

Written Dialogue: An Alternative to the Term Paper

MARK COPPENGER

Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois

The Traditional Paper

After all the reading, note-taking, and discussion, there comes a time when the student makes out a case of his own on paper. The philosophy paper is a fundamental part of a liberal arts education; it is designed to develop a skill and disposition of lifelong value—critical, focussed, imaginative, coherent, and clear thinking. This is a large order for a project often begun the evening before it is due. For every paper representing careful and stretching work, there are many cranked out near the turn-in date.

This last-minute effort is made possible, in part, by the freedom we give students to choose their own topics and to treat them as broadly or narrowly as they please. More than likely they fare better with tight, analytic piecework. Introductory papers tend to be expansive and pretentious and so a cautious, modest proposal usually appears quite mature. Whatever the teacher's preferences, the student is in the happy position of being able to put his best foot forward. When he senses difficulties in his position, he can shift topics rather than deal with the problems. And with a grade at stake, the student is disinclined to tackle a topic he doesn't yet understand; cozier topics beckon. Even when he determines to do thoughtful work, he can misconstrue the nature of the task. Raised on a diet of research papers, he may head for the *Philosopher's Index*, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the *Great Books Syn-topicon*, or *Readers' Guide*, for the components of his paper. If he can understand what he finds, he sometimes recounts the arguments in his own words. Worse than that, he may simply quote an eminent philosopher for his clincher. There is some comfort in these approaches, for the risk is low. The task may be enormous but it can be outlined from the beginning—read everything you can find on the issue and distill an answer. The material is bound to be available since the issues have been so thoroughly worked over by philosophers. The philosophy paper then becomes a high-level version of the seventh-grade report on sonar or the twelfth-grade project on an anticipated vocation. To solve a problem, you consult a reference book.

If the student goes on to critically encounter the material, he may stop with a simple, though sometimes passionate, expression of preference. Emotive and *ad hominem* argument are commonplace. Sometimes a paper is largely

autobiographical; the student traces the development of his thought anecdotally. In other cases, he shifts into sociology, Biblical exegesis, or economics, without understanding the philosophical perspectives which regard those moves as legitimate.

It is unfortunate that the marginal notes the teacher uses to address the errors are seldom taken at their full value. Frequently the student reads the margins simply for compliments or for ground from which to launch an attack on a disappointing score. In some cases, if the grade is satisfactory to the student the notes are not read at all. In short, there is often a difference between the amount of constructive criticism given and that received.

The indictment is this: The traditional philosophy paper often fails as a helpful philosophical experience. Yet it is obvious that, despite problems, many of these projects do have a positive influence. People do develop their critical skills in college and the cumulative effect of the many college writing assignments is substantive.

Some Alternatives

Sensing difficulties with the traditional approach, a number of teachers have developed variations for the requirement. A fairly common approach involves successively-refined drafts, the first draft coming early in the term. In response to the teacher's comments, the student revises his work, learning what it takes to sharpen up thinking and expression. This is not a bad approach, though it can be annoying; the student can feel himself little more than the teacher's secretary as he progressively approximates the teacher's notion of what he should be saying. Another teacher schedules personal post-mortems with the student, discussing the work in detail. This seems an excellent practice, though the time required for large introductory classes can be staggering.

Beginning a Written Dialogue

After three years of experience with written dialogue, I propose it as another option, one which avoids some of the difficulties mentioned above. I've found it to be workable in Introduction to Philosophy, Philosophy of Law, Aesthetics, and Philosophy of the Natural Sciences.

The student begins the dialogue by submitting a single-page argument. I give the introductory students a list of about fifty philosophical questions as a stimulus. One group of questions takes the form, "What is X?"—justice, truth, knowledge, time, law, art, duty. Another group focusses on ethical issues—war, abortion, euthanasia, reverse discrimination. Other classic problems and questions join the list—the problem of evil, the question of free will, and the question of objective standards in judging art. I give a question relating directly to each discipline in case the student wants to tie his work in with his major—"How does a formal mathematical system connect up with the world?" "How best do you accomplish moral education?" Though the list is extensive, it

is presented as only suggestive. The student is to select a topic he genuinely wants to puzzle through.

I ask the Aesthetics student, for example, to respond to some feature of one of a small group of essays on the nature of art and its evaluation; these essays are placed on reserve in the library. I explain that an argument is simply a position or point supported by a reason, and then I give some examples. Although the main factor in limiting the work to single pages is the grading time, there is value in his learning to be concise. The initial argument is usually due by the end of the second week of classes.

Dialogue

Thereafter exchanges occur weekly. I return the paper with comments a week after I receive it and the student submits the next installment a week after that. An eleven week quarter permits five student papers. My responses can take the following forms, among others:

- Can you see any dangers in the broad application of that principle?
- What exactly are you saying in the second paragraph?
- But what about the following case?
- How does the underlined passage square with your closing claim? They seem to conflict.
- Is this just a matter of personal behavior or should it be put into law?
- I want you to comment on an essay which speaks to your position. Check with me for a copy.
- What's wrong with the following counterargument to your position?
- I think you need to address this more fundamental question.
- You've told me what in fact occurs. Now tell me whether it should occur and why.
- What assumptions do you make when arguing in this way?
- Granting what you say is true, how do you convince a skeptic of its truth?
- You didn't really answer the question. Let me rephrase it.
- Can you see any connection between these two issues?
- Your claim seems so secure as to be empty. What could possibly undermine it?
- Can you give me an example of what you mean by that?

