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Abstract:

If there is one constant, uninvited guest in the typical public school classroom—or indeed in any setting in which children gather in numbers—it is conflict. The transcripts from which I draw in this reflection on how young children think together about conflict reflect two four-part sets of conversations with two second grades in a small school of roughly 300 students in a predominantly middle to upper middle class suburban town in a heavily populated metropolitan area in the northeastern U.S. Most of the examples of conflict which the second graders chose to offer were located in their lives with friends or acquaintances or siblings, or incidents among adults that they had witnessed. There seemed to be a level of tolerance, even expectation and affirmation of these small conflicts in their lives; they had already become relatively “natural” occurrences for them. Large sections from four of the transcripts are included here, with commentary. In the first, conflict is represented by the group as a competition, either between two people or two possibilities only one of which can be fulfilled (the “fork in the road”). There is disagreement as to whether interpersonal conflict can be avoided. The second section revolves around the reorganizational or reconstructive potential of conflict. The third section takes up the question of whether we can say that there is conflict within nature beyond just living things — i.e. whether conflict can be considered a metaphysical or at least ontological principle. Transcript and analysis of arguments are accompanied by reflections on the differing social atmospheres of the two classes, their possible relationships to the discussion styles of the two, and on the possibility of a form of pedagogy which allows for the self-organizing character of group life and the role of conflict in the dialectics of development.

Key Words: Conflict; Young children; Conversation; Dialogue; Classroom

Crianças pequenas discutem o conflito

Resumo:

Se há um intruso constante que, sem ser convidado, surge na sala de aula da escola pública ou mesmo em qualquer ambiente em que as crianças se reúnem em grande número, é o conflito. As transcrições trazidas para esta reflexão, sobre como as crianças pequenas juntas pensam o conflito, refletem dois conjuntos de quatro partes de conversas com duas turmas de segundo ano de uma pequena escola de cerca de trezentos alunos de uma cidade predominantemente de classe média e média alta de um subúrbio em uma área metropolitana densamente povoada do nordeste do EUA. A maioria dos exemplos de conflito que as crianças escolheram para oferecer situam-se em suas vidas com amigos, conhecidos ou irmãos, ou são incidentes entre adultos aos que elas haviam testemunhado. Parecia haver um nível de tolerância, e mesmo de expectativa e afirmação em suas vidas desses pequenos conflitos, que já se haviam tornado ocorrências naturais para elas. Amplas seções de quatro das transcrições estão incluídas, com comentários. Na primeira, o conflito é representado pelo grupo como uma competição, seja entre duas pessoas ou seja diante de duas possibilidades das quais apenas uma pode ser realizada (a “bifurcação na estrada”).

young children discuss conflict

Há discordância quanto à possibilidade de conflitos interpessoais poderem ser evitados. A segunda seção gira em torno do potencial de reorganização ou reconstrução do conflito. A terceira seção retoma a questão de saber se podemos dizer que, para além dos seres vivos, há um conflito na natureza - ou seja, se o conflito pode ser considerado um princípio metafísico ou pelo menos ontológico. A transcrição e a análise dos argumentos são acompanhados por reflexões sobre as diferentes atmosferas sociais das duas turmas, suas possíveis relações com os estilos de discussão das duas, e sobre a possibilidade de uma forma de pedagogia que permita a auto-organização da vida em grupo e o papel do conflito na dialética do desenvolvimento.

Palavras-chave: Conflito; Crianças pequenas; Conversa; Diálogo; Sala de aula.

Niños pequeños discuten el conflicto

Resumen:

Si hay un intruso constante que, sin invitación, entra en el aula de las escuelas públicas o incluso en cualquier ambiente donde los niños se reúnan en gran número, es el conflicto. Las transcripciones que traigo para la reflexión sobre cómo los niños reflexionan juntos sobre el conflicto corresponden a dos grupos de cuatro partes de conversaciones con dos clases de segundo año de una pequeña escuela de trescientos estudiantes de una ciudad predominantemente de clase media y media de alta de un suburbio de un área metropolitana densamente poblada del noreste de Estados Unidos de Norteamérica. La mayoría de los ejemplos de conflictos que los niños eligieron para ofrecer se encuentran en sus vidas con amigos, conocidos o hermanos, o entonces son incidentes entre adultos de los que los niños habían sido testigos. Parece que hay un nivel de tolerancia, y hasta la expectativa y afirmación en sus vidas de estos pequeños conflictos, que ya se habían convertido en ocurrencias naturales para ellos. Grandes secciones de cuatro de las transcripciones están incluidas, con los comentarios. En la primera, el conflicto está representado por el grupo como una competencia, ya sea entre dos personas o entonces frente a dos posibilidades de las cuales sólo una puede ser considerada (la "bifurcación en la carretera"). Hay discordancia respecto a la posibilidad de que los conflictos interpersonales puedan evitarse. La segunda sección gira en torno del potencial de reorganización o reconstrucción de los conflictos. La tercera sección recupera la cuestión de si podemos decir que, para allá de los seres vivos, hay un conflicto en la naturaleza - es decir, si el conflicto puede ser considerado como un principio metafísico o por lo menos ontológico. La transcripción y el análisis de los argumentos son acompañados por reflexiones sobre las diferentes atmósferas sociales de las dos clases, sus posibles relaciones con los estilos de discusión de las dos, y sobre la posibilidad de una forma de pedagogía que permita la auto-organización de la vida en grupo y papel del conflicto en la dialéctica del desarrollo.

Palabras clave: Conflicto; niños pequeños; conversación; diálogos; aula.



YOUNG CHILDREN DISCUSS CONFLICT

David Kennedy

Two kinds of classrooms

If there is one constant, uninvited guest in the typical public school classroom—or indeed in any setting in which children gather in numbers—it is conflict. This is not to say that there is more conflict in schools than in any adult office, or in some as-yet-undetermined percentage of families. But adults in offices—and, of course, in schools, which are in fact a type of “office”—have learned to handle it, to tone it down, to suppress their reactions. The more common and less menacing variety gets siphoned off and developed in different, political directions in gossip, or quasi-confrontations, or it simmers in latency, mostly invisible but felt, and works to slowly blunt—perhaps necessarily—the lived edge of life together. In a collective work setting like a school, mutual wariness, one might be (but is not) astonished to find, easily keeps company with familiarity and even a sort of comfort. Life is flattened out, loses color, but not unbearably—in fact it might even help us to know that the workplace is not one’s home, or the place where one’s personal salvation gets worked out, and so to maintain some socially and personally necessary distinctions.

Nor is it hard to imagine a school in which all the teachers basically resent and mistrust or are jealous of or just plain resistant toward the overbearing principal, or coordinator, or anyone else with any sort of officially bestowed power over them. They sit in after-school staff meetings watching the clock, like a weary band of derelicts huddled in the rain. The principal is bright, cheery and decisive, in bizarre but all too predictable contrast to the stagnant emotional chill in the room. The teachers are wooden, as if in some kind of slow motion. But when they communicate with the boss individually, conflict is dissimulated: power puts a hand on their neck from above and they can’t resist the impulse to fawn, cower, or, at best, to maintain a stoic reserve.

Children have not come this far in the possibilities of emotional and relational stagnation of various kinds. For the second graders who are the protagonists of this narrative, conflict on the whole does not yet trigger insoluble grievance, despair, avoidance and deception. The child’s natural, organismic self-love is more often than not baffled rather than wounded by rebuffs from the reality principle—nor, in most cases, has self-love begun its devious descent into vanity. Conflict, for the child, like the weather, may in fact be—after physical pain and discomfort—her first major lesson from the reality principle. What can one do but accept it? It seems not yet to be a moral problem—although it’s possible that for many adults it never becomes a moral problem either, that its inevitability may be added to death and taxes; indeed, this may be the most moral way to look at it. Besides, in this culture adults are usually—apart from those terrifying *Lord of the Flies* moments—all around to be called upon for help mediate it.

Children have a rather sophisticated way of categorizing adults according to how they deal with their (children’s) conflicts, which in fact will be the main indicator of their emotional style in the classroom—whether irritable,

explosive, patient, peremptory, authoritarian or dialogical, dismissive, pedagogical, perceptive or dimwitted, tolerant or moralistic. Certainly one moment of painful and shocking truth testified to in many childhood memoirs is the one of flagrant adult injustice—when the adult holds a child accountable for something she didn't do, or the less traumatic but equally morally scandalous case in which the whole class is punished for something that one person did. This is a particularly poignant example of the conflict between adults and children that characterizes life in school as we know it, but there are many more. We might say that the traditional school is the place, not just where children learn to deal with conflict with each other, but where adult-child conflict becomes institutionalized, and of course constructed so that adults will (almost) always win.

The children whose voices are recorded and transcribed and reflected upon here—roughly fifty second graders—both spoke about and, during or around the edges of the discussions we had, were involved in plenty of conflict, whether with each other or the adults around them. Most appeared minor—conflicts over pencils or trinkets or seating, or whose turn it was, or a place in line, or how close someone is standing next to you, or an accidental trip or shove, or losing in a game at recess, or someone making a face at you or even saying something nasty to you or about you, or a sharp reprimand from a teacher, or friends or potential friends choosing to spend time with others rather than you; and as one gets older, just barely dissimulated competition over who is “smarter” or “cooler” or more athletic. Malicious or stupid (or both) false accusations by other children. Ridicule. Gossip. Bullying. Or a teacher yelling at or otherwise haranguing you or the class, which is just as bad. Or a teacher just being plain unfair, or irritable beyond reasonable measure, or acting like a suspicious, mean-spirited cop, and in no case can you ever expect either a recantation or an apology, and if you try to do something about it chances are you will be in worse trouble, downstairs getting grilled or lectured or therapeutically sweet-talked by the principal.

How minor in fact are these conflicts when taken cumulatively, day in and day out? Take Sean, perhaps the most philosophically astute in Ms. River's second grade group, a quiet, gentle blond boy, slightly phlegmatic (in school anyway), who sat just outside our weekly discussion circle at a table—the circle was seated on the floor—every week, taking notes and occasionally raising a question or making a comment that showed how closely he was listening. When the school year was over, Ms. River shared with me that his life had been made miserable by another, troubled and “underachieving” boy in the class, who hounded and persecuted him continually, all year, mostly out from under the eye of the teacher. Or take the challenges, recorded in the transcripts, which the second grade boys Samuel, Abraham, Peter, Talbot, and Pablo dealt each other—the instant contentiousness, the tone so easily slipping into agonistic sparring, the sense of precious personal psychological space that one must guard. It's not so clear to me that conflict among children has any less high stakes than among adults.

In fact all of the twelve philosophy discussion sessions that were facilitated, observed and videotaped and transcribed unfolded in an atmosphere that included an element of conflict, sometimes more and



sometimes less controlled. There were various kinds, at various levels: small conflicts over immediate issues like seating, or someone who somehow has your pen or the class pen you have been using; conflicts over participation, for example when you've had your hand up forever and the facilitator keeps overlooking you; conflict between adults and children over order and politeness and enthusiasm and motivation, expressed by adults either yelling or barking or flaring or smoothly reprimanding children who were openly or half-covertly disrupting or subverting the group conversation by talking with each other, getting caught up in self-perpetuating laughter at comic incidents or ideas, or the whole group simply "going out of control"; and finally, conflicts of ideas and judgments—which is what, as practitioners of philosophy with children, we are generally after—sometimes so heated that it disrupted the group altogether. On an even more general level, the whole structure of events lay on the fault line of a conflict between the goals of the classroom teacher and/or the visiting discussion facilitator, and the goals of the children. The teacher wanted more or less perfect order, interest, politeness, and some evidence of "learning." The facilitator wanted order too, but was willing to sacrifice a bit of it (how much was never exactly clear) for a rich response to the ideas he was presenting for discussion.

This is all complicated—although what sort of complication is not completely clear—by the fact that the facilitator (myself) held a particular educational, developmental and pedagogical ideology, or counter-ideology: he believed in the self-organizing capacities of groups and individuals—put abstractly, the spontaneous tendency of both individual and group systems to reorganize in the direction of greater order, integration and effectiveness—in other words, the long-term self-perfectibility, given the right conditions, of human nature. In short, the facilitator was a philosophical anarchist. Correlative with this belief was the notion that both individuals and groups will not self-organize unless they have the responsibility to do so, because without the responsibility there will not be the need—and that the reason many children actively or passively resist school or find school unbearable is that they are disempowered there, and kept from developing except in the most perfunctory ways, or in defiance of or unnoticed by the iron hand of the system that grips them. A corollary of this notion is that, given a "smart" psycho-social environment, the positive expectations and enabling dispositions of the adults around them, and both the autonomy and responsibility to do so, that they will learn both adequate self-control for the situation, and reinforce, through various group dynamic means, group self-control.

