

Reconsidering the Transformative Potential of Dialogue

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In her thoughtful essay, Shilpi Sinha raises important questions about the potential of dialogue to tap into the transformative capacities of students, enabling them to expand their understandings of others. In considering the transformative potential of Ruth Grant's cognitive dialogue and Rob Reich's hermeneutic dialogue, Sinha faults both for relying on conceptions of affect that do not successfully engage the not-self but rather refer back to the self. I consider whether Sinha does enough to establish that each form of dialogue in fact fails to meet her conception of affect, and then I conclude by asking whether she sets the bar for transformative education so high that it is unlikely or perhaps impossible to attain.

Although presented as distinct alternatives, Grant's and Reich's proposals share important similarities. Both emphasize the importance of autonomy and argue that dialogue is an appropriate pedagogical tool for the promotion of autonomy. However, they understand autonomy somewhat differently. In her article "Ethics and Incentives," Grant defines autonomy as "the capacity to set one's own ends or purposes according to some rational standard."¹ This rational standard requires submitting to the dictates of universal reason. Grant's cognitive dialogue supports autonomy by requiring participants to support their views with arguments that are likely plausible to others and to be open to changing their views should the force of the better argument require it.² It claims to be transformative by helping participants move from particular views to shared ones through identification of universal reasons. Dialogue is distinguished here from debate. Both involve providing evidence and arguments. However, whereas dialogue requires listening to others and being open to change, debate does not.

Drawing on arguments regarding the death penalty, Sinha concludes too swiftly that cognitive dialogue does not move students by anything outside themselves but rather only by evidence that already fits into their worldviews. The death penalty example on which her criticism is based does not adequately meet Grant's requirements of dialogue. Little is said about whether her interlocutors are attempting to provide reasons likely to seem plausible to others, or whether they are open to listening to others and changing their views. These exclusions lead Sinha to conclude that educators should avoid cognitive dialogue because it may reinforce rather than challenge students' social or cultural assumptions and may decrease students' responsiveness to one another. These criticisms seem better addressed to debate than dialogue. Sinha's criticism is perhaps better recast as a caveat to educators to take care that dialogue does not devolve into debate.

By failing to engage Grant on her own terms, Sinha launches criticisms that do not necessarily apply to Grant's view. Sinha argues that the sphere of logic is polyphonic and that this fact delivers a fatal blow to the transformative capacity of cognitive dialogue. We can understand this polyphonic claim as identifying the fact

that rationality underdetermines normative commitments. Sinha seems to deny that Grant's theory can accommodate the fact that reasonable people may disagree. Grant acknowledges that not *all* conflicts have a single rational solution, but this does not foreclose the possibility that *some* conflicts may be resolved rationally and so that cognitive dialogue may sometimes be transformative in Sinha's sense.

Although Sinha does not judge hermeneutic dialogue as harshly as cognitive dialogue, she does deem it unlikely to engage students' transformative potential with the requisite urgency. She argues that Reich's dialogue suffers from the same weaknesses in its understanding of affect as Gadamer's hermeneutic dialogue, on which it is based. The success of this challenge rests on two factors, which I consider in turn: the success of the criticism of Hans-Georg Gadamer and the applicability of the criticism of Gadamer to Reich.

Sinha's criticism of Gadamer proceeds in two steps. First, she explains that through hermeneutic experience we only gain understanding of the not-self from the position of the self. Sinha claims that this necessary tie to the self is problematic when the self is too limited to successfully engage with the not-self. She refers in passing to several texts to substantiate this claim. In the second step of the criticism, Sinha considers whether Gadamer's view has any internal resources to counter the limitations purported in these texts. On Gadamer's view, hermeneutic dialogue is a perpetual process, with the self never fully gaining access to the not-self and the potential for new experience remaining ever-present.³ Though Gadamer's theory leaves open the possibility of transformation at some future point, Sinha claims that it is insufficient to meet the urgent demands for engaging students' transformative capacities. Whether this pessimism is warranted depends on the soundness of the claims in the first step, namely, whether the self really is as limited as Sinha suggests. Both steps of the argument would benefit from a fuller explication of reasons for assuming the self is excessively limited, for example, through a considered account of the nature of human experience, especially in regards to the formation and modification of social, political, and moral values.

