only to win typifies political and legal discourse. While retaining the facade of dialogue, such argument tips the scales. This is seen in the *Apology*, which exemplifies the antithesis of the two-way flow.

In antiquity "apology" meant a courtroom defense. Socrates's primary accuser, the poet Meletus, leveled tandem charges: not believing in Athens's sanctioned gods, and corrupting the youth. Socrates answered these charges before a jury of 500 men, who voted on two things: 1) guilt or innocence, and 2) if guilty, the penalty. Stone (1988, p. 181) deduces the votes were 280 to 220 for conviction, and—if Diogenes Laertius is correct—360 to 140 for the death penalty (p. 187). Of the prosecution's argument, Socrates said, "I do not know, [gentlemen of the jury], how my accusers affected you; as for me, I was almost carried away in spite of myself, so persuasively did they speak. And yet, hardly anything of what they said is true" (p. 18).

Socrates complained about lacking adequate time to mollify pre-trial bias. The Athenian air is so thick with years of accumulated slander, Socrates argued, that he can't possibly clear the air in so little time. The pre-trial slanders are the most formidable to overcome, says Socrates, "because they got hold of most of you from childhood." Because he can't bring into court people like Aristophanes—who drew a hideous caricature of Socrates in his play *Clouds*—Socrates says he "must simply fight with shadows" (Plato, 1997, p. 19). With impeccable logic, Socrates, proceeds to demolish the charges against him. But to no effect. The jurors' "deliberations" were concluded well in advance of the trial.

A parallel dynamic was seen in a recent example antithetical to the two-way flow: the Brett Kavanaugh Senate confirmation hearings of September and October 2018. Setting aside questions about Kavanaugh's fitness for the U.S. Supreme Court, and his innocence or guilt on sexual-assault allegations, the proceedings were hurried, curtailed by arbitrary deadlines to ensure that the vote—already predetermined—occurred prior to the November 2018 mid-term elections.

The day before the Kavanaugh hearings opened (September 4) a Bush lawyer released 42,000 pages of documents covering Kavanaugh's service in the George W. Bush White House, including his judicial philosophy and views on settled precedent. The impossibility of reviewing this cache in less than a day compelled the Senate Minority Leader, a Democrat, to ask for a delay in the hearings. The Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman, a Republican, denied the request (Barbash, 2018). The hearings were scheduled to last four days, with the vote coming two weeks thereafter. However, when sexual abuse allegations against Kavanaugh surfaced, the Judiciary Committee agreed to delay their vote until the allegations could be investigated by the FBI and a second hearing could be held.

The second hearing was limited to two witnesses, Kavanaugh and his principle accuser, Christine Blasey Ford. The 11 Republican members of the Judiciary Committee, all males, declined to question Ford directly. Instead they turned this responsibility over to a surrogate, a female career prosecutor from Phoenix, Arizona. (Senator Lindsey Graham used his allotted time to unleash an extended attack on his 10 Democratic "colleagues" on the Committee.) The outside prosecutor and the Democratic members of the Committee took turns questioning Ford in five-minute bursts. The prosecutor did not question Kavanaugh. Rather, the Republican senators reclaimed their time and used it to praise Kavanaugh (Fox, 2018).

The following day, September 28, the Judiciary Committee voted along party lines to send Kavanaugh's nomination to the full Senate. But several senators said they would not vote to confirm without a further FBI investigation of the sexual assault allegations. The Committee agreed to a supplemental background investigation, but only within certain parameters. The FBI had six days to complete the investigation and a limited list of allowable witnesses to question. Everything else was off-limits. Not included on the witness list were former high school and college classmates of Kavanaugh's who had publicly contradicted his congressional testimony about his student drinking and belligerence. On October 6 the Senate voted to advance Kavanaugh's nomination (almost entirely along party lines, one senator from each party "flipped").