There is nothing esoteric about this belief: it is the same persuasion that informs the self-actualization theory of the mid-twentieth century, most versions of ego psychology from the same period, and democratic theory in education in the Deweyan and the Freirean sense. The stubbornness of this belief among those who hold it and the hint of scandal it communicates to most others is only exacerbated by the current climate of educational reaction, and is probably reinforced by the fact that it cannot be tested. In a society based on surplus repression, for administrators, teachers and, most importantly, parents, to consider really trying it out in schools evokes the

spectre of King Darius, come again to isolate an infant from birth and confirm his suspicion that when he starts to speak, it will be in Persian (it was, of course, discovered only that the child would die of grief before he began speaking). Children are just too precious a resource, we love our children too much, goes the proscription, to do anything but house and surveil and in general put them in the iron grip of the law, and not allow them their own experience, to learn their own lessons until we absolutely have to.

Nor does philosophical anarchism offer anything like the promise of a conflict-free school. In fact in certain cases—depending to an as yet undocumented and perhaps undocumentable extent on the relational chemistry and resultant group dynamics of each particular classroom—even a classroom run painstakingly and compassionately and intelligently as an experiment in democracy, as an embryonic community in which power is to the greatest extent possible shared, in which adults respect to the greatest extent possible the agency and the autonomy of the children, can be a hotbed of conflict and subversion. But this is also true for adults attempting to build community, as those of the facilitator's generation who embarked on multiple experiments in intentional community well know, and as defenders of organizational hierarchy claim as its chief justification. But the argument for constructing classrooms that are organized as experiments in democracy is precisely that it offers the hope that the children who experience it will become adults who are better at dealing with conflict. From there, it is up to each of us to decide what we think the positive limits of human nature to be, and what role education can play in equipping us to explore those limits.

As it was, in this case I accepted the limits of human nature assumed by the adults in this particular “nice” middle class school, which were nothing out of the ordinary, implicitly soft-authoritarian view. I acceded to these assumptions by 1) accepting and even welcoming the presence of the classroom teacher-as-order-and-etiquette-enforcer in the group or even just in the room; 2) not protesting when teachers or teachers aides spoke in ways that privately I found rude to the point of offense to children whom they thought were getting too wild. In other words, I depended on the repressive system which I saw as at the heart of child disempowerment in order to maintain the order that I was convinced had to be dialectically constructed and reconstructed by the children themselves if it were to be of any worth or value; a self-organizing order which, I was further convinced, had most usually to be preceded by disorder—or by the falling apart of the externally imposed order—in order to emerge and take systemic shape.

Given the ubiquity of conflict, the project here described—to talk about conflict in the abstract, as if in fact it were not present at all, as if it was some distant phenomenon about which I could philosophize without fear of having to deal with it at that very moment while in fact it was all around us—might be accused of promoting a category mistake, although it might also be suggested (and often is by the enemies of philosophy) that this category mistake is characteristic of philosophy in general. On the other hand, and like the “untestable” hypothesis of collective self-regulation in an intentional community like the classroom, it could be argued that philosophy seems abstract and removed from experience only to the ears of an educational



culture so intellectually hobbled by a crass instrumentalism that it wouldn't recognize the value of collective philosophical reflection in the classroom even if a god came down to offer it. The desired "outcomes" of the conversations which I facilitated, taped and transcribed—characterized, say, as the ability to deal more reflectively and effectively with the conflict in their own lives and with the conflict they see around them—cannot, if they exist, be quantified, and for this I am grateful. To understand that what one was giving in a classroom—to children and, more indirectly, to their parents, to the adult-child community which is the school, to one's fellow practitioners and to those practitioners who will come after us—as only to exist according to formulae of replication, or coefficients of correlation which make a mockery of the complexity of causality, is in my view scandalous. Such an approach to developing good pedagogy is about as useful for others as replicating Yo Yo Ma's cello playing on a synthesizer.

The transcripts from which I draw in this reflection on how seven-year olds think together about conflict reflect two sets of conversations. I worked with two second grades in a small school of roughly 300 students and 32 teachers (including teacher "aides") in a predominantly middle to upper middle class suburban town in the heavily populated Greater New York area. The student population was roughly fifty percent white, thirty percent African American, ten percent Asian, and ten percent Hispanic. 25% of the students received free or reduced lunch. Although the town was quite decidedly politically "blue," and prided itself on the legendary claim that it had the highest rate of inter-racial marriage in the country (in a town in which approximately 40% were "minorities"), it also dripped with huge mansions, sky-rocketing real estate prices, colossal property taxes, and the most businesslike of soccer moms zipping around in eternally new SUV's. It was the kind of town where the streets of the rich neighborhoods feel like the set of the Truman Show, each house a masterpiece of outsized conventional taste, manicure, and radical isolation, and not a soul to be seen—completely empty, even of cars, which are not even allowed to park there between 2AM and 5AM. The impression was one of dramatic but quite affable psycho-social lockdown.

Mr. Palermo's room was at the end of the hall on the second floor. Palermo was a teacher who yelled at children lovingly—a Santa Claus pretending to be a drill sergeant—or, sometimes, a drill sergeant pretending to be Santa Claus—almost like a movie character, or an odd cross between Mr. Rodgers and Gradgrind. Children treated him like a big, loving, well-meaning animal who sometimes lost it, and at those moments they had better respect it, because he was that much bigger and louder than they were. Sometimes, influenced by his sadistic bad-cop aide, whose whole style was based on losing it, he did too, and said some really outrageously moralistic and manipulative things to children in rebuke of their disorder. Fortunately, for the most part this was left to her—who always sat on the sidelines during philosophy sessions with busy work of some kind, and when things got too lively for her liking, threatened children in a loud, outraged voice—still sitting with her busy work—with loss of recess and other "privileges," hurling admonitions like curses, professing astonishment at their atrocious,

unacceptable behavior, the broken trust, the rudeness, the unbelievable effrontery At this, they typically ducked their heads in a frozen, neutral silence, as if wanting to avoid the flying debris from an odd but, they had learned, predictable explosion. I ducked my head too, then, when she was finished, in a quiet voice, led us warily back to what we had been talking about.

Unlike most of the other teachers in this school who hosted philosophy sessions, Palermo loved listening to children talk this way, and although he didn't have much of a gift or an education for doing it himself, supported me faithfully by sitting in circle every week, following each intervention closely and with interest, a smile of pleasure on his quick, pleasant, emotionally expressive and observant face. But it would have been impossible for any observer to deny the implicit conflict between his goals and the goals—or at least one set of goals—of the children. When things began getting chaotic—which is something which doesn't particularly bother second grade children—he barked, hectored and cajoled, threatened (and sometimes abruptly executed) expulsion from the circle, ordered children to sit up, hands in lap, to quiet down, to listen, to stop grinning, to take a deep breath, whatever. It was a sort of cat and mouse game between his (and implicitly mine, for I welcomed his presence—it meant I didn't have to lift a finger to keep order) idea of what's the most rewarding thing to do when you sit down in a big circle on the floor. And yet because he was the inimitable Palermo, it was understood at least partially as a histrionic event—the theatre of school and second grade, where the chief character actor is the loving but stern, demanding but caring, dangerous but also cuddly, schoolmaster. A perfect surrogate father for the launch into the “big world.”

We were working with a children's philosophical novel, designed to be read aloud and then discussed, called called *Elfie*.¹ I was working with the same text in Ms. River's room, three doors down the hall of the old, two-story school. I had been meeting with both groups once a week for forty minutes or so since October (now it was March)—and by this point the discussions in River's class had, for my (and her taste) become unbearably chaotic. The level of disorder—children calling out loudly, interrupting others, small but loud personal disputes, general collapse into side conversations or side-silliness in the circle—had, just two weeks before the first of the four sessions specifically dedicated to conflict—reached a peak. It seemed to make no difference whether River, who was a tolerant and sympathetic veteran of the second grade classroom, was sitting in the circle or not. There was a kind of obsessive inwardness about the class, a feeling of being in the wilderness somewhere, as if each member was lost in a search for self which both required the other and to which the other was always a real or potential obstacle. One sensed chronic struggles among a handful of the boys for, if not power, then some recognition for which they had to, by hook or crook, advocate in order to survive; while among the girls, the sense of who was “inside” and who “outside” among middle class immigrant Mexicans and Indians and Brazilians and middle and upper middle-class whites and African Americans was mostly unconscious but bewilderingly complex.



The children came to circle with a sense both of mild interest in what this male visitor (me) had to offer, and of stoic neutrality, as if called to a task which, although they did not quite understand, they were willing to take on. But the sessions had begun fairly quickly to short-circuit on the loose wires of the complex politics of their day-in-day-out life together, exacerbated no doubt by my bemused unfamiliarity with the subtler rules and terms of the game of this particular classroom. Nor was it directly influenced by River's real interest in discussing philosophical concepts with children, which was slightly hampered by her belief that she had no idea how to do it. In fact she had quite a good idea how to do it, and her sense of inferiority was based, I think, on her sense of unfamiliarity with the philosophical tradition. She was not satisfied, as some good teachers are, with her intuitive sense of the resonance between the philosophy which we find all around us, whether among 7 or 70 year olds, and the way that was reflected in the tradition. She had an unhealthy respect for the academy.

Ms. Rivers and I had agreed that for this, our third year together, we could swap sessions—she would take one, and then I, the “expert” from the University, the next. But when I did sit in circle with her, she deferred to me with such abject regularity that it only added to the ambiguity of power relations that already haunted the class. And this ambiguity had reached such a peak in the weeks leading up to the conflict sessions, that I did what I usually do when disorder begins to reach epidemic proportions—a strategy directly based on my anarchist convictions. The week before our first conflict discussion, I had announced that this particular class session would be handled completely by them: they would choose what we were to talk about and deal with the mechanics of the conversation themselves. I would make no demands—not introduce or ask that we stick to any sort of topic or theme, nor rebuke anyone or ask for any kind of response. The only ground rule on which I insisted was that people would stay seated in their place in circle. Otherwise I was there to listen, and to share myself when so moved.

The resulting session was of a sustained chaotic intensity which left several children complaining of headaches at the end of the 40 or so minutes—an argument about what they wanted to talk about which lasted the whole period, and in which three or four children dominated the proceedings through initiative, persistence, and their capacity to over-ride the others through rhythm or bravado. Interestingly enough it was an African-American girl who had hardly attended any of the previous sessions (and didn't attend any of the following) because she was usually attending a “special needs” session during this time, who captured the initiative, and became the leader in the high-jinks combination of joking and grandstanding which characterized the session. When we finished, it seemed that all of us—the children and the three adults in the room (myself, River, and her aide, both of whom who listened attentively from the sidelines)—were bemused, in a faint state of shock at what had just happened.

The following week we began our four-session discussion about conflict, and I introduced the “name recorder system.” This is a classroom practice whereby one or more of the students is given charge of keeping a written list with the names of those who raise their hands in order to speak, and of

calling on them in order. The name-recorder system quickly became both a cause of and the controller of conflict. The controller because, to the classes obvious relief and interest the moment it was introduced, it provided a structure of containment for the somewhat desperate sense of competing self-interest in the form of a game protocol that everyone could participate in and master, even if they argued about the rules from time to time. Most importantly, it involved writing things down, making a record that could be referred to as an arbiter in any dispute over scarce resources, an emergent tally which objectively reflected the distribution of turns, a plain and obvious index of the equity which the class was unconsciously searching for in the sometimes fury of their interactions. When I suggested that the designated name recorder—a new one was chosen each week by each class member (excepting those who had already served) guessing at a number which I had arbitrarily chosen—use a clipboard, another student asked if the rest of the class could use clipboards too, and within a short minute eight or ten children had left the circle and returned with clipboards, paper and pencils. This continued in all the discussions that followed, and the clipboards were used for various purposes—often for students to spontaneously take notes on questions and statements made in the discussion, sometimes to draw. From then on, the children monitored the name-recorder process carefully and with increasing expertise, well aware that there was a new interlocutor and authority in the struggle over order and disorder within the group, and perhaps in fact more interested in that than in mere conceptual deliberation.

