

Diverse Voices and an Ethos for Public Conversation

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ethos: the distinguishing character, sentiment, moral nature, or guiding beliefs of a person, group, or institution (Webster's 9th New Collegiate Dictionary)

I wish to address the conference theme "Liberal Education and the Public Spirit" by addressing the way we communicate with ourselves and each other from our diverse perspectives. In doing so, I build upon Worsfold's (1993) call for tolerance as "the prerequisite epistemological principle (p. 27)," that recognizes the fallibility of our beliefs and assumes that no belief system has a monopoly on truth. From this perspective, we can see diversity of viewpoint as essential to the continuing evolution of our knowledge.

I believe that an effective liberal education requires that students understand and appreciate the wide variety of viewpoints and perspectives that characterize human inquiry and understanding. Such an approach helps a diverse student body develop a sense of legitimacy for their own perspectives and enhances their effectiveness living with people different from themselves. A general education program incorporating these elements can facilitate effective personal development and enhance students' ability to assume effective citizenship roles in an increasingly diverse and interrelated world. Further, and perhaps more importantly, it can assist us, collectively, in our quest for transcendent knowledge that addresses our most fundamental concerns as humans. However, in order to maximize these values, we must engage in these issues with productive interchange. Intolerance of diverse viewpoints, ranging from "hate speech" to "political correctness," inhibits and undermines the process we require.

I wish to approach this issue by addressing four topics. First, I will elaborate briefly the value of including diverse viewpoints. Second, I shall consider some assumptions I find useful regarding the nature of our personal participation in constructing our beliefs. Third, I will invite you to consider a post-critical intellectual ethos in which we accredit each other as fellow knowers jointly involved in a quest for transcendent knowledge. Finally, I shall suggest that we consider adopting a language discipline that requires us to accept direct responsibility for our interpretations, attributions, and beliefs.

The value of learning diverse viewpoints

In considering diversity I include a range of elements such as race, ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, creed, political and economic beliefs, lifestyle preferences, religion, philosophy, and theoretical and conceptual models regarding politics, economics, and epistemology. Members of various groups whose voices have not appeared regularly in our discourse can benefit personally in learning about their group's perspective, an argument effectively discussed and articulated by those who emphasize ethnic

studies, women's studies, gay and lesbian studies, etc. Such exposure helps these individuals develop a deeper sense of understanding of "unconscious" or "tacit" elements in their own experience, providing a greater sense of legitimacy to their own perceptions. Individuals may thus feel less alienated and more willing to participate in educational enterprise. We can see great value in calling our attention to continuing inequities, injustices, and the need for continuous social change, a perspective well represented in discussions around the current controversies within academe.

Membership in a group, however, may not define everything about a person's perspective, and individuals may differ in their adherence to or comfort with their own culture, or may have differing predilections. Thus, we may see value in learning about other perspectives accruing to individuals who feel "alienated" from their group. Such individuals may experience similar benefits as those described above by learning of the existence of perspectives with which they may identify.

We can also see value for all people in enhancing effective living by learning about other perspectives, and seeing the variety in how humans experience life and give value to it. Understanding that our own tradition represents only one of many approaches can help us understand and respect other cultures "and relate effectively to individuals who differ in terms of race, ethnic group, social class, gender, or national origin" (Gaff, 32) Learning about diverse perspectives can also include learning more about our own culture, and members of the "majority culture" can benefit from studying Western perspectives as subject and as context. Such emphasis on diversity can, we hope, lead to more harmonious relations with a range of fellow humans, more effective dealings with other people, greater tolerance of diverse perspectives, greater cooperation, reduction in barriers, prejudice, bigotry. It can create more effective opportunities to live and work together in a multi-perspective world.

Inclusion of diverse and alternative viewpoints on issues may facilitate the full psychological development of our students. They have evolved a self structure to provide predictability and meaning and further development consists of transcendence of exclusive identification with each structure and its replacement with a new structure in which the previous mode of understanding becomes a component of a new mode of understanding. We do not lose the earlier structure, but see it within the context of a broader view (the whole becomes part to a new whole; the context becomes content).

I believe, additionally, that we must incorporate diverse viewpoints in our quest for a comprehensive (McWilliams, 1988) perspective on knowledge that can help us to transcend the obvious facts of our daily lives and come to terms with the most fundamental and important questions that we humans ask about the nature of our existence, and lead to construction of a more unified and integrated conception. This process requires knowledge of a variety of particulars because comprehensive understanding comes from awareness of coherence among particulars previously seen as unrelated. By considering alternatives we have the possibility of perceiving recurrent patterns among the diverse perspectives, which may demonstrate a greater sense of unity among people.