As to the preceding confirmation hearings, *The New Yorker* editorialized that the Committee had failed to do its job properly: "The Republicans ignored not only [Kavanaugh's] extreme views on issues such as executive power, gun control, and reproductive rights but his obfuscations, if not outright lies ... the Democrats, for their part, wasted some time and credibility with grandstanding forays" (Sorkin, 2018, pp. 13–14).

### 3) *Fairness*

Drawing and expanding on Ehninger, I designate the third condition for dialogue “fairness,” meaning one welcomes criticism and examines their own position as vigorously as their opponent’s. The goal is to work together in a spirit of partnership, not to show up the other person.

Ehninger contrasts “naked” unilateral coercion to “restrained partisanship,” which examines arguments on their merits. An argument is granted

only that degree of credence which upon study it is found to deserve.... The antagonist must also play the role of a restrained partisan—must stand poised between the desire to maintain his present view and a willingness to accept the judgment which a critical examination of that view yields. (1970, p. 104)

Restrainted partisanship means a person must be willing to yield their position when critical examination finds it flawed or ill founded. The dialogue *Charmides* provides a good example of fairness, or collaborative discovery. Socrates and the philosopher Critias try to define temperance. As Socrates is posing questions, Critias becomes agitated and accuses Socrates of deliberately refuting everything he says, presumably to show him up. Socrates replies that he subjects his *own* statements to the same type of relentless inquiry “for fear of unconsciously thinking I know something when I do not” (Plato, 1997, p. 653). It doesn’t matter, said Socrates, who refutes whom—or who bests the other—just that they partner to propel their investigation. Critias then understands that refutation is vital to discovery. Who seems to best who is unimportant, only that both work in concert to pursue the question wherever it takes them. Bruised egos don’t matter. As Socrates put it:

‘Pluck up courage, then, my friend, and answer the question as seems best to you, paying no attention to whether it is Critias or Socrates who is being refuted. Instead, give your attention to the argument itself to see what the result of its refutation will be.’ (p. 653)

This means one can “lose” an argument and still succeed as a partner in dialogue.

History provides many examples of dialogues aborted for want of fairness. The unanswered questions raised in such exchanges may outlive the participants and be rediscovered by new generations as a path not taken, but still viable. A salient example comes from an unverified letter Chief Seattle is said to have sent to President Franklin Pierce in 1852, (other accounts say the words were spoken in a meeting with the governor of the newly established Washington Territory):

“The President in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. But how can you buy or sell the sky? The land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air or the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?” (Seattle, 1852).

Although Chief Seattle raised an honest, timeless question, history has shown that his “negotiation” partner never had any intention of sincerely examining *his* own stance, thus negating any fairness in the exchange.

The Bulgarian-French literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov found a similar stance at play in his analysis of the Spanish chronicles of the conquest of America:

In the best of cases the Spanish authors speak well *of* the Indians, but with very few exceptions they do not speak *to* the Indians. Now, it is only by speaking to the other (not giving orders but engaging in a dialogue) that *I* can acknowledge *him* as subject, comparable to what I am myself. (1984, p. 132)

To acknowledge the other on equal terms, “comparable to what I am,” as Todorov put it, is to affirm the other. Affirmation involves seeing the other on their terms, i.e., validating the “self” they wish to disclose.

### 4) *Willingness to Risk Self-Identity*

The most fundamental and problematic aspect of Ehninger’s paradigm is that argument puts the “self” at risk. As he puts it,

correction through argument is, in a very real sense, a ‘person-risking’ enterprise. By entering upon argument in any but a playful mood, a disputant opens the possibility that as a result of the interchange he may be persuaded of his opponent’s view, or failing that, at least may be forced to make major alterations in his own. In either case, he will emerge from the interchange with a different pattern of convictions, values, and attitudes that he held when he entered it, and to this extent will be a different ‘self’ or ‘person.’