Most of the examples of conflict which the second graders chose to offer were located in their lives with friends or acquaintances or siblings, or incidents among adults that they had witnessed. There seemed to be a level of tolerance, even expectation and affirmation of these small conflicts in their lives—they had already become such natural occurrences for them. Samuel, who carried himself with a distinctive sense both of ease and self-confidence and with a quick, quirky intelligence—who easily dominated the conversation with his responsiveness and straightforwardness and comfortable willingness to challenge whatever he wished to, said, “Well, sometimes they just have to fight—like ‘that’s my ball’, ‘no it’s mine’, ‘no it’s mine’—then they just get into a fight.” And Hillary, with a different sort of self-confidence—one which bespoke a sense of personal emotional order in her life, and a passionate interest in explaining the world, somewhat as if she was explaining it to herself as well as those to whom she was speaking—illustrated the notion of conflict with a story about two people drawing in the classroom: “. . . and the person who was making the mouse had the black marker and the person who was making the ladybug says, ‘Hey, I want that black marker’. Or like, ‘Can I have that now?’” Then Elenor, who always sat near or next to Hillary, and who seemed to share with her a sophisticated if not in any way overstated way of being an intelligent and reasonable citizen in this odd wilderness experience which was River’s second grade for that year, said, “Well I sort of agree with Hillary, because that happens a lot during our class . . . One time me and my friends were playing a money game, like there is over there [she points] . . . and um a girl came over here and said ‘I want to play that game’. And she kept on saying it even when we



asked her to stop it. Then all of a sudden we get into a big fight. We tried to tell her to stop, but . . . Not many people in our class use words." Her last sentence was pronounced with a combination of ruefulness, confessional honesty, polite diffidence and, of course, implicit self-exception from being one of those who couldn't "use words."

It seemed clear to me that Elenor was talking about a girl in the class. That girl may or may not have been in the room—I thought it inadvisable to pursue the matter. It is as likely as not that the girl to whom she was referring did this chronically, and that Elenor, who sat next to Hillary in the circle, and shared her general maturity, also shared with Hillary a feeling of . . . fatalism? towards this girl's depredations towards her as a token or symbol or index of the kind of stubborn, mute inchoate incomprehension of the skills through which conflict could be mediated. And indeed, it was Jodi in Palermo's class—Jodi already a radical individual, glowing mutely with a resilient self-love which had, one felt, already been challenged by others—adults, I sensed, including Palermo—as selfishness or inattention to others—Jodi who never stopped paying attention, and who would keep her hand up for fifteen minutes with something to say—who first made the proposition, when I put the question of whether conflict was unavoidable or not, that "you can go without fighting." In fact in all cases it was the girls who made this particular proposition or ones like it, who seemed, that is, to have higher stakes in conflict mediation. For them, the idea that you can live without conflict was a proposition which was held in some doubt, but remained as an ethical imperative in the face of an ontological point of view which understood conflict as inscribed in the structure of being itself. In other words, it was some kind of contradiction.

Is conflict avoidable?

The segment included below, from the very first session with Palermo's group, put all the pieces of the concept of conflict more or less on the table quite immediately, and set up the contradictions within the concept which, as we shall see, were the preoccupation of River's class as well. We had just finished a section of the first discussion dedicated to clarifying the term "conflict," in which a distinction had been teased out between internal and external conflict. Stephen had begun with defining conflict as "one person meaning to do something and another person, like stopping him from doing so." This had quickly morphed through another example—"Like maybe you have two things at the same time like Tai Kwan Do and violin lessons at the same . . . And, and you have to pick one because they conflict"—into the notion of internal conflict. Hans, in a dialectical move which was quite common in these conversations and which I will call very generally "mediation," acted to synthesize whatever contradictions or distinctions had emerged in the conversation in a new statement: "Conflict is like people trying to go two different ways—like some people this way and some people that way [gestures with two hands in two directions] and they're kind of in conflict?" This is a synthesis of mediation because he has gone from one person stopping another, to two internal goals which are incompatible with each other, to two people "trying to go two different ways," i.e. a simple

crossing of intentionalities, which can include both the stopping and incompatibility, and the inner and the outer.

The conversation which preceded the bit of transcript included here continued for several more minutes on this theme of internal conflict, with examples given by Abdul, Charlie, Stephen and Jeremiah—four boys—from sports, video games and, from Stephen, the notion that in family or relational conflict, both internal and external conflict are present: “I think if you were, like, depressed or like very like sad, or if you’d gotten in a fight with a lot of people you could have a problem, and you could have conflict. Like a family conflict.” As was characteristic of all the conversations with both groups of second graders, the facilitator tended to work the discussion by posing questions which followed from or were implicit in the example just given—in this case I had followed the examples from video games and sports with, “. . . what about conflict inside yourself?”—and the children responded with brief propositions followed immediately by more examples, which the facilitator interpreted as development of the propositions in this direction or that, which led to his further questions or interpretations—e.g. “you seem to be saying that there’s a connection between conflict with other people and conflict within yourself”—and further examples. There were in fact several children—in particular Stephen, Martina, Jeremiah and Veronica—who seemed to have more mastery of the distinction between a contextually isolated “abstract” proposition and an example, but in most cases the children thought immediately and intuitively through the latter. These examples were actually “abstract” in the sense that they were a way of thinking about the concept in response to the facilitator’s question, and thus moved the conceptual work along. But now to a more detailed look at a particular segment, with some commentary interspersed:

David: I want to ask whether conflict is avoidable. Would it be possible to live your life without conflict? (*excited no’s and yesses from group*). There are yesses and no’s, so let’s hear both sides. Martina?

Anon: We’re having a conflict right now.

David: (Jokingly) Not yet. Don’t put any gasoline on it.

The facilitator does not take this opportunity, offered playfully, to explore the concept in situ. Lulled by its playful irony, he responds in kind, and lets it slip.

Martina: Well, conflict can mean many different things. And maybe, like Hans was saying, maybe you can maybe you can’t, two people could be like going in different directions . . . like Jeremiah was saying not making up your mind, and— . . .

David: And like Davida was saying, *want*, it’s two different wants.

Martina: Well yeah, but like, it’s life. So I think you have to have it.

David: You have to have it?

Martina: Yeah, for example Mr. Palermo says you can’t learn if you don’t make mistakes. Cause . . . everybody has to make mistakes, that’s just life.

David: So without mistakes no learning, and making mistakes is conflict—a kind of conflict—is that what you’re saying? (*Martina nods*) That’s—that’s kind of like a logical thing: that mistakes are conflict, mistakes are necessary, therefore conflict is necessary. Yeah? That seems to be how you’re reasoning.



Martina is associating conflict with learning, an idea which had not yet been introduced, but which is the basis for cognitive learning theory at least since Piaget. She reasons syllogistically in order to arrive at the conclusion that all people make mistakes, using as her first premise an argument from authority, and arguing, implicitly, modus tollens:

If they don't make mistakes, people don't learn (if p then q)

All people learn (not-q)

Therefore all people make mistakes (therefore not-p)

Or she could be arguing from a simpler categorical syllogistic form, using an ontological assumption, tagged as such by the phrase ("that's just life"):

All people make mistakes (all a's are b's)

All mistakes lead to learning (all b's are c's)

Therefore, all people learn (all a's are c's)

David: (Looking at Jodi, who has her hand up) Did you agree?

Jodi: No.

David: O.K. So let's hear your side. You said (when all were calling out "yes" or "no") that conflict *could* be avoided.

Jodi: Yeah, you can go without fighting.

David: That you can live without fighting.

Jodi: Yeah, because if you just take it one step at a time, and like, hold your temper, you can live without it.

David: O.K., This is a different proposition, right? Jodi is actually saying that it's actually possible if you do the right thing, if you don't respond, if you hold your reaction, that you can actually live without conflict. And Martina has said that conflict is necessary even to learning. So we've got two different positions. Could somebody help us to talk between those two positions?

Amanda?

Amanda: Well I don't think you can live without conflict. I just agree with Martina.

David: Can you address Jodi's point? Jodi is suggesting that you could actually, if you knew how to do it you could check your anger, your . . . You don't agree with that? Can you give a reason why?

Amanda: Well everyone has temper, you can't just stop it.

David: You can't just stop your temper. Jodi, do you want to respond to that?

Jodi: Yeah—well, . . . you can . . . because if you take a deep breath you just walk away.

Brian: I disagree with Jodi, because you have to have conflict, otherwise you won't settle the problem, that the other person agrees and you agree . . . Because my parents fight all the time. (Some titillated laughter among the group. Brian smiles as well)

Brian introduces a new concept, analogous to Martina's, about mistakes and learning. Just as the conflict which is "making a mistake" leads to self-correction, so the conflict of "fighting" leads to the resolution of the difference which led to the conflict. We will encounter this argument again.

David: So you're saying that unless the problem gets expressed that it will never be solved. Is that what you're saying? Did everybody get that? So (to Jodi) he's sort of responding to your point. He's saying that it would just

pretend to be solved, but it doesn't really get solved. (*calls on Hope, who has her hand up, but she has forgotten, and is silent*)

Joan: I think . . . I disagree with Jodi, because whenever me and my sister fight we can't drop the subject . . . Like we keep on fighting and we want to stop except we *can't*.

Joan offers a counterexample both to Jodi's and to Brian's point: to Jodi's in that Joan claims that at least in this case, you can't "just take a deep breath"; and to Brian's in that, at least in this case, fighting does not lead to the settlement of the problem.

David: Want to stop—yeah, I think everybody knows this feeling, right? Where you're in an argument and you want to stop but it just keeps feeding and feeding and feeding. Jeremiah?

Jeremiah: Uh well, I like half agree with Jodi and half agree with Joan, because you could hold your temper half the time but half the time you can't—and there's the other kind of conflict that you face sooner or later. Like if you're going to your friend's house and there's this fork in the road and you need to decide which way to go . . . "I'll go this way, it looks good—but no, I think I should go that way" . . .

First Jeremiah mediates the issue of whether conflict in the sense of "fighting" is avoidable, and suggests that, although there might be a categorical imperative, there is no guarantee that's it's possible to carry out. Then he offers, almost exactly in John Dewey's (1997/1902) language,, a restatement of Stephen's category of conflict between two goods (Tai Kwan Do and violin lessons) as a "fork in the road" situation. Dewey, of course, characterizes it as the situation which characteristically leads to what he calls "reflective" – i.e. "critical – thinking.

David: So you're saying that for this reason conflict is unavoidable—because there are forks in the road. There are those kinds of choices that you have to make and therefore it's impossible to do without conflict. Stephen?

Stephen: Well I think that . . . I think that you can't live without conflict because if you don't have conflict then everybody . . . it's just a thing that everybody lives It's like these kids go to the store and there's only one thing left and they all want it, and like if the person who took it would get it and then everybody would have to hold their temper and then the next time that happens they're gonna have to build it up even more and you can't just keep building your temper up, eventually you won't be able to hold it any more, so eventually you would have to have conflict. . . . Or like if everybody wanted something, then everybody might not get it, then who will get it? You have to get to conflict once in a while.

Stephen deepens the discussion about the inevitability of conflict by identifying what, on a Hobbesian view, is its fundamental cause: competition for scarce resources ("there's only one thing left and they all want it"). By this time, and with the facilitator's unconscious complicity, "conflict" has been defined as a behavioral event, and not something which leads to a behavioral event. This ambiguous distinction sticks, and in fact is never fully explored and clarified during the second grade discussions.

David: O.K. so you're giving an example—Stephen I think is introducing another category—Davida said "want," but Stephen says maybe there are



more people in the world—or in the way we've built the world—there are more people in the world than there are things for everybody. So there's always gonna be—

Stephen: Well there will be [enough things in the world] but there might not be enough in *one place* . . . So that everybody's gonna go there and say "I want that, I want that," and you can't just hold it back—somebody would say "No, I want that," and that would be the start of a conflict.

Prompted by the facilitator's restatement, Stephen refines his proposition. It's not even the fact of scarcity, but the statistically inevitable problem of unequal distribution which ensures that there will always be conflict. It's not just, as the facilitator suggests, "the way we've built the world," but the way the world is regardless of how we build it.

David: So Stephen seems to be suggesting that one cause of conflict is—I don't know if you guys know this word—"scarcity." Scarcity means there's not enough of it. So if you say, well . . .

Stephen: Food is scarce.

David: Yeah, "food is scarce," it means there's not enough in the stores, and people are *competing* for it, like one person wants the loaf of bread and another person wants it too. So he's saying that this kind of situation is in the world and so it's impossible to avoid conflict. . . . We need to be finishing up now, so I want the people who speak now to be summarizers, meaning we want to end with a sense of what's been said. What have we said about conflict? Where have we gotten to in our inquiry, into our dialogue, in our thinking about conflict? . . . Because we want to go on next time. So we want to know where we stopped.

Samantha: I'm kind of responding to Jodi. Like, what if you were fighting and you tried to hold your temper, what if you got so mad that you couldn't?

David: So you're kind of agreeing with Stephen that eventually it's gonna build up, it's just impossible to keep it down. Stephanie are you gonna be a summarizer?

Stephanie: No.

David: I'm looking for a summarizer. (*Veronica raises her hand, and facilitator nods at her*)

Veronica: You have to have conflict in the world.

