

Dear Reader,

This issue of the Newsletter is on the topic of debate. It is a topic that should be important for current political activity in preparing for an election. Unfortunately, what are called debates today almost never are. Debates should be at the center of political life but the presence of debate has declined to almost non-existence.

The absence of political debates may be reflective of the absence of debate in ordinary life. The idea of debating should perhaps be divided into a routine practice that we are hardly aware of and a very formal event that should proceed by strict rules. The debates of ordinary life begin with what goes on inside the head of most people. We are – or should be – in regular conversation with ourselves.

The human being becomes of two minds early in life. Little children talk to themselves, taking both sides of the conversation. Adults are embarrassed to be caught talking to themselves. Admittedly, it is not a good idea to be talking out loud on the subway. That may indicate an absence of other people with whom to carry on conversation. But anyone who has an active verbal life will naturally include the conversation within.

Why do people carry on a conversation within themselves? Plato's answer is to discover who we are. Once we become self-conscious as children, we immediately recognize a division within ourselves. One part seems good and the other part bad. Our tendency is to side with what we think of as our good side and try to suppress the bad side. Religious and philosophical thinkers through the ages have warned that we cannot win that war. What we need is a conversation within that can gently restrain what is bad, or seems to be bad, while taking seriously what that side of the self is saying to what we think is our good side.

## LIFE IS DIALOGUE

By Gabriel Moran

“All true life is meeting” was the fundamental principle of Martin Buber’s philosophy. Human beings are communal animals. That statement is not an innocuous truism. It is a stand for one version of human life that is always struggling to survive against a version of humanity in which “rational man” or violent man is in charge and decides what is ideal. The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen says that “man is born free.” No mother could have written that line.

Human babies are born completely dependent on someone who will supply food, protection and affection. They are born with an almost limitless capacity to take in the world around them, but they would be overwhelmed by that openness without a guardian who provides a temporary filter. Every step along the child’s way depends on the presence of other human beings who teach them even if they are not aware of that.

For a human being to come to the fullness of its capacities, it has to enter the human conversation; the child begins as a silent listener but quickly tries to use language. An infant (which means one who lacks speech) listens for human voices and struggles to make sense of those voices; the infant tries to throw in its own opinion. Language consists not of words but of statements. The miracle of childhood is that the child has the ability to grasp the structure of language. At first it cannot put together subject, predicate and object, but when it says “no” it is making a statement.

Knowledge, especially in modern times, has been imagined as ideas to which we attach words. We assume that the ideas correspond to something outside our heads; language is thought to be labels that are easily replaced or are disposable. “It doesn’t matter what you call it” or “that’s just arguing over words” are commonly heard statements when people disagree. With a little reflection we can realize that most of the words we use do not correspond to anything “objective.” Humans have made up parts of speech that are simply for talking; only the nouns have related objects and not even most of them. It is in words that human beings agree or disagree.

We acquire knowledge by entering conversation and then gradually fit ideas to the words. That is clearly the way the child learns by getting into the flow of language and then gradually clarifying what action some of those sounds

are related to. Throughout life, we have only the language at hand for forming our knowledge. We have to talk out what we receive before we settle upon what we hold as true.

Our interior conversation depends upon conversation with other human beings. The fourth gospel 's "In the beginning was the word... refers to the opening words of Genesis, "In the beginning God said..." Who was God talking to? Apparently himself which Christianity explains by positing three persons in God. However, when God comes to the creation of the human being, his "Let us make man..." is perhaps addressed to the other animals. In imitation of God, the humans should have a dialogue with their friends in the animal world. Dogs are not much as talkers. but they are good listeners.

People who do not carry on an inner dialogue and debate are a little scary. They are likely to be described as acting from the "gut" rather than from a combination of heart and brain. One sign that a person has good inner conversations is the readiness to laugh. Laughter is a profound human activity made possible by the ability to look at both sides of oneself.

Laughter should be a requirement for any political office. Donald Trump has never laughed. He is incapable of laughing because he cannot look realistically at his divided self and the ridiculousness of much of what he says. A person needs to be able to look at himself or herself self from outside so as to get some distance between the self and the fallible opinions we all hold. If we can debate our own self we can usefully debate others.

Public debates on ethical and political issues should reflect some of the private debates we regularly have. However, they also require very clear rules. What are currently called debates among politicians running for office have almost no relation to actual debates. Ten people cannot debate; in reply to questions from a moderator, they give mini sermons.

The first requirement of debate is that there be two sides to the debate; each side can be represented by one or several people. There has to be one thesis on a precisely defined topic for debate. One side argues for the thesis; one side argues against it. Each side wishes to convince a jury and win the debate. But the debate is also about reaching the truth.