Occasionally I give the student a choice of several questions to respond to, and my teaching assistant may add questions of his own. It's important that the student turn in all previous work each time so that new questions can be formulated in light of what has gone before.

Even though the instructor determines the direction the student's thought

will take, there are some ways the student can derail or spoil the dialogue temporarily:

- 1) A student may outline the whole dialogue in his mind at the outset. He has a certain number of good arguments to offer in support of a position and he plans to sprinkle them throughout the exchange. He might even refer to an argument which will appear in a later paper. He soon learns though that the course of genuine dialogue is not so predictable.
- 2) The student attempts a reversal of roles, challenging the teacher to formulate and defend a position. There's nothing inherently wrong with this, of course, but it is to be, after all, the student's "paper." A reversal has the student turning in questions rather than arguments. A gentle reminder on the nature of the project puts the dialogue back on track. Of course, it may be useful for the instructor to offer a position of his own in informal conversation with the student. And if he chooses, he may present a position and challenge the student, in writing, to counter it.
- 3) The student regards the dialogue as a debate, with a winner and a loser. Perhaps he sees the instructor as one playing forty games of chess simultaneously. It's crucial that the student realize the dialogue is a cooperative effort at arriving at a plausible position and that when one is reached, both he and the teacher are winners. Occasionally the teacher will face an argument so good as to persuade or dissuade him, and he should feel free to acknowledge this. In debate, you don't encourage your counterpart when he does well. In philosophy, you should, and the student should notice the difference. The distinction is that between Socrates and the Sophists.
- 4) The student takes the questioning very personally and the dialogue becomes a grudge fight. His responses can have an *ad hominem* flavor. As often as not, he doesn't realize how contentious he appears; he's too absorbed in the virtues of his cause. As a rule, a counterblast is a mistake, because you only deepen his conviction that philosophy is war. A calm pursuit of the issues can cool things, as can the simple observation that a certain line reflects more personal attack than argument.

The students' attitudes are varied throughout. They find the dialogue variously fun, annoying, exhilarating, terrifying, infuriating, sobering, and liberating. Some claim to have never thought so hard and thoroughly, and some claim a new level of enlightenment.

Grading

When I began assigning dialogues, I spent an average of five minutes per paper. With introductory classes of about forty students, grading took three to four hours for each installment. Overall, each student required about thirty minutes of grading time, somewhat more than with traditional term papers. Although

more time was required, it was distributed over the quarter; I did not face a stack of the traditional works at quarter's end.

I find that as I grade more and more of the dialogues, my grading time drops; sometimes I can maintain a pace of a paper every two minutes. Arguments recur and standard responses develop. I have a favored collection of counterexamples. Those tying art closely with beauty are asked to comment on Ivan Albright's "Into the World There Came a Soul Named Ida." Those who attack the problem of evil by focussing on free will and man's cruelty are asked to account for natural disasters. Those who address the same problem by claiming desert for pain are asked to explain how exactly an infant deserves suffering. The task of grading is made easier by the students' inclination to choose certain issues over others. At least ten per cent address the problem of evil, while as many discuss the objectivity of aesthetic judgments, and the rationality of belief in God. Abortion and euthanasia are also favorites as are the problem of other minds, the question of the existence of an external world, and the mind-body problem. Each quarter, though, some new topics appear and require more time—"Should the Indians be paid for the land taken from their ancestors?" "Should one marry?" "What is energy?"

I ordinarily allow five points for each installment for a total of twenty-five of the course's one hundred points. Satisfactory work rates a four, distinctively-good work a five, below-par work a three, and thoughtless blurbs a two. In Aesthetics and Philosophy of the Natural Sciences the value of each paper is dropped to four points, giving the dialogue a bit less weight in the final grade.

Each time I return the papers, I take a few minutes of class time to note recurring difficulties, a singularly good or bad step, and even spelling errors. A few general comments to the class can save a substantial amount of grading time; you need not write the same comment repeatedly.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Obviously the quality of the dialogues varies, and some of this is the instructor's responsibility. With forty or so exchanges going on simultaneously, some of the questions are bound to be relatively lame. Virtually all of the student complaints have been directed at a certain line of questioning rather than at the practice itself. In each of four classes surveyed, better than ninety per cent of the students "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that written dialogue was worthwhile, so overall, the reception has been good.

But there is a limitation the numbers alone do not show. Student comments have led me to believe that written dialogue best serves those unpracticed at writing critical papers. It's not as well suited for the upper-division philosophy major. This, of course, poses no problem in Introduction to Philosophy, but there are clear differences in the other courses. A philosophy major in Aesthetics may express impatience with the same technique which effectively challenges his classmate from the Art Department. The former may be better equipped to ask himself the right questions, and may want to get on with

his own uninterrupted work. The latter, on the other hand, often expresses gratitude for the personal, instructive exchange. This difference suggests the need for a two-track system for courses beyond Introduction to Philosophy.

In conclusion, this form of tutoring is well-received by the great majority of students—those not accustomed to writing critical essays. Its usefulness lessens as the student learns to ask the basic questions of clarity, consistency, justification, assumption, and significance.

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