David: You have to have conflict in the world.

Veronica: Because if you don't—if you hold your temper but you still have conflict because you want to, eventually you have to . . . Like say your sister was mad at you for doing something, and like she wouldn't say that, she would just hold it . . . Like I was using her pen that she liked a lot, and like she would be acting like . . . she wouldn't *tell* you, but then she would have to say "That's my pen." You have to have conflict.

Veronica builds on Joan's previous sibling-related example with her own, and deepens it. Conflict here seems to be understood as such a natural outcome of problems of use and distribution of resources that to think one could eliminate it from experience would be equivalent to thinking one could eliminate a body function, or the weather.

David: O.K. but um Hans, you want to speak now—could you remind us what Brian said and what Martina said, because I think those are two

important aspects of conflict. Do you remember what they said? (*Hans shakes his head,, having forgotten*). Wendy, what did Martina say?

Wendy: Um, she said that ...(*inaudible*) Learning.

David: Yeah, something about learning.

Samantha: You have to make mistakes once in a while.

David: Yeah, and anybody remember what Brian's point was? (*Joan struggles to remember, then gives up*) O.K., we'll just ask Brian to repeat it.

Charlie: I think he had something about . . . I forgot.

David: O.K., let's let Brian say it.

Jeremiah: Oh that's right He said that his parents always fought, but then settled it down.

David: Yeah, he seemed to be saying that unless you have a conflict, problems won't go away, right? So that's interesting because that might mean that a problem would be a different thing from a conflict. You might have a problem and you never talk about it and you never get upset, you stop yourself from getting upset about it, but something is wrong . . . So I'm wondering if we can make a distinction between whatever that problem is and the conflict, if you see the conflict as just the fight about it. . . I hope I'm not going in the wrong direction. Veronica?

The facilitator attempts to explore the distinction mentioned above between conflict as a problem of any kind and conflict as a behavioral event. But he is temporarily forgetting that he's looking for a summary, is at the very end of the session, and loses confidence.

Veronica: Conflict must have something to do with decisions.

David: With decisions. And this was Jeremiah's point.

Veronica: Because like if you hold your temper you've made that decision. (*Glances at Davida, who is sitting next to her*) Because if your sister won't let you in her room to get to your room that's a decision. And like to solve your problems, that's a decision. . . . Yeah, and so conflict *must* have to do with decision. Pretty much everything we all do has to do with making decisions.

Veronica, in the process of summarizing, has found herself with a new criterion for defining the concept of conflict. She uses two examples which have already been offered to demonstrate their decisional nature. She seems in fact to be implicitly upholding Jodi's earlier claim that conflict can be avoided. She moves naturally from the descriptive to the normative, and identifies the ethical dimension of conflict—that whether it occurs or not, at least interpersonally, depends on whether one decides it will occur.

In this first conversation, the concept of conflict was built up—under instigation and sometimes suggestion by the facilitator, but by no means by anything like “instruction” —in the following points:

- Conflict can be interpersonal, intrapersonal, or both
- Conflict represents a competition, either between two people, or two possibilities only one of which can be fulfilled (the “fork in the road”)
- It is not completely clear whether interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict can be avoided. The reasons given *against* it are:



- o Scarce resources and/or necessarily unequal distribution of resources means that there will always be competition for them
- o The process of learning itself involves conflict. Here a “mistake” is understood as a conflict, and mistakes are considered necessary to learning
- o In a related way, except in interpersonal terms, conflict is necessary to the resolution of problems.

The reasons given *for* it are:

- When conflict threatens, it is possible through an act of the will to suppress or avoid it. Implicit here is a categorical imperative
- All conflicts are, in the last analysis, the result of decisions. Decisions in fact can be said to underlie all behavior, and the behavior described as conflict is no different.

Do we need conflict? Dialectical approaches

It could be claimed on a reading of all the transcripts (which represent 100 manuscript pages) that this initial conversation with one second grade laid the same basis for conceptualization of conflict that appeared in the other second grade. It is true that Samuel, in River’s class, added the classic category of *territory* to Stephen’s of scarce resources, but these are analogous—both examples of Sean’s (also in River’s class) suggestion that “some animals”—like his example of the dinosaurs—“need conflict for a living.” But during their third session, River’s class made an advance—already emerging in Veronica’s assertion that “You have to have conflict in the world”—on this conceptualization by adding a dialectical element, and an argument was made, not just for the fateful necessity of conflict, but for its necessity for transformation, and thus, if it is possible to claim it, a hint of “purpose.” This might have come earlier if the first two sessions had not been dominated, first by a passionate argument about the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which was beginning during those very weeks; and in the second week by a discussion about a problem happening right outside the window and across the quiet street in the public park, where the resident Canadian geese were befouling the grass with their excrement, and the city was dealing with the problem unsuccessfully by setting off flares, whose hissing explosions could be heard outside on a daily basis. This second conversation quickly turned into an argument about the responsibility of pet owners for taking care of their animal’s offscourings, decorated with numerous lurid examples, most of them about neighbors and their dogs. As River remarked afterwards, “poop” was a topic which second graders delighted in, for its slightly transgressive quality and its frank appraisal of the relation between custom and instinct, a theme which is, quite understandably, of interest to humans who are still at or near the peak of their activity level. But it should also be recognized that both conversations—Iraq and the Canada geese—were about very real conflicts, and that the argumentation in both was very close and intense.

And indeed it could be said of River’s class that they were, because of the measure of autonomy they felt as a result of their teacher’s unstated but

implicit trust in their developmental potential for self organization, oriented to discussing conflict, not through abstracting the concept, but through practical application of it. This is also indicated by the enthusiasm with which they took up the name recorder procedure as a way of dealing with the small and atmospheric conflicts in their class process. Because they had a teacher that encouraged their autonomy (if only sometimes through a vague neglect which seemed more related to an incalculable combination of pedagogical wisdom and fatigue than to self-absorption) the group was taking a different kind of responsibility in the doing of philosophy than Palermo's class. In fact they were ready to take on actual problems, and were ready to discuss them on their merits.

I started River's third session with a question which Samuel had presented to me just *after* the second session—the session about “poop” management among animals—had ended. He had approached me as I was rising from the floor and getting ready to leave, with that air of his—mindful of how I imagine the young Emile—which somehow suggested he was addressing an equal, in spite of the slightly embarrassing difference in our relative heights. “I have a question,” he said. “Do we *need* conflict?” I was delighted to have some return from a conversation whose combination of scatological glee, giddy contentiousness, and sovereign inattention to my continual attempts to “take it to a higher level” in the form of propositions and generalizations rather than examples had left me feeling tired and ground down. I suggested we take it up first next time, and I didn't forget. When I put it to him the following week, he answered, “I don't think so, but some people think we do, but I don't care. I don't know if we need conflict. We might need it and some people think we do. I don't think we need it, but if some people think they do it's O.K. with me. I don't want to say conflict in itself. If I say ‘We don't need conflict’ they say ‘Yes we do’, and I don't want to start with myself.”

I was startled and a bit confused by this crafty session-opener, and only managed to say “That's an interesting position to take. Anyone want to respond to it?” This was followed immediately by Jasmine stating categorically “I don't think we need conflict,” and then lapsing into silence, then a hesitant, half audible response about people doing something one doesn't like, and feelings getting hurt. Instead of circling back to attempt to unpack Samuel's slightly obscure reasoning and elliptical semantics, I pushed forward with “Can conflict ever end up well, or can conflict ever do something good, or, or is there any kind of conflict which leads to positive . . . ?” Only later, when the colleague who was filming the session pointed it out to me, did I realize what in fact Samuel seemed to be saying: if he argues that we don't need conflict, he is engaging in conflict, which is contradictory, and therefore he won't make the claim, although he believes it. This kind of contradiction and even suggestion of paradox, ignored here, arose, as we shall see, in another, playful and fantastic way in Palermo's last class.

David: Can conflict ever end up well, or can conflict ever do something good, or, or is there any kind of conflict which leads to positive . . . ?

Peter: Next is Martha (*Peter is the Name Recorder for this session*)

Martha: We sort of need it. There would be no United States if there wasn't—if it wasn't for conflict. So . . .



David: How is that?

Martha: If George Washington didn't have to fight with all sorts of our . . . *(pausing, thinking)* . . . all sorts of our states. Like he had to fight with California and Texas. And there probably wouldn't even be a United States as big as it is now. There would only be thirteen states.

It was Martha who put the question early in the first session – “Why do people fight wars anyway?” – which led to the discussion about the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

David: So without conflict, you're saying, there's no growth—there's no reorganization.

The facilitator jumps to a generalization from Martha's example. Although his inference is correct, he jumps too far, since Martha doesn't understand the word “reorganization” in this context.

Martha: There would be thirteen colonies.

David: O.K. Could somebody respond to that? Could the next person who speaks respond to that?

Peter: Martha . . . She's on the list three times in a row.

David: No, you just go once, and then . . .

Peter: O.K.. Elenor.

David: *(to Martha)* And then you can go on the list again after you've spoken. *(long silence, as Name Recorder looks at list for next speaker)*

Elenor: Um, I sort of agree with Martha because . . . Let's say that other people were coming to America and start destroying it. And we're trying to stop them from destroying America.

David: And that's conflict.

Elenor: Well I think that sometimes we need conflict.

David: In order to protect ourselves.

Talbot: *(Begins to speak, thinks, then says, “I forgot”)*

Abraham: Well I don't really think we need conflict, because sometimes it's good but sometimes it's bad. It's sort of in between the same way Martha said, but there's also another way that's better than Martha said because in a war people die. And we wouldn't even have the thirteen colonies if they didn't win that war, but also if they didn't fight it, then people wouldn't have died.

Abraham objects to the idea that conflict is the only way to settle disputes. He uses conditional reasoning to evaluate Martha's example: there might have been a different outcome without war, but there would still have been an outcome, which might have been as or more acceptable than the one which came about.

David: So we would have had something else but we would have been peaceful.

Abraham: In lots of big wars, lots of people die, so many people must have died in that war, and even though now we have a lot of people on this continent, when that war happened a lot of people died, so . . .

David: O.K., so I'm trying to figure out what your reasoning is here, Abraham—I think it's good reasoning. Could somebody . . . You said if there hadn't been a war, people wouldn't have died, and there would still be a lot of people here . . . Is that right?

Samuel: There would have been a lot of people here. A hundred thousand or so.

Abraham: Yeah.

David: So it would have been possible. If there had not been a conflict which was the Revolutionary War then the shape of the country might have been different, but people wouldn't have died. So you're saying implicitly that it's more important that people don't die than that you make something like the United States.

Abraham: It's a good thing that the United States is here now, but um, still if we didn't fight that war then it would still be as good as it is now.

Samuel: Well I have an answer to Abraham and Martha—well if we need conflict, then . . . O.K. we don't need it. But Martha, we didn't *have* to do the war. I mean we could just think of a reason to have peace, right?

Martha: Well, the answer to your . . . We would have the smallest . . . like the smallest country . . . the USA wouldn't own the biggest trees on earth if it hadn't been in history.

Samuel: But we don't have the biggest trees.

Martha: I wouldn't be able to visit my grandma without going out of the state, or any other of my family.

David: O.K., wait a second—a little time out here because I'm not sure how to handle this kind of situation—like we've got a specific question—Samuel has actually addressed a question to Martha, and she should be able to respond, but then the problem is, how long should they go on before we go back to the list?

Martha: Three hours. (*smiles*)

David: Well that's the problem, we—

Anon: Two minutes?

David: Two minutes is a long time . . . (*multiple voices*) Rather than talking about it in terms of minutes, how about if we talk about how many exchanges there can be?

Samuel: I don't really get what you're saying.

David: What I'm saying, Samuel, is that you were on the list, right? And you addressed a question—

Samuel: No, I addressed a . . .

David: Well a disagreement to Martha—actually it was in the form of a question. So, she wasn't on the list, legally or officially she shouldn't have answered—we should have just gone to the next person on the list, and she wouldn't have been able to respond to you. But we let her respond. And then you responded back, and then she responded, and that could go on—

Martha: For three hours, or two hours and two days.

David: For too long for the whole group. So how long do we deal with the particular . . .

Samuel: Two more hours and we'll be done (*Martha laughs*)

Peter: Not funny.

David: Does someone have a suggestion? Or do the name recorders have a suggestion?

Hillary: Can you tell us the next person on the list?

Peter: Yeah, uh, Hillary.



Hillary: Well I agree with Samuel that we don't need conflict, because we could have like made a declaration of peace. . . and tell them that . . . can we please have those like . . . states in common.

David: We could have done it non-violently.