Assumptions about the universe and our knowledge

My approach to valuing diversity rests on several assumptions about the universe and our understanding of it that I have elaborated through my study of a wide range of writers in psychology, philosophy, and religion. Two perspectives have particularly influenced my assumptions: the constructivist psychology of George Kelly (1955, 1979) and the post-critical epistemological philosophy of Michael Polanyi (1958; 1969), whose approaches I find complementary (McWilliams, 1993). I assume that human knowledge derives from our attempts to understand and relate effectively to the universe in which we live through our experience of it. We participate actively and passionately in our knowledge, basing our beliefs on our often tacitly held intimations about reality. Our knowledge system evolves as we admit new elements into the existing structure and then revise the structure in the face of new information (Piaget, 1971). I see this process as combining intellectual, emotional, and physical components.

I assume that the universe does not tell us how we should understand it. Rather, we humans construct our beliefs and we can change or replace them as we invent more useful beliefs. We can always consider alternative interpretations and we need not disprove one theory or hypothesis in order to entertain another. We might usefully see the universe as integral, with each element bearing a relation to every other element. Thus, the universe itself holds no allegiance to any particular human belief about it, and does not divide itself into our disciplinary or cultural units. Although somewhat paradoxical, we pursue our understanding and beliefs with universal intent, and the sense that our knowledge represents contact with a real world. However, because we see the world as real, we must recognize that it may reveal itself to us as quite different from what we currently imagine.

In our pursuit of understanding we tend to seek the most comprehensive interpretation, and we quest for knowledge that transcends our specific observations in favor of more universal and eternal truths. We might best view the universe as a form of motion, in which all elements relate to each other, with culture (including, most strikingly, American culture) and knowledge as "works-in-progress." We must remember that ultimate truth still eludes us. Our most useful understanding of the universe can benefit from considering one or more alternative perspectives. We might enhance our effectiveness to the extent that we can develop techniques for opening ourselves to differing viewpoints, including adopting ideas on an "as if" basis or even pursuing contrary points of view to see where they lead.

Although we might well voice theoretical support for the need for hearing a diversity of voices and acknowledge the relative nature of our beliefs, we often act as if our particular viewpoint reflects an ultimate truth. We seem to have a strong desire to find a shortcut to the eternal quest for transcendent knowledge. We desire certainty, and often prefer to authorize our current understanding as final. As a result, we criticize perspectives that do not agree with our own point of view, which we often take for granted, and engage in acrimonious disagreement about "the way it is." If we wish to apply our agreement about the value of diversity, and the partiality of each individual perspective, I believe that we must assume a more tentative posture with regard to our beliefs, and a more convivial stance with regard to other perspectives. We must, therefore, recognize our common pursuit for transcendent truths and accredit each other as independent seekers of common knowledge.

A post-critical intellectual ethos

Cannon (1993), elaborating on Polanyi's (1958) work, discussed what he called a "post-critical intellectual ethos" as a way of entering into community with other knowers, and committing ourselves to our own understanding alongside others who may commit themselves to distinctly different frameworks of knowledge. Our desire to reduce or banish doubt leads us to tend to accept only that information, and those interpretations, that accord well with our current framework for understanding, which we often take completely for granted. We thus have difficulty giving credence to, or even acknowledging the existence of, any point of view that we cannot fit into our immediate framework. This tendency prevents us from integrating into a common or publicly shared reality our individual experiences, thoughts, and imaginings. Cannon argued for a "common sense," defined as "the ability to recognize something-in-common, not despite our different viewpoints but in virtue of those very differences" (p. 7). This perspective views us each as embodied knowers pursuing truths that transcend our subjective points of view. Cannon also describes the extent to which disciplinary "purity," as a tool for banishing doubt, creates single perspectives within each field that stand in the way of building a common knowledge of the world and addressing "the large questions pertaining to the meaning and purpose of our lives" (p. 10). This post-critical perspective proposes that we retain confidence in our personal viewpoints not as "truth" but as "our own best avenue, or clue, or stage-on-the-way to discovery of, truth-in-common" (p. 11). This approach would thus encourage us to enter into the beliefs of others, respecting all individuals' ability to discern a basis for justifying their views even if we do not ourselves discern it at the outset.

