

Excerpt from: "Notes on Dialogue" by Stigfellow Barr (St. John's College)

. . . . The many dialectical conversations in Plato's Dialogues suggest several rules of thumb that might be profitably used by [students], or at least more frequently followed. One hesitates to suggest rules of thumb for a kind of discussion that is essentially spontaneous. But it is hard to see how these particular rules could stifle spontaneity:

* The exchange of declarative monologues should be dialectically unproductive. The effort to be too complete is often self-defeating. An adumbration often contributes more to dialectic than a rotund speech. Brevity stimulates dialectic.

* I take it that Herodotus' "anecdote that the Persians deliberated while drunk and decided while sober implies that in the early stages of dialectic exchange a "wild idea" is often more fruitful than a prematurely confident opinion. The imaginative and the unexpected are frequent ingredients of Socrates' style, though they are often introduced with an (ironic) apology. Since [students are] trying to see more deeply into current problems but are free of the burden of imminent, practical, political action, they might profitably stay "drunk" longer than the King of Kings and his royal counsellors could risk staying.

* The Socratic dialectic has another code of manners than the dinner party, where religion and politics are sometimes forbidden for fear that strong passions may damage "social" intercourse, and where interrupting a speaker and even long-winded empty speech, is forbidden. In dialectic, a quick question is analogous to "point of order" in political assemblies. "Do I understand you to be saying. .?." always has the floor.

* Even these thumb-rules may seem guaranteed to produce bedlam. And, indeed, when they are first tried, they generally do produce it. But experienced dancers on a ballroom floor and inexperienced skaters on an ice rink also collide. Experience brings a sixth sense in Socratic dialectic too. The will of self-insistence gives way to the will to learn.

* In dialectic, "participational democracy" consists in everybody's listening intently; it does not consist in what commercial television sells as equal time. When a good basketball team has the ball, its members do not snatch the ball from each other but support the man who has it, and the man who has it passes it to a teammate when a pass is called for by the common purpose of the team. But in dialectic, as opposed to basketball, the "opponent" is composed only of the difficulties all men face when they try to understand. The point is that, in dialectic, it does not matter whose mouth gets used by the dialectical process, provided all are listening intently and exercise the freedom to interrupt with a question if they do not understand. On the other hand, reading or writing while "in dialogue" is a grave offense against the common purpose of all, not because they diminish the number of speaking mouths but because they diminish the number of listening ears. (Doodling and smoking are permissible aides to listening!)

* Whatever the touted merits of pluralism in democratic society today (and pluralism is, minimally, better than shooting each other with mail-order sub-machine guns or even than legislating on religious beliefs), the agreement to disagree is a disgraceful defeat if it means surrendering the hope of agreement through dialectic. Even Socrates, on rare occasions, countenanced postponement of the issue to a more propitious occasion.

* Perhaps the first rule of Socratic dialectic was laid down by Socrates: that we should follow the argument wherever it leads. Presumably, this means that some sorts of relevance that a court pleading should exhibit (and, even more than the rhetoric eloquence that pleading encourages) are irrelevant to dialectic. The deliberate manner, and even more the ponderous manner, are mere