Hillary: Yeah, and we could have told their . . . (*she signals to Peter, mouthing the word, "Martha!" meaning Martha has her hand raised. Hillary is the "spotter" of the name recording team today, and is multi-tasking*) . . . we could have told the army that—we could have told the British army, I think it was . . . Was it the British army?

David: Yeah, it was the British.

Hillary: Yeah, O.K. That we just have our colonies. And they could just not have made conflict. But they didn't think—they just went ahead and made conflict . . . So they could have stopped before doing that, like having war, they could have talked it over awhile and then agreed with the US army. But—

Martha: There wasn't a US army.

David: Let's not talk out. Is there a response to what Hillary is saying?

Peter: Yeah, Martha's next on the list anyway.

Martha: Well I want to respond to Hillary and Samuel. If we had that small of a country then we wouldn't have . . . we would only have to do thirteen states in our state book And guess what that means?

Hillary: What?

Martha: Then not everyone gets to do a state. Another reason is, don't you think they tried to do that?

David: Tried to solve it without war?

Martha: Yeah.

David: O.K. let's . . . you made two points, so let's stop there and let's go on. . . a response to it. Who's next?

Peter: Katrina.

Katrina: Um, well, um, you don't have to have conflict, like . . . (*inaudible*)

David: And you're saying that that's also the case with the original American Revolution. You're agreeing with Hillary. But I'm wondering whether even though there's not a war over it, whether or not it's not still a conflict . . . I mean all of us had the idea. It was Hillary's idea and maybe even first Abraham's idea that we could actually solve it without war. But it's a conflict even before there's war, isn't it? I mean it's a conflict between the colonies, and—

Abraham: War starts because of conflict. If you don't have conflict then you don't have a war.

David: O.K., so the conflict was already here . . . that's what I'm saying. So there was a conflict about land and there was a conflict about taxes and money, a conflict about who gave who what and how much and who was the boss of who.

Katrina: (*inaudible, a pause then, mildly frustrated*) I don't know!

David: (*smiles*) Keep thinking.

Peter: Samuel.

Samuel: Well if we have an army it wouldn't really matter if we make a book about the U.S. What really matters It's just a book. What really matters is

if we have conflict—and if we didn't have conflict then everyone would just be so nice, and there wouldn't be like boxing or something, on T.V. And I think we sort of like need conflict a little bit—not all the time but just a little bit—and . . . we don't need conflicts.

Samuel is arguing conditionally and counterfactually. "Just so nice" indicates a bit of sarcasm. There seems to be the implication that conflict adds necessary interest or dimensionality to an otherwise insipid life, and an implicit revolt against the PC notion that we could do away with conflict altogether. And with his boxing example, perhaps he is making an argument for something like the "moral equivalent of war."

Peter: Martha. Martha, it's your turn.

David: Response to Samuel?

Peter: Uh, yeah Pablo.

Pablo: O.K. Well I agree with Samuel and Hillary because you need conflict, well I agree with Samuel because you need conflict a little. Like, if we didn't have conflict every country would have been blown up. Um well um, well because everyone . . . well someone has to be mad sometimes . . . or else maybe you would be friendly with a bad person, and then the bad person tricked you, in a game, and you lost, and it was for your house . . . and then like well then like there would still be bad stuff even if you didn't have conflict.

David: So you're saying it's impossible to get rid of conflict in the world, because there's always somebody who's getting mad or somebody's tricking somebody else.

Pablo: Yes.

David: Why?

Pablo: Well because people just, their moms and dads tell them . . . like one time this happened to my dad, this guy was running and screaming in my dad's face when he was holding my little sister, and my dad was just about to drop her when this guy—he knew him—and he said, "What the heck are you doing?" And he's like, "I'm screaming in that guy's face." And then the guy said, "Well why are you doing that?" "Because my mom and dad told me that black people are bad." And they're really not.

David: So what point are you making with the story?

Pablo: Well it's impossible to . . . well it may be impossible to get rid of conflict because there's like always someone who's doing bad stuff.

David: There's always gonna be someone who's doing bad stuff.

Pablo: Like Saddam Hussein.

Samuel: Oh yeah, that guy's terrible! He—

David: Don't speak out. O.K., so somebody needs to address Pablo's point—whoever's next on the list.

Peter: O.K., uh, Abraham.

Abraham: I disagree with Pablo because . . . well actually I agree . . . Well I partly agree and partly disagree because you can't ever destroy conflict because once you destroy it somebody will make it up again. . . Because even if you destroy conflict it won't change a bad person's personality. So . . .

David: There will always be something bad in the world.

Abraham: If you destroy it somebody's gonna make it up again.



David: And destroying it is itself a form of conflict (*Abraham nods*). . . We're in pretty deep waters here, but we need to quit. Does anyone have a question that they could finish us with?

Hillary: Elenor is next.

Elenor: I have something to say about conflict.

David: We have to finish up but you can go on, but I'd like a question like— Samuel reminded us of this question today.

Elenor: O.K., why can't we talk to bad people about . . . they would like it and (*inaudible*)

David: O.K. So why can't we settle with words? (*multiple conversations*)

Lavina: I have a question.

David: Lavina . You want to step in and—

Lavina: What does conflict mean?

This is Lavina's third identical query in as many sessions. Several begin to explain the term to her. David rises and leaves, smiling.

The conversation began with Martha calling on an example from her current social studies curriculum to argue for the reorganizational or reconstructive potential of conflict. She was arguing counterfactually, with a "what if" structure, and offered three examples of how things would have been different if the Colonies had not rebelled and founded another nation: 1) we wouldn't live in the country with the biggest trees in the world; 2) if she went to visit her grandmother, or anyone else in her family—all of whom live outside of the space of the original thirteen colonies—she would have to leave the country; 3) their class would only have thirteen states to pick from in doing their "states" books projects, which, it is implied, would lead to a scarcity crisis.

These arguments appear laughably naïve, self-centered and ethnocentric, and were in fact considered that way by at least Samuel and probably other members of the group, but on closer examination each one represents a different kind of concern. The first has to do with overall size (the trees are on the west coast, and she is on the east), the second with the status of families, and the third with the shared life of River's classroom, which was her most immediate and demanding community at this point in her life. But most importantly, her intervention, made from where she stands and operates in the world, *does* immediately invoke and further provoke the idea of dialectical change and the role of conflict in it, and led to the rapid unfolding of a conceptual structure based on that new, larger understanding. The results of the provocation were roughly as follows.

The notion that conflict is a necessary condition for positive change was immediately contested by Abraham—thin, striking-looking, with wild, abundant, self-organizing curly black hair, quick, vibrant and often quarrelsome but always engaged—who had argued passionately (and alone) in the first session against the invasion of Iraq, characterizing it as the behavior of "bullies." Here Abraham took the same position as did Jodi in the other second grade class, and Hillary in this one, that, as Veronica said, "Pretty much everything we all do has to do with making decisions." In other words, a categorical imperative is performable—one can "take a deep breath" and negotiate. Abraham claims that if there hadn't been a

revolutionary war, there is no logical way to argue that something less satisfactory than is now the case would be the case, and that, most importantly, people wouldn't have been killed. He had support from Samuel and from Hillary—who argued, as she had already done about classroom conflict in discussing a dispute over colored markers, that “they [the British] could have stopped before doing that, like having war, they could have talked it over awhile and agreed with the US army.”

But Martha's point had already been picked up and transformed by Elenor—a good friend of Hillary's and a solid “citizen” of the class in a different, more ironical and expressive way—who indirectly invoked the terrorist threat (“Let's say that other people were coming to America and start destroying it. And we're trying to stop them from destroying America”) as an argument for the necessity of conflict in self-defense. This is the first mention in River's class of the idea that there is evil in the world which, if not resisted, will prevail, and that resistance assumes conflict. This had already been sounded in the second session of Palermo's class by Stephen, who said (over the course of several turns): “It's like conflict happens. It's not like it can't happen or it can. It just does. . . . Every time you make a new friend, or someone you're friendly with, once in your life, you're going to have conflict. . . . It's not good to have conflict, because it could lead to something bad, but if you didn't have conflict, then everybody would try to grab so many things and then some people would just die, and you couldn't just keep doing that, because they'd take all the food and all the money from the banks because the banks couldn't have a conflict with them if it wasn't possible, so you need to have it. . . . Conflict, yeah, if you don't have a conflict then the world would go crazy.”

Both Stephen and Elenor—the former quite explicitly, and the latter rather more hesitantly (for we soon see her take the other side of the categorical imperative again)—reasoned that conflict is a necessary balancing mechanism, if not in the war of the all against all, then in the protection of the good from the evil, the constructive from the destructive. Without it there is no redress. In fact it is analogous to Martina's argument that error is necessary to growth, in that both are systems arguments, and both are implicitly dialectical. It is a descriptive argument—this is the way things are—and tends to trump or at least to fatally complicate the normative argument of deontological or decision-based ethics. As Pablo said, “there would still be bad stuff even if you didn't have conflict. . . there's like always someone who's doing bad stuff.” And Abraham, who until now had been implicitly supporting a deontological or decision-based approach, finds himself forced to agree: “. . . you can't ever destroy conflict because once you destroy it somebody will make it up again. . . . Because even if you destroy conflict it won't change a bad person's personality.” The segment ends with Elenor, who first suggested that conflict is intimately associated with the problem of evil when she invoked the terrorist threat, remonstrating almost despairingly that, just as “good people” can avoid conflict through self-restraint, it may be possible to “talk to bad people” and change them so they don't do things which cause conflict. Hope never dies.



The mindedness of matter

Both groups, then, arrived more or less in parallel although through quite different conversational avenues, at a Hobbesian/Calvinist position about the basic nature of the human situation, and a dialectical or at least a pragmatist view of the role of conflict, not only in mediating the human situation, but in transforming it. This seemed to be a pretty clearly accepted and articulated position, but I was interested in going further. I wanted to tempt the Heraclitean notion that “strife” or conflict is written into the very nature of the cosmos, and ask, is there some deeper level in nature at which we can identify conflict? If conflict is so naturally liable to a dialectical interpretation in terms of the social world, couldn’t the same interpretation be applied to the natural world? Before the sessions started, I had developed a set of questions in the form of a discussion plan and an exercise. Since I knew that we had only four sessions each, I also knew that I wouldn’t be able to touch on all of them. But I was particularly interested, for reasons having to do with my own beliefs as well as from an interest in children’s epistemological convictions and their development and transformation, in what my interlocutors would say to me and to each other about whether we could follow the concept of conflict, not just “down” into the animal world but deeper than that, into the world of plants and further into the inorganic, and whether it might lead us to make some generalizations about the “mindedness of matter.” But some background is in order.

The first half of the twentieth century was the moment of the triumph of positivism in the sciences, and, correspondingly, the relegation to children and “primitives” of outworn metaphysical and ontological notions. A number of cognitive psychologists, including Baldwin (1895), Piaget (1929), and Werner (1948), took an interest in “child animism” – which they defined as the attribution of life, consciousness, will and purpose, to objects in nature or nature as a whole by children – as a last vestige of a millennial world view based on panpsychism, or the notion that whatever we mean by “soul” pervades the whole universe. Animism as a technical term actually covers at least two phenomena, one known as classical animism, which early anthropologists, following the influential E.B. Tyler (1873), identified as a belief of “primitive” peoples that, not only are there spirit beings which animate nature, but that inside the physical body is a soul, which can travel, be bewitched, cursed, etc. For this form of animism there is little difference between human beings and other living things. The other, termed by the early scientists “animatism” involves the belief that the world is animated by impersonal, supernatural powers or a universal power like the “mana” of the Pacific Islanders, or the “orenda” of some Native American groups.

Early in the century, Piaget (1929) attributed to the young child a form of animism which he defined more simply as the “tendency to regard objects as living and endowed with will,” and formulated a four-stage theory of how it is transformed into the modern scientific notion of living and non-living, which went as follows: Stage 1: “anything that is in any way active is conscious, even if it be stationary”; Stage 2: “consciousness is only attributed to things that can move”; Stage 3: “an essential distinction is made between movement that is due to the object itself and movement that is introduced by

an outside agent. Bodies that can move of their own accord, like the sun, the wind, etc. are henceforth alone held to be conscious, while objects that receive their movement from without, like bicycles, etc, are devoid of consciousness"; Stage 4: "consciousness is restricted to the animal world." The ages at which Piaget found children in middle-class Geneva in the 1920's identifying with these various views were, on an average, Stage One until 6-7; Stage Two until 8-9; Stage Three until 11-12; and Stage Four from 12 on (pp. 170-173).

