JP/D

Discussion As A Means Of Teaching And Learning*

By JACOB KLEIN

What follows is a description of a St. John's Seminar.

A book or a part of it is to be discussed; about twenty students (usually fewer and seldom more) sit around a table, and two tutors have to act as moderators of the discussion. The students are supposed to have read the book or the assigned part of it before coming to the seminar. Some have done that well and thoroughly, some not well and superficially; it may even happen that a student has not read the book at all. One of the tutors begins the discussion by raising a question, directly related to what is said in the book. Sometimes a silence ensues before a student chooses to answer the question; sometimes the answer follows the question immediately. This answer may provoke a comment or a refutation or a new question coming from students or tutors. Thus an exchange of opinions develops, which can be animated, even heated, or calm and slow. Quite a few students participate in this exchange, while some remain silent.

What happens while this exchange goes on? Many things. What the book is about may be clarified to some extent. How its content is connected with the content of other books may be discovered, weighed or subtly suggested. But more important things do occur. A student might find his most cherished thought elucidated or his most burdensome question answered in the book, and this gives him the opportunity to bring about a discussion of this favorite theme of his, which turns the seminar away from the book altogether. And yet, what is then being discussed may be something more fundamental for the understanding of one's world and one's life. Or, on the contrary, a student may see for the first time that something he had always accepted is actually highly doubtful. A sentence, even a single word, uttered by one of the participants in the discussion, may open to him a new vista, may challenge his deepest convictions, may aggravate the awareness of his ignorance.

It is thus that learning takes place, not in the sense that the students are being "informed" about opinions and doctrines uttered in the books, about events and facts mentioned in them, about plots and stories presented and narrated. What is achieved is rather an expansion of the intellectual horizon, a fostering of understanding, a demolition of false assumptions. This may not happen at all in any one seminar or even in a series of seminars; but it is likely to happen after a while, which means that only a steady continuation of the seminars through a lengthy period of time makes the seminar exercises fruitful and beneficial.

Two fundamental rules determine the discussion. As the College catalogue puts it: "every opinion must be heard and explored, however sharp the clash of opinions

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may be," and "every opinion must be supported by argument—an unsupported opinion does not count." But it is not possible to avoid empty or even frivolous talk altogether. Serious arguments may degenerate into repetitious and shallow assertions. It is the task of the moderators, the seminar leaders, to turn the discussion back to its meaningful origin. They are not always able to do that because even wasteful and extravagent claims might contain points that fascinate the students' imagination and stimulate their urge to refute and to explore. Even then learning may take place.

Very rarely is a question fully answered and the answer approved by all present. The main purpose of the seminar is not to find final solutions of perennial problems, but to become aware of a range of possible answers. Nor is it the purpose of the seminar to interpret the content of a book once and for all. Be it Homer or Virgil or Dante or Shakespeare, be it Plato or Aristotle or Descartes or Kant, be it Thucydides or Augustine or Hegel, be it any other author, none of the students and tutors is expected to "master" any one of their works, but everyone is expected to discover the diversity of possible interpretations that these works give rise to and the depth of the task that understanding them presents.

Some troublesome aspects of the seminar have to be mentioned. There is too much to read, and the riches of the books are overwhelming. The habits of the students, as far as reading, listening, and arguing are concerned, vary to a very great extent. This can make the discussion uneasy or turbulent or even explosive. It is, at any rate, always unpredictable, as indeed it should be. But there is always the possibility that some spoken word—or some word withheld—may provoke a student with an insight of a penetrating nature, not necessarily related to the book or topic under discussion. The occurrence of learning itself is indeed unpredictable.

One indispensable—although not always sufficient—condition must prevail for learning to occur. It is the *effort* on the part of students, a *continuous* effort, to find answers to the questions raised. The answer to the question what learning itself is, is not a "theory of knowledge," a so-called "epistemology," but the very *effort* to learn. That is why in Plato's *Meno* Socrates keeps exhorting Meno and the young slave to "make an attempt" to answer. And that is why, in Plato's *Republic* (376B), Glaucon has to agree with Socrates that the "love of learning" (τὸ φιλομαθές) and the "love of wisdom (τὸ φιλόσοφον) are the same. This "love of learning," which leads to the effort to learn, may not result in actual learning—it may indeed be insufficient, just as the "love of wisdom" may not result in obtaining wisdom and knowledge. The pursuit of understanding and of knowledge in the seminar is clouded by this uncertainty and unpredictability. But at some point of the discussion some understanding may be gained by some student or students, and this understanding may then evolve further and further. Let us also bear in mind that this point may never be reached.

In what then does teaching consist in a St. John's seminar? Certainly not in the "pouring" of knowledge into the learner's soul, just as learning does not consist in listening and repeating what one has heard. It is hard for any tutor to resist the temptation to present his own opinions about the content of a book or about the hidden meaning of a phrase. Sometimes such a presentation may even be fruitful because it can provoke counter-argument and far-reaching discussion. Above all, however, the seminar leaders have to solicit the opinions of the students, to try to keep the discussion within the limits of the subject argued about, which is not at all easy, and to let the students participate as much as possible in the debate. Not seldom some students remain altogether silent, and it may become important to the tutors to understand the nature of this silence by talking to these students outside of the seminar. Conversations between tutor and student outside of the seminar are, of course, generally most desirable and helpful.

As to the "silent" students, their silence can ultimately be attributed to two very different causes. One is a lack of interest which implies the absence of that effort to learn, on which so much depends. If this attitude of the student persists and cannot be broken, it is not likely that the student will continue to be a student. The other cause is a deep and complex involvement in what is read and said, so deep and complex, in fact, that the student cannot afford to take a stand and to open his mouth, because he would have to say too many things at once. This student listens attentively, and his inside effort to clear his thoughts, by separating what does not belong together and by combining what does, may lead him to learn a great deal. Here again it is not possible to predict whether this learning will occur. But when it does, it is bountiful and precious.

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