While Sinha's criticism of Gadamer requires further explication, it is also unclear that this criticism applies to Reich. He proposes hermeneutic dialogue as a pedagogical tool for liberal multicultural education, which aims to educate for minimalist autonomy and to provide a cosmopolitan outlook. We can consider whether minimalist autonomy and cosmopolitanism are compatible with the underlying assumptions of Gadamer's hermeneutics.

Reich sees hermeneutic dialogue as supporting autonomy by promoting critical reflection among possible alternatives and access to a meaningful range of life choices.⁴ This understanding of autonomy differs from Grant's by allowing decisions to be made on the basis of loyalty or love rather than only strict rationality.⁵ We can consider whether Reich's critical reflection is compatible with Gadamer's hermeneutics. Although Gadamer reacts against excessively rationalistic views that assume individuals can reason their way to universal truths (for example, Grant), his hermeneutic dialogue may nevertheless be reconcilable with a less stringent form of rationality. Georgia Warnke interprets Gadamer as reconceiving rather than

rejecting rationality. She writes, “The awareness that one’s knowledge is always open to refutation or modification from the vantage point of another perspective is not a basis for suspending confidence in the idea of reason but rather represents the very possibility of rational progress.”⁶ This understanding of rationality seems compatible with Reich’s emphasis on the importance of one’s values, commitments, and goals remaining open to potential revision or rejection.

However, it is less clear whether Reich’s cosmopolitanism is reconcilable with Gadamerian hermeneutics. Reich proposes education about the particularities of cultures around the world *and* about the values we all share as humans.⁷ This second component of cosmopolitanism seems at odds with Gadamer, who defines hermeneutic experience in opposition to “knowledge of human nature.”⁸ Although Sinha briefly mentions Reich’s cosmopolitanism, interpreting it as appealing to something outside both the self and the other, giving it more attention may illuminate a departure from Gadamer on the potential for universal value. Perhaps Reich is adopting aspects of Gadamer’s hermeneutic dialogue as pedagogical tools without fully endorsing Gadamer’s underlying theory of experience. If so, Sinha needs to reconsider her challenge to his view.

Sinha’s provocative look at the transformative potential of dialogue would benefit from a more careful consideration of the views she opposes, along with an account of the nature of human experience to support her conclusions about the limits of dialogue. I conclude by considering one further threat to her view. She suggests that tapping students’ transformative capacity through affect only occasionally is insufficient, implying this needs to happen always or often. Sinha’s understanding of affect by definition undermines this perfectionist goal for transformative education. Although she argues that reason is polyphonic and so limited in its transformative potential, she fails to acknowledge that affective receptivity is also polyphonic, admitting variation among students. If cognitive dialogue is limited by the polyphonic nature of rationality, the transformative potential of any form of dialogue is also limited when understood through this concept of affect. It seems reasonable to relax the requirements of transformative education so that its realizability is not ruled out by definition. If we conceive of success in classrooms in a less perfectionist way and focus on openness to revising and possibly rejecting one’s current views rather than on contact with the not-self, cognitive and hermeneutic dialogue both seem like potentially more promising transformative tools. They both cultivate openness to change, cognitive dialogue through development of openness to the force of universal reasons and humility about one’s particular views and hermeneutic dialogue through exposure to difference.

1. Ruth Grant, “Ethics and Incentives: A Political Approach,” *American Political Science Review* 100, no.1 (2006): 34.

2. Ruth Grant, “The Ethics of Talk: Classroom Conversation and Democratic Politics,” *Teachers College Record* 97, no.3 (1996): 475–78.

3. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1998), 361–62.

4. Rob Reich, *Bridging Liberalism and Multiculturalism in American Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 105.
5. *Ibid.*, 97.
6. Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1987), 173.
7. Reich, *Bridging Liberalism and Multiculturalism*, 190–92.
8. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 358.