(1970, p. 104)

I have retained Ehninger's phrase for the fourth and final condition of dialogue: the willingness to risk one's self-identity. This means that entering into a dialogue renders a person vulnerable to persuasion by an alien view. Self-identity is at risk because people derive their identities from their core beliefs and values. As beliefs change, so does self-image. This may be seen in religious converts, and in defeated athletes, such as George Foreman.

Foreman lost the World Heavyweight Championship to Mohammad Ali in Zaire in 1974—his first professional loss. Foreman also lost his identity of invincibility. His “self” shattered, he plunged into a two-year depression (Gast, 2005). After a second loss (to Jimmy Young in 1977), an exhausted and despondent Foreman experienced an “epiphany” in his dressing room. His anger dissipated, and subsequently he became an ordained Christian minister (Oden, p. 79).

The dialogue *Parmenides* gives a suggestion of Socrates teetering into doubt and self-risk when his theory of reality is belittled. The great philosopher Parmenides pokes fun of Socrates' theory of “reality,” i.e., everything that exists has a non-perceptible twin in the ideal realm of “Forms,” as do, for instance, beauty, the good, the just. If so, asks Parmenides, then are there not ideal Forms for mud, dirt, and “totally undignified and worthless” things, i.e., human waste? Socrates admits that the very thought has troubled him, compelling him to protect his self-identity by refusing to linger where it hurts: “when I get bogged down in that, I hurry away, afraid that I may fall into some pit of nonsense and come to harm” (Plato, 1997, p. 364).

Dialogue requires the fortitude to subject one's beliefs to questioning and to face the possibility of being “wrong.” If a person is open to persuasion by an opposing view, they could leave the dialogue a different “self.” This sounds transcendental and needs explanation.

A person's self-image originates in the awareness of another person's gaze: through empathy, the image of “self” reflected in an other's eyes is internalized. From this primal dynamic arises the contentious—has it ever been otherwise?—nature of social experience. This phenomenological axiom weighs heavily in dialogue and its requisite emotional equilibrium.

This idea is pivotal to 20<sup>th</sup> century existentialist philosophy and literature, especially Sartre's 1943 work *Being and Nothingness*—see the section titled “The Look” (1973, pp. 340–400). Hegel was the first to describe the “self's” ephemerality (in his 1807 classic *Phenomenology of Spirit*).

Hegel called the “self” an indeterminate and reflexive phenomenon, meaning that our sense of “self” comes into being only through the presence of another person. Perhaps influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's “noble savage,” Hegel portrayed this—somewhat metaphorically—as a life-and-death contest in a strange abstract tale, as if Samuel Beckett had given Robinson Crusoe an existential twist: a self-sufficient person has his idyllic autonomy shattered by the unexpected appearance of a second person. He takes action. (I've put his motives into a fictive monologue): “I see you looking at me. Your look pins me to a conception of self that is not my own. To preserve my autonomy, I must *cancel* your power to look at me.” Cancel is Hegel's word. It means death. In less extreme encounters, the vanquished are relegated to subservience—or the role of object rather than subject (Hegel, 1977, pp. 113–114).

The sense of “self” reflected back to us through another's look, as in a mirror, isn't necessarily self-affirming. In Martin Buber's terms, others may see—and treat—us as an It rather than a Thou.

Here is another, older way of saying this:

The Rabbinic tradition contains a beautiful aphorism which runs, ‘if I am I only because you are you, and you are you only because I am I, then I am not I and you are not you.’ For then we face one another only as two mirrors endlessly reflecting their emptiness into one another. (Kaplan, 1969, p. 100)

Endless status games, “cancelling” the Other to establish “self” dominance in a race to the “top,” mark “civilized” society. However, the dialectic of self-identity—while fundamental and inescapable—needn't be a blood sport. Rather, it may be viewed as a primitive level of consciousness that can be sublimated and superseded by a higher level of consciousness—one that culminates in genuine communication and affirmation. Namely, in dialogue.