In the middle ages, the university's standard way of searching for the truth was by debates. One rule of the debate was that you had to state your

opponent's position accurately before going on to state your side. One can see that format in Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* Thomas begins each question by stating objections to his own view. After arguing for his position, he returns to the objections and indicates how his answer responds to each objection.

Thomas was following a procedure that had been established by Abelard's *Sic et Non* (Yes and No). Abelard had put together the competing teachings of the fathers of the church. After the Council of Trent such an approach was not acceptable. When Pope Leo XIII ordered Thomas Aquinas's work to be taught in seminaries, the manuals simply lifted Thomas's views from the *Summa* and turned his work into a catechism of answers.

Real public debates have always been difficult to find.. The Senate describes itself as the world's greatest deliberative body. I cannot remember the last time I saw an actual debate in Congress. The idea of having two political parties would seem to be designed for debating important questions. Perhaps in the past there were occasional debates but the loss of civility in public life makes serious debate all but impossible.

It is perhaps too much to expect that television should have debates when our political parties do not. The cable networks, Fox, CNN and MSNBC, occasionally gesture in the direction of debate. Sad to say the attempt usually fails badly. Fox and MSNBC no longer pretend to have debates. CNN and PBS to their credit continue to make the attempt. The Internet is even less likely to present two sides of any argument. Twitter is not prepared to get out more than the fragment of a thought. Facebook has refused to take down advertisements that are demonstrably false. That might seem like a minor issue but forty percent of people get their news from Facebook and it has two billion (yes, billion) subscribers.

I remember the day that I ran across a new program on PBS which consisted of Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel reviewing movies. I was shocked. I thought these two men are actually debating. They were not friends; they were competitors who wrote for two Chicago newspapers. They had different tastes and standards for movies, but both were thoroughly grounded in knowledge of movies. The question they debated was whether a particular movie was good or not. Each man stated his own opinion and then listened respectfully to the competing view of the other man. They are missed.

## A THREAT TO POLITICAL DISCOURSE?

By Jonathan Ellis and Francesca Hovagimian

What do conservative political figures like Ted Cruz, Steve Bannon, Karl Rove and Richard Nixon have in common with liberal politicians like Elizabeth Warren, Andrew Yang, Kamala Harris and Bill Clinton? They all honed their skills of rhetoric, reasoning and persuasion on school debate teams.

But while school debate can be good for aspiring politicians, it may not be good for our politics. In particular, it may contribute to the closed-minded, partisan and self-interested nature of so much of today's public and political dialogue. Why? Because school debate ultimately rewards biased reasoning.

In traditional debate competitions, teams are assigned at random to argue one or the other side of an issue. Each round, one team is assigned the affirmative view — say, “Recreational drug use should be legalized” — and the other team, the negative. That means teams start with a conclusion, whether they endorse it or not, and work backward from there, marshaling the best arguments they can devise to make that conclusion come out on top.

The goal is not to determine the most reasonable or fair-minded approach to an issue, but to defend a given claim at all costs. This is an exercise not in deliberation but in reasoning with an agenda. This also happens to be the kind of argumentation we find so corrosive in today's politics. Politicians and pundits have their favored view and then emphasize the information that fortifies it. Evidence that threatens their position is rationalized away. Problems for the opposing view are hunted for and magnified.

This criticism is not new. The philosopher and logician Willard Van Orman Quine argued that school debate elevates “the goal of persuasion above the goal of truth” and that the strength of a good debater “lies not in intellectual curiosity nor in amenability to rational persuasion by others, but in his skill in defending a preconception come what may.”

School debate reinforces this mode of reasoning. By celebrating those who are most adept at it, schools hold it up as a model form of thinking.

Don't get us wrong. This style of reasoning can be useful. Legal advocacy, for instance, often requires it. And in preparing to argue both sides of a question, as you do in school debate, you can gain valuable perspective on the topic at hand and develop the ability to approach a topic from different angles. You might learn the critical lesson that there is often more to an opposing view than it may initially seem.

Nevertheless, traditional school debate discourages the kind of listening and reasoning that is critical to a healthy democracy. Student debaters don't

deliberate about what they themselves believe or should believe. They don't cultivate the disposition to listen to others with the real possibility of changing their minds. On the contrary, they practice listening with eagle ears for opposing points to pounce on. Rather than increasing their comfort with being wrong, they can deepen an attitude of certainty.

School debate doesn't have to be this way, though. In fact, many schools around the country are gravitating to alternative forms of debate that set the goals of truth and understanding over the goal of persuasion. A good example is the Ethics Bowl.

In the Ethics Bowl, created at the intercollegiate level in 1993 and the high school level around 2012, a team is assigned a question — not a statement or conclusion, as in traditional debate — on a contentious topic, such as “When is the use of military drones morally permissible?” The team then presents and defends whatever conclusion its deliberation has led to. An opposing team and a panel of judges pose questions and raise problems, to which the first team responds.