In seeking out the principles of thought which resulted in animism, the most fundamental for Piaget was what he called "indissociation," the inability to separate purposive from non-purposive action," or, more primarily, the subjective and the objective, the world and the self, the living and the inert, conscious and mechanical movement. The child and the "primitive," according to Piaget, "possess[es] no criterion by which to make the distinction." Indeed, "the world is regarded by primitive consciousness as a continuous whole that is both physical and psychical at the same time." "... it remains an undoubted fact that child thought starts with the idea of a universal life [i.e. panpsychism] as its primary assumption" (1929, pp. 237-238, 236, and 230).

The ontological convictions which Piaget and his Enlightened compatriots so neatly stored away as historical and developmental relics in the early twentieth century are part of a philosophical tradition probably even older than the presocratic nature-philosophers of ancient Greece and Ionia, whose theories of flux and transformation of elemental forces driven by attraction and repulsion all suggest an aspect of intention, and some elemental notion of will, however impersonal, in nature. For Anaximenes, "As our souls, being air, hold us together, so breath and air embrace the entire universe." And for Heraclitus, "Soul is the vaporization out of which everything else is composed; moreover it is the least corporeal of all things and is in ceaseless flux . . ." (quoted in Wheelright, 1960, pp. 60 and 72). Even for the comparative rationalist Plato (1961) who followed him roughly a century later, the world is "a blessed god," "a living being, whole and complete, of complete parts," a "living creature that embraces all living creatures within itself"—ensouled, intelligent, and endowed with sensation and reason p. 1165).

Aristotle's (1986) ontology of nature followed with a modification, but not an alteration. He still held to the principle of soul as animating nature, and the center of its implicit grand plan. All of nature's objects have in themselves a principle of movement and an inner tendency to change. Nature is characterized by *pathos*, that is, it undergoes constant motion and change (it "suffers")—and all of it is directed toward an end—the development from a state of potentiality to one of actuality, the embodiment of form in matter. Beginning with plants, all living bodies possess soul—which is their form, principle of movement, and end—on a hierarchical scale. And finally, the Stoics (cited in Hahn, 1977) combined the widespread idea that the cosmos is a living being with the latest scientific theories of the biologists. The result was a living, ensouled, but completely material cosmos, a "living, organic whole, with each single part grown together."



There are those whose conviction it is – perhaps romantically, but perhaps too as the only explanation which would avoid a radical hopelessness about the near future of the planet – that the break with Aristotle and his predecessors in the seventeenth century inaugurated the ontological reduction of nature to a thing, which among many other factors set the stage for the encroaching environmental disaster that promises to threaten the earth over the course of this century. Descartes typically receives the blame, but he is just one representative of a way of coming to understand nature in the figure of, according to Hans Jonas (1966), “an ontology whose model entity was pure matter, stripped of all features of life,” or a “mechanistic monism,” as opposed to the ancient and Aristotelian intuition that “mind is prefigured in the organic from the very beginning” (pp. 3, 8). The rejection of Aristotelian science in the seventeenth century removed the quality of soul – which implied *telos*, and therefore intentionality – from nature and broke the great chain of being which informed the notion of sentience at all levels of existence – which allowed human projection onto the ensemble of nature as a whole as a dynamic, participative, social unity. Descartes finalized the separation of soul from matter by rejecting Aristotle’s notion of three different species of soul – vegetative, sensitive, and rational – arguing that the first two, the power to grow and move, which man shares with the brutes, are generically different from mind, and “nothing else than certain dispositions of the parts of his body.” Soul was equated with “consciousness” and restricted to humans. Descartes even characterized animals as “machines” (Jonas, 1966, pp. 58-63).

The limits between the objective and the subjective, the living and the non-living, the minded and the non-minded, the sentient and the non-sentient are not, as Ernst Cassirer (1955, p. 31) pointed out, rigidly determined from the first, but are formed and developed through a combination of experience and the communication and internalization of a world view, i.e. an implicit ontological theory, which is rendered from a cultural to a perceptual style. The scientific theories of the seventeenth century became part of our perception of the world itself, more directly and non-verbally communicated to children through their observation of the way adults act in and upon the world than otherwise. But whatever unconscious or naïve theories of panmechanism might prevail in a culture, the genetic fact is, as John Macmurray (1961) pointed out, that the developing child arrives at the concept of a “material world” through a process of derivation and abstraction from the personal and social. “The material is in fact the non-personal; and as a negative conception it depends for its definition upon the positive which it negates. . . . The child arrives at it only by a reduction of the concept of the Other which excludes part of its definition . . . by a partial negation: only by downgrading the “you” in the “you and I” to the status of It” (p. 80).

Before the socialization of perception that the process of “subjection” – the social construction of a culturally and historically identifiable form of subjectivity – entails, the young child lives a form of experience in which the object and the inner experience exist as an indivisible unity. Objects are understood through motor and affective patterns related to action. Meaning and significance are inherent, fused in perception and its intentionality.

Perception itself, prior to any explicit mental acts, is naturally imbued with expressive meaning – things are perceived as gloomy or joyful, lively or tired, angry or friendly, etc. – that is to say, expression is an inherent characteristic of all perception. For all subjectivity, but for the modern subject in particular, psychological development is, in Scheler's (1954, p. 106) words, "a continuous process of disenchantment, in that only a proportion of sensory appearances retain their function as vehicles of expression, while others do not. Learning, in this sense, is not animation, but a continual de-animation."

Beginning with the new physics in the first half of the twentieth century, the paradigm shift that post-modern science brings has in fact acted, if not to reconstruct panpsychism, then to deconstruct panmechanism in preparation for something else. The undermining of the underlying subject-object schism which characterizes modernity has emerged both from quantum physics, which finds it impossible to separate the observer from the observed, and from evolutionary biology, which finds it impossible to separate the organism from its environment. Among twentieth century philosophers, the most radical exponents of a redrawing of the line between the animate and the inanimate were a paleontologist and a mathematician, both of them highly distinguished in their fields. For Teilhard de Chardin (1965) all matter, "living" or not, has a "within" as well as a "without" – a psychic as well as a physical aspect. All of nature may be thought of as conscious, but nature below the line of man has "interiority," whereas above that line nature possesses "subjectivity," the level for which we would ordinarily reserve the term "conscious." The telos of the whole cosmos is towards personality, and everything beneath the level of the person must be interpreted as on its way to the person, a notion which resonates enigmatically with Plato's characterization of the cosmos as "a blessed god . . . a living being, whole and complete, of complete parts." And Alfred North Whitehead (1961) put it more operatively: ". . . this sharp division between mentality and nature has no ground in our fundamental observation. We find ourselves living within nature . . . we should conceive mental operations as among the factors which make up the constitution of nature" (p. 203).

If, as tends to be the conviction among at least among ecopsychologists, impending ecocide can be avoided only by a reconstruction of our felt understanding of nature, we can only hope for a shift in world view in dialectical relation to the radical deanimation of nature that has been inscribed in modern perception itself. It might be claimed that this is possibility is psychologically equivalent to Heidegger's suggestion that "only a god can save us," but I have in fact just described another such radical historical shift. And if we understand subjectivity as to some extent a social construction, and perception itself as an interpretive stance towards the world, a "taking something as" – that is, as hermeneutical through and through – then it follows that subjectivity is to some extent also a historical construction, and has changed, and there is no reason to think that it won't change again, and keep changing. And what would be the role of childhood and childrearing in this process? Theodore Roczak (1995, p. 16) argued that our identification with the earth is the source of "the empathic rapport with the natural world which is reborn in every child and which survives in the



work of nature poets and landscape painters. Where this sense of shared identity is experienced as we most often experience it, person to person, we call it 'love'." If in fact it is reborn in every child, then is education and child rearing the god that will save us?

In search of that possibility, so remote in a historical epoch that specializes in the crushing of any creative impulse in public education, I wanted to raise the question among my seven-year old interlocutors—to feel out the structure or configuration of those spontaneous ontological convictions that Roczak claims they (and I) were born with. How fully had they already been socialized into the radical mind/nature split of modernism? Were they still willing to entertain other alternatives? Was a hint of the post-modern paradigm change emerging in them like an unconscious trace? And perhaps as a question yet to be asked—what role might the communal, dialogical clarification of and philosophical inquiry into our ontological convictions play in their construction or reconstruction in childhood? So at a moment in the third conversation with Palermo's class, when a discussion of conflict in the animal world was veering toward a hilarious sharing of stories about dogs in heat—I pushed ahead and put some of the questions in the second discussion plan: Is a card game a conflict? Rough housing? A traffic jam? A thunderstorm?

I was hoping to edge gradually into a discussion of the impersonal, the macro-organic and the inorganic—the larger system—and the role of conflict in its function. In our discussion of card games and rough housing it was suggested that anything which involves a winner and a loser is a form of conflict, even if it's "play." When we moved to traffic jams, Brian, reasoning syllogistically on his stated premise that all conflicts were things that could be stopped, suggested that a traffic jam was therefore not a conflict. A few personal anecdotes about parental road rage triggered another contretemps of scandalous humor—only minutes after the facilitator had cut off a growing feschrift of stories about randy dogs. Here was another conflict of intentionalities and, by implication, a tacit power struggle, now centered on another subversive issue—the foibles of one's most immediate authorities. The mood was palpable amusement, triggered by Davida's example—"Well I think a traffic jam is a conflict, because . . . (*smiling*) sometimes my Mom yells out the window and stuff when we get in a traffic jam, like she yells "Get going!" and stuff like that, because it's a green light and people are just sitting there. . . (*general laughter*).

David: So you say it's a conflict because people are feeling angry. Somebody want to comment on Davida's example? She says it's a conflict because it makes people upset . . . Let's wait until everybody's listening and paying attention to the next speaker. . . O.K. Elizabeth, what did you—

Elizabeth: Well I agree with Davida because once my Dad when he's like walking on the sidewalk and a car comes by that's going too fast he yells at the car, like "Slow down!"

The problem for the facilitator—the one with the "authoritative" agenda—is that Davida has ignored Brian's syllogism; but he is saved by Jeremiah, who returns to it by disagreeing with the premise on which it is

based. A discussion follows about the premise, which the facilitator pushes beyond for a second time, intent on the “ontological question.”

David: O.K. But I just wanted to say a traffic jam in and of itself—without people’s reactions to it or how it makes you feel. Could you call that a conflict?

Martina: Yes.

David: Could you say why? I mean apart from people yelling out the window and stuff.

Martina: Because it’s really annoying, because you want these people to go already! It’s like Davida said, it’s a green light and no one won’t go. It’s like, it’s a green light, go!

David: O.K., but that’s still people’s reaction. I’m just trying to talk about the thing in itself.

Stephen: I disagree with *you* because I think that any traffic jam is people’s reactions. Because what leads to a traffic jam is people’s *reactions*—like say there’s a traffic jam because people got into a car accident. It’s the people’s reactions that made them get into a car accident. Or say people are building something—the people are using their own reactions to build it—so there won’t be a traffic jam unless people used their reactions—then there wouldn’t be a traffic jam because what causes a traffic jam is caused by people’s reactions.

David: O.K.

Stephen: So you can’t say just “in itself.” Traffic jams are caused by people’s reactions.

David: O.K., let’s try another example to sort of test what . . . said because I’d like to say you’re looking at it from the sky, from a helicopter say, and you’re looking down at this traffic jam and you would say—not even thinking about all the people in those cars—you’d just be looking at all the cars stuck, and you wouldn’t say this is a conflict?

Stephen: But it’s a conflict.

David: But it’s caused by people—people being in conflict.

Stephen: Yeah, it’s not caused by the traffic jam itself, it’s caused by the people.

So the facilitator, determined to widen the definition and having failed once (due as much to the ambiguity of the example as anything else), moves to another example—thunderstorms. He calls on Penelope, because she has been (and usually is) silent in the group. She implicitly upholds Stephen’s definition of conflict as strictly a conscious, human phenomenon, and this agreement is reiterated through examples by Mariette, Wendy and Jodi.

David: O.K., I think I understand that, but let’s try another example now—Jodi and Mary, I’ll let you comment on this next example, (*they have their hands up*) but I want to call on somebody who hasn’t had a chance . . . is that . . . Penelope? Penelope? Do you want to comment on this next example?

Penelope: Yeah.

David: What about a huge thunderstorm. Would you call that a conflict?

Penelope: No.

David: Could you say why?

Penelope: Because no one’s fighting.



David: Because no one's fighting. Is that what you said?

Penelope: Yeah.

David: O.K. So Penelope says that a conflict involves people fighting? Mariette, you want to disagree?

Mariette: Yeah. It's a conflict because when it's a stormy night my Mom always says "I want this storm to go away," so it's a conflict because she hates storms.

David: O.K. Hold on a minute Stephen, let's . . . Jodi, you've had your hand up for about three days.