### Obstacles to Dialogue

Dialogue is difficult to engender because two pervasive cultural obstacles block its path. (There are more, but these are the most pressing.) The first is “conversational narcissism,” which kills two-way flow. The term comes from Derber (1983), who, following Fromm, believed that economic systems and their ideologies shape consciousness or create particular “types.”

Derber argues that the ideology of rugged individualism in commodity exchange, i.e., “grab as much money as you can,” has saturated face-to-face interactions, resulting in pervasive conversational narcissism, i.e., “grab as much attention as you can.” He writes that

Erich Fromm has theorized that a shared character structure develops in each society, a ‘social character’ that is a response to the requirements of the social order and best suited for survival and success within it. The self-oriented character type develops a highly egocentric view of the world and is motivated primarily by self-interest. (1983, p. 21)

Conversational narcissists monopolize conversations. Others exist as “objects” for them. When the attention turns to others, they use discursive ploys called “shifts” to control the conversation and deflect the attention back to themselves (Derber, 1983, pp. 22–23). Such “me-first” behavior may be so deeply entrenched, owing to neurosis or inveterate habit, as to make it impossible to cede the floor and listen to others. Those denied attention by narcissists are rendered “invisible,” the social analogue to economic bankruptcy.

The second obstacle is the flood of intolerance engulfing the U.S. An intolerant or hateful disposition precludes any self-risk, i.e., openness to other views. At base, intolerance is a refusal to affirm others as they are. Intolerance is a type of rigidity, a refusal to allow that one may be wrong or to risk loss of “self,” which must always be based on “superiority.” This refusal to acknowledge others or examine one’s own position, describes the “structure” of racism, whose “psychodynamic” Abraham Kaplan explains:

More and more people seem to be coping with their problems by adopting negative identities, thinking to find themselves by differentiating themselves from the other, to become selves not by being *with* the other, but by being against the other. Racism, both black and white, has, I think, this psychodynamic. ‘I can’t talk with you, indeed, I won’t talk with you. Only in that refusal can I be myself’ (1969, pp. 99–100).

Self-identity based in opposition precludes any validation of a dissimilar other, thus ruling out dialogue entirely. To reiterate, intolerance and hate are the function of a primitive level of consciousness, where brute force settles the primal issue of self-identity, as in Hegel’s atavistic tale of the dialectic of self-identity. Such low-level thinking is mired in a willfully ignorant state-of-mind—often ruled by superstition and myth that denigrates science and education.

Sadly, the effects of intolerance are all too predictable. Warfare begins where speech has ceased, said Martin Buber, (in his 1953 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade speech in Frankfurt, which he titled, *Genuine Dialogue and the Possibilities for Peace*.) Buber noted that the fact that “peoples can no longer carry on authentic dialogue with one another is not only the most acute symptom of the pathology of our time; it is also that which most urgently makes a demand of us” (Boos, 2014, p. 36).

### Suggestions for Future Research

Heretofore, I have eschewed the term *elenchus*—“refutation” in common parlance—because of its ambiguity and idiosyncratic shifting in usage by specialists. For example, Gregory Vlastos—no mean Platonist—disavowed his earlier “certainty” about *elenchus*, admitting, “I guessed wrong thirty-five years ago” (Vlastos, 1994, p. 2). For nearly a century, it has become standard for “commentators to use the term ‘Socratic *elenchus*’ as a label for Socrates’ way of philosophizing in the dialogues” (Scott, 2002, p. 2). However, it’s unclear

whether ‘the *elenchus*’ is supposed to refer to a process (in which case it could mean to ‘cross-examine,’ ‘to put to the test,’ ‘to put to the proof,’ or ‘to indicate’) or a result (in which case it could mean ‘to shame,’ ‘to refute,’ or ‘to prove’). In short, there is no general agreement about ‘the *elenchus*,’ and therefore no consensus either about its employment in the dialogues. (p. 4)

However, *elenchus*’s ambiguity is also its strength. It represents multifaceted depth, which protects the concept from dogmatic trivialization. The facets of *elenchus* worth exploring—and putting into play—are the sense of *shame* and personal accountability that the concept carries. As Vlastos points out, *elenchus* is used to search for truth *only* in the moral domain (Vlastos, 1994, p. 7). (Or what I called existential or non-empirically verifiable topics).

