The Vermont Connection

January 2003

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> The primary purpose of the moral conversation . . . is to expand, enrich, and deepen our various philosophical languages through the disciplined examination of significant texts, so that each one of us can arrive at a "fuller" (more complete) language than we now speak. So, with the ideal moral conversation in mind, I hope we can be genuinely attentive to each other's efforts to work through difficult readings, to find a common classroom language, to express our individual interpretations of these readings, and to take conversational risks in constructing a more probing and cogent intellectual discourse.
>
> -Robert J. Nash, 1996

This year, *The Vermont Connection* editorial board asked me to reflect and revisit the tenets of the moral conversation. This important tool in the changing world of higher education continues to assist HESA students and other educators in understanding the world created in and beyond the ivy walls.

The moral conversation continues to establish a safe, yet invigorating space for discussing and writing about very controversial issues. These safe spaces include seminar rooms, conference halls, and scholarly journals, places where people come together to share ideas about highly provocative topics. For moral conversation to take place, common understandings for such dialogue are necessary.

Every single person, at least at the outset of an exchange of ideas, deserves a presumptive respect for any views expressed. The core responsibility of all participants in the moral conversation is to find the truth in what they oppose and the error in what they espouse —before they go on the critical offensive.

In seeing others as possible allies instead of enemies, we can display empathy and understanding for them at all times. In doing so, we find common ground and overlapping middles rather than irreconcilable dichotomies. From there, conversation progresses to mutually constructive, critical analysis. Unfortunately, the traditional model of discourse in the Academy, particularly in its scholarly publications, has been more adversarial and polemical than reconciling.

We need to listen to and read one another with generosity, trying always to attribute the best, not worst, motives. This works best when people speak not simply in the voice of an omniscient third person, but from the heart of what they personally believe—from their subjective "I."

In the interest of intellectual integrity, we also need to listen to one another critically and, when appropriate, be willing to change or modify our own positions on controversial topics, given the persuasive force of what we hear. At the same time, we must approach conversation ethically and commit ourselves to the principle of non-maleficence. We must refrain from going on the attack only for attack's sake. We must engage in spoken and written discourse always on the supposition that a genuine attempt to understand another's views is the prerequisite for critique and judgment of those views.

The ideal end of moral conversation is to reach a point of mutually acceptable agreement, no matter how thin, instead of aiming for an intellectual knockout. Absent this agreement, all moral conversationalists must be able to leave the dialogue, at the very least, with dignity and integrity fully intact.

References

Nash, R.J. (1996). Fostering moral conversations in the college classroom. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching, 7*(1), 83-105.