Jodi: I agree with Penelope because I think a thunderstorm is not a conflict . . . A thunderstorm . . . people don't have to have a conflict with a thunderstorm, like in my family they ignore the thunderstorms.

David: O.K., and Mariette is saying it's a conflict because it makes people upset. Wendy?

Wendy: I agree with Jodi and Penelope because well . . . It's not like you can stop it, and like conflict, you can stop that.

David: So we're back with Brian's point.

Wendy: Yeah, if you're in a traffic jam then the person can just go, you can stop the traffic jam, but like . . .

Stephen: I disagree with everybody that said about thunderstorms, because— it can half be . . . because the conflict—if you're just talking about the thunderstorm itself, like, like the thunder and the lightening—

David: right. That's what I'm talking about.

Stephen: Well the storm couldn't be the things that had a conflict, like plants or animals or people. But itself isn't a conflict, because I think conflict is made by the living things like—for example two computers who are plugged into the same thing, like they both have a virus and could like fight over electricity, but they can't have a conflict knowing it, like we have a conflict knowing it, and so like a thunderstorm isn't really a conflict, like the thunder and the lightening, how could they have conflict if they won't know you can't have a conflict—they're like just making sounds and making like things that you can see—like it's not a conflict—but they can lead to a conflict, but they're not conflict themselves.

David: Does somebody want to respond particularly to that, because if they don't I want to—I want to give a reason. Particularly to Stephen's point. He's being very clear. He's saying, you cannot call a non-human event a conflict.

Stephen: Or non-living things, because like animals aren't human.

David: O.K. A non-living thing event.

Stephen: Because like plants aren't human, but . . .

David: But plants have conflicts?

Stephen: Yeah, they can like, some plants like, like tangle up each other to try to get more sunlight and some trees do that to other trees, they spread their roots and tangle around the other tree.

David: Alright, we've got to finish up because we're already late here, but this is kind of winding down now, but can somebody speak to Stephen's point—Abdul, can you speak directly to Stephen's point?

Abdul: I agree with him too because I *do* have a conflict with the computer, because sometimes, like (*inaudible*) I get a conflict because . . . (*inaudible description of conflict in a video game*) sometimes they just knock the ball down.

Stephen: But how does that agree or disagree?

David: Abdul, can you respond? Do you hear what he's saying?

Abdul: Well I actually agree with you because you say you can't have a conflict with another computer. Did you say that?

David: He said two computers could have a conflict.

Stephen: And you're not a computer. I never said a person and a computer could have a conflict.

Abdul: Well you're doing it with the computer, aren't' you?

Stephen: But that's not having a conflict with the computer, that's like having a conflict with your mind.

Jodi: You can have a conflict with yourself and a computer.

Stephen: O.K., but the computer doesn't know—it's not saying "I'm gonna do this and do this, it just . . . (*inaudible*). . . to play. (*eruption of voices*)

David: O.K. wait, hold on guys. . . there are two things . . . We've got to close down now and this is probably selfish of me, but I want to just offer the possibility—like I don't disagree with Stephen, but I'm not sure that he's taking everything into account, because I want to say—and I can't do this right but I want to say that a thunderstorm involves a conflict of elements, like hot air and cold air rushing towards each other [*gestures with hands*—I don't know enough about weather to be able to describe this, so this is my belief, that maybe we could say that the elements themselves—the hot, the cold, the wet, the dry, the high, the low, the dense and the . . . are somehow (*brings hands together*). . . in conflict.

Abdul: Well I know a toy that can have a conflict.

Stephen: A toy?

Abdul: Yeah!

Stephen: They don't have conflicts!

David: Well we'll go on with this next time. (*Many voices*). CUT TAPE.

The facilitator, pressed by a unified set of well-articulated distinctions and run clear out of time, was, in this last assay, unconsciously trying to paraphrase Whitehead:

We find ourselves living within nature . . . we should conceive mental operations as among the factors which make up the constitution of nature. . . there is no such thing as an isolated event. Each event essentially signifies the whole structure . . . the event is essentially a "field," in the sense that without related objects there can be no event. . . the togetherness of things involves some doctrine of mutual immanence. In some sense or other, the community of the actualities of the world means that each happening is a factor in the nature of every other happening." (p. 183)

But it seemed clear that the exclusions and hierarchies against which Whitehead argued were well in place. Stephen appeared to be speaking for the whole group with his progressively refined formulation, which arrived at these final conclusions:



- Conflict can only be between things which are aware they are having conflict, that is, “knowing it,” i.e between self-conscious beings; therefore
- Conflict can only be between living things, “like plants or animals or people.”

Other phenomena, like traffic jams and thunderstorms, can lead to conflict in or among humans, but are not themselves examples of conflict. Of course Stephen’s second point contradicts his first, *unless* he attributes consciousness—i.e. “knowing it”—to plants, a question we did not have time to explore, or rather, which the facilitator preempted in order to have the last word with his Whiteheadian proposal. This is unfortunate, and a mistake on my part, for it could very well be just here, in the world of plants, in which the ambiguity is encountered which would make the deconstruction of “the sharp division between mentality and nature” thinkable. As it was, Stephen was simply moving dialectically—first positing awareness as a necessary condition, then running into an example which contradicted that. And it is enough for taking a reading at least on the “scientific”—or should I say *socialized*—notion of the mindedness or not of nature. Clearly, it seemed, for these the seven-year olds anything but Piaget’s “stage four” on his animism scale—i.e. the Western ontological reduction—was unthinkable, and one might surmise, had been for a few years. This only points up the extent to which Piaget’s “science” confuses epistemic ideology with genetic epistemology. Can we say this of any scientific big picture, to the extent to which, like any narrative, it depends for its identity on what it must exclude?

River’s class was not so sure. Perhaps it was the way I put it. I was both more careful and more direct, coming as I did from my experience with Palermo’s class. I asked Christopher quite purposefully—Christopher who gave the appearance, to adults at least, of being the most mature and thoughtful person in the class—above all someone who was comfortable enough with himself and his perception of his place in the world of this classroom that he seldom threatened or was threatened by others, and when the little showers of conflict which periodically burst out in the group occurred, more often became thoughtful and slightly withdrawn than defensive or hostile. There was always the sense about him that he was listening carefully and even profoundly, his head turned slightly away, always reflecting. Nor was he ever derisive. Christopher already had a kind of natural *gravitas* about him which gave the impression that he was older than the others, although he was not.

David: O.K. You ready? Christopher, I want to ask you this first question. I’ve got some examples and what I’m interested in is whether we can call them examples of conflict . . . (*random talking. Facilitator keeps pausing to wait*) Christopher, do you think a nasty violent . . . (*interruption, facilitator pauses then resumes*) . . . a big nasty violent thunderstorm . . . the question is whether you can call a thunderstorm an example of conflict.

Christopher: Sometimes I think like if there’s a thunderstorm, um . . . um, the way lightning and thunder happens is two clouds push together. I think sometimes when two clouds push together it’s sort of like they’re fighting against each other—lightning and thunder. . . .

David: You say yes?

Christopher: Yeah.

David: You said "sort of like."

Christopher: Um, sometimes I think it and then other times it's just like two clouds crashing together.

David: And what's the difference between when you think that it's fighting and when you think that it's just crashing together? How would you describe that difference?

Christopher: Um, well um . . . The reason I think it's fighting is because . . . I mean it's . . . Um . . . When they crash together it's really loud and . . . And if there isn't any thunder I think that they aren't fighting, they're just playing.

David: O.K., so—Samuel, you have a procedural question?

Samuel: Yeah, but how could clouds be fighting?

David: Samuel?

Peter: You're not on the list!

David: Why did you put your name first on the list?

Samuel: No, next is Jasmine.

David: O.K., so Jasmine will respond to Christopher in some way . . . Respond to Christopher's saying that *sometimes* he thinks it's a conflict.

Jasmine: I disagree with Christopher. Because sometimes when it's raining or thundering . . . I don't think they're fighting I just think they're making a noise. . . but (*inaudible*)

David: Sometimes you imagine that's like somebody up there (*puts arms out wide*). It's kind of like the same thing that Christopher said.

In fact Jasmine is agreeing with Christopher, but emphasizing one side of the ambiguity he has stated—that the perception of them fighting is purely imaginary. Christopher has been very careful to frame his response such that the animate side is stated as "sometimes I think," and "it's sort of like" . . . He even reflects on his own perception, indicating that it is ambivalent: "sometimes I think it and then other times it's just like two clouds crashing together." We might describe him as consciously entertaining two views of the world, two ways of looking at it, knuckling under to the privileged version, but in a sort of continual meditation on his own perceptions, which can contradict it. And like Heraclitus, his notion of the "strife" of nature is only one nuance or difference away from the *play* of nature.

Christopher's maturity is indexed by his very capacity to hold two views simultaneously. For the others, like the clever, savvy, charming and privileged Stephen in the other class (who cites a conflict between a violin lesson and a Twai Kwon Do lesson), the socialized world view, the new one, the authoritative adult one, the one in which he has been subtly instructed from a babe-in-arms, is a more passionate conviction only because it is newer and perhaps less secure, or because it already seems absolutely plain and obvious to him that it is the most reasonable view, and he really doesn't see how any other could possibly be the case. Perhaps he even considers all animistic views childish.

Samuel: Well I want to respond to Christopher.

David: But you have a special duty now, Samuel.



Samuel: I know but I put myself on the list because I need to respond to Christopher.

David: You can put yourself on the list.

Samuel: But I want to know if clouds are moving, by the wind, how they could be playing too?

David: Did Christopher use the word?

Samuel: Yeah, I mean—

Christopher: Maybe they're like working together or something, because they want to make rain or something? And then, um, when it's like, when there's fighting or something I think they're fighting, 'cause there's all these big flashes and noises, and that's sort of what it feels like.

David: O.K.

Samuel: But clouds can't just work together because they aren't real, like . . . How could they talk?

Christopher: I'm not saying they talk, I'm saying . . .

Samuel: Do they have some kind bump language so they could say, "Hey let's work together" and like . . . how could they do that?

David: We still have this problem of how many responses you get in an exchange, so Christopher, why don't you answer and then we'll go on.

Christopher: Well I'm not saying they talk or anything, I'm just saying like, if they bump together I don't think they purposely bump together, but when they do . . . sometimes . . . It's like sometimes when someone bumps into someone else they say "Hey, watch it," and then they start getting into a fight . . . but then if someone bumps into someone else and he says, uh, if there's this kid that doesn't have any friends and he bumps into someone and he says hey, can you be my friend, and then the other person says, yeah, and then it's sort of like working together to be friends.

David: So you're saying something about purpose. Like are you saying all conflicts . . . like it's not a conflict unless there's a purpose in it?

Christopher: Yeah.

David: So when the clouds bump together they're not doing it on purpose.

Christopher: Yeah.

David: And therefore it's not a conflict.

Samuel: Pablo's next.

Pablo: Well um, clouds aren't alive, they don't have brains, they don't have eyes, they don't have any system that could make them move except for air and all the air could make them move, that's the only way. They don't have arms or anything. So they can't like shake hands or anything. And like . . . they don't have a brain so they can't become friends.

David: So they can't be—

Pablo: . . . become friends because they don't have a brain, they don't know anything.

David: They don't know anything and therefore we can't even use the word conflict?

Pablo: For clouds.

David: You cannot.

Pablo: No. Except for when a cloud shoots thunder at another—and the cloud that got shot with thunder couldn't be . . . uh O.K., wouldn't shoot the

other one with thunder because it's not alive, it's just shooting thunder on any place where it's not looking . . . it's like a beam . . . It's like these (*inaudible*) were in a spaceship and they were asleep and they put the beam signal on and it kept shooting beams everywhere.

David: It's not alive. It's mechanical you're saying.

Pablo: Yeah.

David: You're saying that nature is mechanical.

Pablo: Yeah.

David: Except the things that are alive. I'm not sure I agree with that, but let's go on.

Samuel: Next is Abraham.

Abraham: Well I actually sort of agree (*with Christopher*), because it is sort of like that. It is sort of like that because, um, when it's thundering it's sort of like when it makes thunder it's sort of going toward the other cloud (*makes hand motions*) and then the other one makes it go toward the other cloud. So it's sort of like they're – crossing, like they're trying to hit the other one.

David: So you're saying there is purpose . . . Or you're saying it's *sort* of like there's purpose, is that right?

Abraham: Uh huh, because it kind of looks like it's trying to hit the other cloud.

David: O.K. "trying." You mean purpose. So you're kind of agreeing with Christopher in a sense that there might be . . . Just like Christopher you always said "sort of like," which means maybe you're not sure whether you can call it real or not? Christopher used the same term – he said "sort of like," which means you're not saying it's *exactly* like, you're saying . . . ?