Cannon proposed four features of this post-critical intellectual ethos. First, we recognize that the knowledge we seek depends on the development of a mutually recognized common understanding among independent knowers. This process requires that we consider a range of alternative perspectives, with each individual's as one among many but potentially accessible to others. It also suggests that we must look beyond any single frame of reference, to incorporate, inclusively, a variety of voices who do not share one another's perspectives to facilitate a meeting of these diverse minds leading toward a synoptic and integrated understanding. Such an approach would extend across specialties within disciplines, across disciplines, between academics and students and academics and laypersons, and include perspectives of gender and ethnicity. Second, we recognize that each individual has personal access to transcendent knowledge that others can potentially come to understand. Third, our ability to apprehend transcendent knowledge positively requires independent perspectives. If I understand from the outset the partiality and incompleteness of my own perspective, I further understand that in my quest for integration I actively need receptive and empathic access to the point of view of others. Fourth, we must mutually respect and trust each individual's capacity to participate in the process of seeking truth-in-common. We thus must support and assist each other in pursuing our intimations of understanding. This process requires that we encourage active participation in knowing, give others the benefit of the doubt when we fail to understand their ideas, and, further, make an effort to enter into each other's frameworks. When we insist that other individuals make sense in terms of our own frame of reference before we take them seriously we deprive ourselves of alternative viewpoints essential to developing an integrative, transcendent understanding.

Creating convivial conversation

How can we create an appropriate context that will support and nurture this ethos within our educational communities? I propose that we can only enter into a useful relationship with one another's diverse and alternative perspectives to the extent that we incorporate our understanding of this intellectual ethos into the ethos of our conversations. I suggest that we must first address this perspective in our private conversations, clarifying to ourselves our understanding of our own claim to what we know. In order to develop the sustained and personal acceptance of this point of view we must adopt a language ethos that requires us to take direct responsibility for our personal experience and our commitment to our beliefs, and that reduces our tendency to project these beliefs onto events or objects in the universe. Such a language would require that we recognize our personal participation in creating meaning and mutually accredit each other, and each other's perspectives, with the same capacity to participate in discovering common truths. Such an ethos can reduce or avoid the antagonism of competing viewpoints and can facilitate our collective movement toward more universal understanding.

As a prime candidate for an appropriate approach, I propose that we consider using "E-prime," a language approach from general semantics that excludes all forms of the verb "to be" from English usage. Semanticists, as well as philosophers since the Greeks, have raised concerns about how our use of "to be" verbs leads us to project meaning into the names we use and a fixed sense of identity to events, objects, and people. It encourages us to see as constant a universe that continuously changes. When we say, and believe, that an object is what we say, we relieve ourselves of the responsibility for the attribution, and project our partial and incomplete assumptions and beliefs on the object. Use of E-prime particularly helps us develop sensitivity to two insidious forms of "is-ness": the is of identity, in which we equate a particular person or situation with an abstract concept ("Spence is an administrator"), and the is of predication, in which we project our personal attribution on to a person or situation ("Spence is an idiot for proposing this E-prime business"). In "translating" these statements into E-prime, we regain responsibility for our personal observations and beliefs. For example, we might say, "Spence works in an administrative capacity," or "I disagree with Spence as to the value of E-prime." Use of E-prime also prevents us from using a passive voice, such as "It is well known that Spence comes up with crazy ideas." It requires that we make the source of our information or interpretation clear.

The general semantics literature includes extensive discussion on the process of using E-prime, its benefits, and criticism of its shortcomings. Due to time and space limitations, I shall not review this literature in detail. Interested readers may wish to consult an anthology of articles on E-prime (Bourland & Johnston, 1991), as well as two special issues [1992, 49 (2); 1993, 50 (3)] of *Et cetera*, the general semantics journal, that include symposia on the E-prime controversy. Let me instead explore some examples of how we might apply E-prime to our discussions of diverse viewpoints. I will begin this process by presenting statements in conventional English and then suggesting E-prime alternatives.

I turn for my first example to an article in a recent issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Wilson, 1993) describing a controversial point of view propounded by a professor of religious studies. I want to place this in proper context by noting that the scholar indicated that she did

not want to propose her perspective as the last word, or suggest it as the absolute or only reading of the Biblical text. I do not know the extent to which the scholar casts her ideas in the same language as the author of the article, who wrote (p. 7) that the scholar argues:

". . . Mary was not a virgin who was impregnated by the Holy Spirit. Mary was raped. . ."