In using honest argument in this quest—unlike arguing tooth and nail—a person must say what they truly believe,

even if it will lose one the debate.... But if one puts oneself on record as saying what one believes, one has given one’s opinion the weight of one’s own life.... Socrates wants them to tie their opinions to their life as a pledge that what they say is what they mean. (p. 9)

The *elenchus* examines “not just propositions but lives.” Furthermore, *elenctic* argument challenges one “to change their life, to cease caring for money and reputation and not caring for the most precious thing of all—what one is” (p. 9). This presupposes rough handling of beliefs and feelings, i.e., self-risk. The operative emotion here is shame. Plato brings this out in the *Sophist*, when Socrates says knowledge is inert, has no transformative power,

‘until the *elenchus* is applied and the man is refuted and brought to *shame* [italics added], thus purifying him from opinions that hinder learning and causing him to think he knows only what he does know and no more.... For these reasons ... we must say that *elenchus* is the greatest and most sovereign of the purifications ...’ (Robinson, 1971, pp. 84–5)

We live in shameless times. Some in power crow about mendacity—as did political saboteur Roger Stone in defining himself as a “dirty trickster”—as if lying and cheating were virtues. Of course, nothing can be done with inveterate liars, with pathological cases. However, if a modicum of honesty exists in discussants, I believe shame may bridge understanding. Hence, the contemporary potential of elenchus, which holds one accountable not merely for their words, but how they live.

Self-accountability, of course, is indispensable in dialogue. It’s the central precept of the precondition “fairness,” i.e., criticizing your own position as vigorously as your opponent’s, or allowing that you may be wrong. Obstacles to fairness include unexamined or hidden biases or pre-judgments. Bringing these to the surface is one of the tenets of hermeneutics, another discipline that would prove enriching to dialogue. The parallels between elenchus and hermeneutics are uncanny. (Not incidentally; Gadamer, the principal 20<sup>th</sup> century theoretician/promulgator of hermeneutics, was also a great Platonist, as *Truth and Method*, his 1960 master-work attests).

Gadamer writes that “if a person fails to hear what the other person is really saying, he will not be able to fit what he has misunderstood into the range of his own various expectations of meaning” (2003, p. 269). In other words, a person’s lived experience predisposes them to a particular perspective, while blinding them to others.

True understanding, Gadamer says, doesn’t involve “‘neutrality’ with respect to content nor the extinction of one’s self.” But rather, surfacing “one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias” (ibid., p. 269). Hermeneutic self-reflection may thus enlarge our conception and practice of dialogue’s tenets.

I will end on a methodological caveat. In enlarging our understanding of dialogue through the investigation of elenchus and hermeneutics, I am advocating the *creative* use of “found materials” or *bricolage*, to put a name to the method I have employed in my essay. But rather than fashioning a concept of dialogue from cultural detritus—like a Congolese sculptor using nails, or Duchamp using a bicycle wheel—I’ve tried to use the “good stuff.” To reiterate, my work is grounded in phenomenology. This approach I recommend extending, particularly as it pertains to how emotions and moods determine what we see and don’t see, and how we relate to others. I have laid the groundwork for this in discussing the “dialectic of self.”

In suggesting themes for future research, I am not advocating esoteric parsing in a search for definitive meanings. Such endeavors tend to imbue authors with infallibility and petrify their texts. Rather, the way forward is through the creative application and amalgamation of concepts and insights from heterogeneous fields. I believe a concept’s power is proportional to its malleability and applicability. Dialogue is such a concept.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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