Sometimes the two teams find themselves largely in agreement. When they do, the winner is the team that does the better job of articulating its reasoning, listening and responding to questions, and advancing the collective understanding of the issue at hand.

But disagreement is frequent in the Ethics Bowl, and the discussions are spirited. That's a good thing. After all, spirited dissent and disagreement are hallmarks of a healthy democracy. Disagreement among citizens is inevitable — about politics, morality, education, religion, nearly everything. What's crucial is how we disagree, and how we converse and deliberate with those with whom we disagree.

It is precisely when we disagree that it is most critical for our thinking to be clear and our dialogue to be charitable and scrupulous. But disagreement is also when we're most likely to get irritated, defensive and impatient. The more at stake in the conversation, the more difficult it is to remain poised, thoughtful, open to being wrong and ready to acknowledge fair points from the other side.

Disagreeing constructively is a skill — one of the most difficult and important there is. In encouraging students to practice this skill, the Ethics Bowl fosters what may be the most important intellectual virtue of all: openness to changing your mind. There is something of a stigma in our culture about changing your mind, especially in politics. If you do, you are often seen as weak or branded a “flip-flopper.” The problem is, holding steadfast to a belief in the face of sound objections or contrary evidence stops conversation. It's dogmatic and stubborn. Having the courage to admit when you might be wrong, on the other hand, helps move conversations toward meaningful resolutions.

At this seemingly broken political moment, our country's future may depend on our politicians' becoming more comfortable doing that.

## FROM THE DAILY KOS

What if we handled debates differently? What if our debate format focused on substance over style, a candid discussion by the candidates about the issues that would actually help the American public know who they are and how they work? There are ways to accomplish that. We can develop better, more substantive debates. And the format to do it may look very different from what we see today on major news networks. It might look a bit more like “The View” than like “Lincoln versus Douglas.” Would that be so wrong?

Since the mid-1800s, the format for most political debates in this country has been what high school students around the country (and others) refer to as the Lincoln-Douglas debate: individuals at podiums making points. The layout of the original Lincoln-Douglas debates was quite different from what we experience today. In 1858 there was a Senate Race in Illinois between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas. At the time, Stephen Douglas was the incumbent, but in an attempt to take Douglas’s seat, Lincoln challenged Douglas to a series of debates. Although the exact format of the debates was slightly different from the Lincoln-Douglas of today. Back then the first speaker spoke for 60 minutes, the second had a 90-minute rebuttal, and then the first speaker had a 30-minute rebuttal/time for closing arguments. The adversarial nature of the debates was similar.

Of course, no one today is speaking in a 60-minute straight block. The audience wouldn’t tolerate it. However, the brevity of our response system right now means that during a debate, very few points of substance are actually conveyed. This leaves our candidates subject to quick attacks that don’t provide the audience with a means by which to judge what was said, what was proposed, and whether there are actual alternatives.

This buzzword-style debate could be changed and improved. How? By moving beyond an adversarial debate into a substance-based cooperative format that promotes actual discussion. A round table or discussion format encourages exchanges that put substance and thought process above zingers. When students sit to debate issues, for example, it is easy to see cooperative thought in a table format.

The corporate world and TV talk shows have adopted this more conversational, fluid format. When candidates sit down, led by a moderator or moderators, and are closer to one another, they are less likely to launch attacks and more likely to have substantive discussions, discussions that can make positions clearer and more understandable to the public. Isn't that what we really want?

In 1990, David E. Procter, an associate professor of speech communication at Kansas State University, produced a discussion of "dynamic spectacle," a look at the dynamic means of persuasion accomplished through a spectacle or event. At this point, political debates are far more spectacle than process, a means to draw audiences and promote static positions.

What if we harnessed that dynamic spectacle in a way that would get us to think about our discussions in a new way? Imagine if you will a 90-minute primary debate structured somewhat like a general election debate, but around democratic issues. There are 30 minutes focused on the environment, 30 minutes on foreign policy, and 30 minutes on the economy, in a roundtable format. By using our time more effectively and encouraging discussion instead of zingers, we could offer the community a chance to see the dynamic spectacle of the democratic process.

If that isn't doable, we can accomplish many of these goals by creating such a spectacle by focusing on issues and altering the way in which we debate—making changes that will help the audience focus on substance over style. Most important in how we build democratic debates for the future is that we understand that there will always be room for improvement, to tinker with our formats, to try things that are new and different. The decision to change formats or offer alternative ways to handle a debate can be exciting for an audience and motivating for a candidate.

Part of involving our community in democratic politics is to understand that communication methods can vary based on numerous factors, from the cultural to the generational. Accepting this, we can build debates with substance and style that attract viewers. That should be our goal.