Later in the article, the author quotes another religion professor as saying

"The conclusion is simply absurd and crazy."

We can easily see how the use of the "to be" verbs (was, is) leads to a confrontational conversation in which the speakers may fail to accredit each other's capacity for seeking truth-in-common. Suppose, however, that we translated the scholar's statement into E-prime, and said something like:

Suppose we regard Mary, not as impregnated by the Holy Spirit, but as raped?

This approach clearly suggests that the speaker takes responsibility for inviting us to consider a novel interpretation, but does not claim infallibility. If we disagree, we might well say, using E-prime, something like:

I consider that interpretation absurd.

or

I disagree with that interpretation

or

I interpret the evidence differently.

These statements might invite a further question such as "What do you dislike about it?" In this way, we might enter into a dialogue between two fellow explorers who disagree with each other's interpretations of an event. Let me provide another example, this time selecting two "to be" statements on contrasting poles of an issue:

Homosexuality is immoral.

Homosexual practice is an acceptable alternate lifestyle.

If we continue to use standard English, the speakers of these statements might enter into an unproductive argument over which statement truly is right. Instead, we might consider E-prime translations such as:

Based on my religious beliefs I consider homosexuality immoral.

I regard homosexuality as an acceptable alternative lifestyle.

I do not wish to suggest that this simple translation will end a disagreement as fundamental as this one, but it does appear to me that the latter statements provide a greater possibility for

opening the way to further conversation. I offer yet another example of how a "to be" statement can lead us to think of ourselves or others in ways that may impede our effective functioning:

John is learning disabled

Consider these E-prime alternatives:

John's test indicate he meets the criteria for learning disability.
John experiences particular difficulty learning mathematics.

Abortion is murder.
Abortion is a woman's right to choose.

The PLO is a gang of terrorists.
Israel is the God-given home of the Jews.

All males are potential rapists and abusers.
"A rapist is a single-minded, totally self-absorbed, sociopathic beast."

She is mistaken.
He is sadly misguided.

"The academic setting . . . is not a known site for truthtelling."

I am a victim of (racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, etc.).

"The denial of tenure is the denial of professional opportunity."

This latter quote comes from an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education in which the speaker later describes how, following a tenure denial that led to a discrimination charge, the speaker obtained a tenured position in which she found a greater fit with her values, felt professionally much happier, and had no desire to return to the institution which denied her tenure.

In addition to excluding forms of "to be" verbs, we might also wish to consider avoiding other speech forms that decrease our openness to seeing our knowledge as incomplete and ad interim. For example, we might wish to exclude absolutes such as "always" and "never." We might take a suspicious attitude toward use of the verb "to have" as we often use it as a substitute for "to be," as in "John has a learning disability" or "Women have a right to abortion," etc. Additionally, we might wish to call attention to our tendencies to attribute motives, feelings, needs, and desires to individuals based on our observations of them rather than any direct knowledge of the person's phenomenology:

Blacks just want to stay on welfare.

Whites do not want blacks to succeed.

Men need to develop greater nurturance.

Woman just want to have everything their way.

Conclusion

In this brief presentation I can, of course, do no more than invite us to consider the implications of using E-prime as one technique in a post-critical conversational ethos. I did not elaborate on the many implications of this approach. For example, I realize that mechanical usage of this technique will not, in itself, guarantee tolerance and acceptance of the viewpoints of others nor require that we accept our own beliefs as tentative and partial. I suggest, however, that we might consider incorporating an E-prime language practice into our general education programs and, together with our students, apply it to our public conversations within the academy.

A few weeks ago a well-educated but non-academic friend inquired about the topic of my paper for this conference. After I described the issues and concerns about which I planned to speak she asked, "Isn't that just a fancy way of saying that we should respect each other's opinions?" I certainly acknowledge that you may think I have said little more than that, albeit using quite a few more words. However, I hope that I have said a little more than that we just respect each other's beliefs. I have also suggested that we acknowledge our own beliefs as partial, and as imperfect creations of our personal experience. Using this understanding as a basis for the empathic understanding of others, I have further suggested that we recognize the necessity of incorporating diverse viewpoints in our quest for transcendent wisdom. Although these ideas add up to a modest proposal, I believe that our adoption of the approaches I have suggested could have a profound effect on the way we carry on our public conversations about things that matter to us in a consciously diverse environment.