Abraham: Well we're not really sure, because . . . like two people can be friends, so I'm like thinking that's sort of like what happens with clouds . . . When they make rain they're working together. And then also two people could be bullies to each other. And when they make thunder that's when two friends get mad . . . (*short pause*) . . .

Samuel: After Abraham comes . . . (small disagreement about who's next, then . . . *inaudible*) . . . O.K. Then Talbot.

Talbot: I don't agree . . . (*inaudible*) Say there's a cloud in front of a cloud. They don't hit . . . They don't bump into each other. One cloud goes *through* another. (*Again a small disagreement about who's next, and then back to Talbot, who repeats statement about clouds going through each other*)

Abraham: Well how could two things go through each other?

In this section, Christopher has been prompted by a direct question from the facilitator to meditate on the ambiguity of his own perceptions. He's trying to skirt the problem of purpose or teleology – which was in fact the great bone of contention between ancient/Aristotelian and modern science – so he says "I don't think they purposely bump together, but when they do . . . sometimes . . ." and goes on to suggest that it could either be a hostile or a friendly encounter. He uses the analogy of kids bumping into each other and ending up "working together," i.e. being involved in a common project.

Christopher's musings are polarized by Samuel and Pablo, both of them fast-drawers on this issue, who immediately confront him with the ontology of mechanism. Pablo even evokes a striking image of how Western culture



sees nature: the thunderstorm might look like it has purpose, like it is interactive, like it is analogous to our social relationships, but in fact it is a mechanism equivalent to the technological mechanisms which humans create, like our spaceships with laser cannons which are remotely and/or homeostatically controlled. This bears an interesting analogical resemblance to the notion of nature as a mechanism created by God. For the modern Cartesian subject, God and the human soul—in fact not even the soul, but just the “*cogito*,” the “I think” or “I am aware that I think”—are the only subjective elements in the whole universe. The rest is inert but—once the secret of its structure is understood—infinately programmable mechanical matter.

Pablo says that things that are alive (first he uses the word “real”) have to have brains (precondition for the *cogito*), which implies they have to have bodies that the brains can use instrumentally. He is tempted for a moment by the call of the old friendly (and sometimes scary) magical universe when he says “Except for when a cloud shoots thunder at another—and the cloud that got shot with thunder couldn’t be . . .” but quickly recovers his epistemological equilibrium: “O.K., wouldn’t shoot the other one with thunder because it’s not alive, it’s just shooting thunder on any place where it’s not looking . . . it’s like a beam . . . It’s like these (*inaudible*) were in a spaceship and they were asleep and they put the beam signal on and it kept shooting beams everywhere . . .”

Then Abraham, the only child among the fifty involved in these conversations who was clearly scandalized by the U.S. invasion of Iraq—the rest completely accepted and parroted the mainstream media spin—almost playfully, almost it seemed for the sake of argument, came to the defense of Christopher, who was now under attack from two of the three powerful males in the group. By this I mean powerful in the classic manner of the powerful male—in the way of being self-assured to the point where the forceful spontaneity and the implicit amorality that very self-assurance implied could dominate. Like Christopher, Abraham clearly marked his arguments as both tentative and metaphorical, using the phrase “sort of like” four times in one intervention. He seemed to be trying to tease out an animated, sociable universe by using the phrase “going toward” and using his arms forcefully to illustrate the confrontation of the two clouds—as if the going toward implies purpose—and extending Christopher’s trope of “friends” working together or getting mad at each other, or bullying each other.

Talbot speaks next, and in fact for the first and last time in the four conversations. He had made several false starts in previous sessions—raising his hand, then when called upon shaking his head as if he’d forgotten, or lost confidence. He hadn’t even done that so far in this session. After the first two sessions, he took to sitting on a chair just outside the circle. Talbot was serious, both friendly and compliant and withdrawn, as if involuntarily repudiating something he didn’t quite understand but found interesting in these conversations, in which he felt compelled to at least half participate, as much because it was part of what he had to do as a member of this community as because he felt called by it as an activity. Here he suddenly

erupted, and argued passionately, even aggressively, for five straight minutes. And he landed in the question, not in the area of its general ontological and epistemological warrants—in questions, that is, of the animate or the inanimate nature of the cosmos, of whether non-persons could experience anything even approaching what we call conflict—but seized on a detail—on the “fact” whether clouds could in fact “bump into” each other, given their composition, which he insisted had to mean that they simply passed through each other.

He set off a firestorm of argument, which he helped to fuel and maintain with his own passionate declarations, but he had changed the argument, or at least introduced a subsection of it from which we might have returned to the question of purpose, intentionality, sociability in nature. If he was aware that the loop in the argument which he was introducing had implications for these more general questions, he did not show it, but simply stuck doggedly to the level of discourse of a purely scientific question—that is, for him it was just about the facts of the matter of the physical attributes of clouds. I would suggest that, in terms of the system of the larger conversation, this loop was in fact completely logical and promised to be helpful. If his factual point was proven and acknowledged, then the discussion about the sociable relation between the two clouds would have to be undertaken in different terms. How could entities which passed *through* each other be interpreted in any way as friends or not friends, as working together, in conflict, etc.? Did Talbot do this because he had so internalized the mechanical account of nature that he didn’t even notice the issue under discussion—that is, whether it could be interpreted as anything other than mechanical? Whatever motivated him to take up the argument in this particular dimension, the discussion which followed—an argument about empirical facts—was vociferous, and punctuated by Abraham working his way several times into the middle of the circle on his knees, waving his arms in a dramatic representation of clouds, approaching Christopher and Peter as if he was a cloud, in supposed demonstration that, just as he could not pass through Christopher, so clouds could not pass through each other.

Talbot: Like an airplane could go through a cloud . . . a rocket ship could go through a cloud. So almost anything could go through a cloud.

Christopher: Anything except another cloud.

Talbot: (*Voice rising*) A cloud can go through a cloud. (*three boys, voices raised, arguing about cloud/cloud, including the statement that “clouds have a lot of rain”*)

Abraham: Like two people couldn’t go through each other. (*he has moved into the middle of the circle and towards Christopher*) Look, if I try to go through Christopher (*he demonstrates by touching him lightly with his shoulder*) I’d just bump into him. Wouldn’t that be the same as a cloud?

(*continued heated argument: “They’re air!,” “They’re not air!” “They’re just gas!”*)

Samuel: Who’s next? I’m getting confused.

David: Let’s go back to our name recorder.

Peter: Abraham! One thing: clouds don’t move. (*Abraham is still moving around the circle on his knees, moving toward and facing everyone he’s speaking to*)

Talbot: Yeah they do move Peter!



Peter: No they don't!

Talbot: Yes they do!

David: (*Over altercation*) Let's um . . . Let's go back to our name recorder. Abraham, (*who is still moving around the middle of the circle on his knees*) could you sit in one place?

Peter: Abraham, how come you're walking across the room? (*More commotion. Abraham walks on his knees back to his place*)

Samuel: O.K., Christopher's next.

Abraham: But I want to respond to Talbot's question.

David: O.K., but wait until we're settled, because that was just an outbreak of people just talking out, which is not the game we're playing. So wait until everybody's focused.

Samuel: O.K. next is Christopher.

Christopher: Well I want to respond to Talbot. If two clouds can't bump into each other, what makes rain?

Talbot: Clouds just make rain. (*Samuel's hand shoots up, then he realizes he's name recorder and puts it down*)

Samuel: Well, I'm next anyway.

David: Abraham, are you next?

Abraham: No.

David: O.K. then let me make a suggestion. Let me try to identify . . . This is what's called an empirical question—in other words we think—

Samuel: (*To someone*) Want to be next? (*Two boys are up from circle, going to sharpen a pencil or get paper*)

David: This is called an empirical question, meaning that we could go someplace and find out. So our problem here is that nobody has exactly enough information, but if there were somebody here who was a specialist in weather they would have the information and they would just be able to tell us. (*Now three boys are up to get new pencils and do other chores, then sitting down again*) And we might question one or another thing. So we're arguing about something we don't have enough information about to know . . . So the next step from here would be to go to the encyclopedia. Or we could go to the internet.

Abraham: What I want to say is that if clouds could make rain any time they want to it could rain any second now. But they're not.

Talbot: They can't—like they can't make it rain whenever they want to.

Jasmine: God's making it rain.

Abraham: No!

Talbot: Yeah, God's making it rain.

Abraham: No! . . . (*inaudible*) . . . so why isn't He coming to me right now?

Jasmine: God's in power over the whole world, don't you know that?

Abraham: No! What if I don't believe in God?

Pablo: Except for Jesus!

Talbot: I believe in God. (*Several other affirmations of belief called out*)

Abraham: Well anyway you said that clouds could rain whenever they want . . . that clouds could go through the rain whenever they want. Then it'd be raining right now.

Talbot: Well, what if they don't want it to rain?

Samuel: Talbot, it's not your turn. (*more altercation – about whose turn it is, about whether God is connected to the rain – and Abraham moves on his knees into the circle again*)

David: Abraham, stay in . . . (*he crawls back to his place*)

Samuel: It's Christopher's turn! (*more altercation, multiple voices*) Christopher!

Peter: Christopher should talk! (*More altercation*)

Christopher: It's my turn!

(*short silence*)

Christopher: Well, if clouds just rained whenever they wanted to, they would just ruin Spring. I mean they would like ruin Spring but like if it rained for a week or something. If it rained like for a week it would just flood the whole world or something. I mean if . . . the . . . if it went on and on, you wouldn't be able to . . . like the whole house would be flooded, but then what you're saying, "God is making it rain," so, if, but –then you were saying, clouds – how do clouds make rain? Even if there was no God, clouds would just . . .

Talbot: It wouldn't rain. It wouldn't rain at all then.

Abraham: What if God is just a crazy myth?

Pablo: What would be making people, who would be making –

Christopher: (*still addressing Talbot*) What are you talking about! If it wasn't wet we wouldn't be here. (*argument, loud, between two pairs, inaudible . . . widens into three conversations, with passionate gesturing, about existence of God, and how we could be here if He hadn't made us*)

Samuel: . . . it made the Milky Way.

Peter: In milk.

Samuel: Well not, um (*starts as if to explain, then looks down at his list again and trails off*) .We're talking about God. Well actually we're talking about rain . . . and –

Christopher: I'm still going.

Abraham: Actually we're talking about clouds now. (*some smiles now, as if the group is seeing the humor of the whole conversation*)

Samuel: I know, but . . . And now it's Christopher's turn. (*side conversations about what the group is talking about*)

David: Yeah, we got into God. But the name recorders. I mean you guys are responsible for the –

Samuel: I know. Jasmine.

Christopher: But I'm still going!

Abraham: But anyway we're supposed to be talking about conflict, not clouds. This isn't about clouds. We're talking about clouds, not conflict. (*Abraham, Talbot, Jasmine, Pablo, Peter, Samuel all talking over each other*)

David: Well my original question was trying to put them together. I said, is a thunderstorm a conflict? That's what I said. But let's let Christopher go on and try to put it together and then we'll go on to the next person on the list.

Christopher: Well um . . . I'm gonna respond to Talbot again. If clouds didn't bump into each other, why do they always just collide, and . . . once it's raining, yeah. I always look up in the sky and I just see these clouds together – it's just like that.

Talbot: Yeah, but clouds can stay on top of each other and like stay –



Jasmine: I've seen a lot of clouds on top of each other and they don't make rain.

Christopher: Sometimes they don't, sometimes they do. (*More voices speaking out*)

Jasmine: You're saying every time they bump, right, they make rain?

Christopher: I said *sometimes!*

David: Guys, we need to finish up because we're going downstairs in one minute, but I think we should follow this list to the end . . . and whoever is next on the list . . .

Samuel: We have, like, six more people.

David: Six more people. Yeah, so you guys can go on after we leave.

Pablo: Um, until we get more people on?

David: Well, until you're finished with six people or until you've come to some other conclusion . . . But I just want to say very quickly – this is sort of a time out thing – I want to say very quickly that this is the last day that we're videotaping . . . (*explaining that the four sessions are over, Spring Break is coming, and that we'll watch the video together after break*).

Samuel: Well, I'm next, and this is a remark for everyone, it's about making rain and it doesn't happen like two clouds get together, it's when water evaporates and when the cloud gets too heavy it just has to let the rain go.

Pablo: That's what I was going to say!

Samuel: Yes, well, too bad! (*smiles, and Pablo smiles also*). CUT TAPE.

What mad causality informed the sequencing of the last five minutes of this last session? The argument transitioned from the physical properties of clouds, to the causes of rain, to the existence of God. At the mention of one word – “God” – a set of empirical claims and assumptions about the properties of matter veered immediately into vociferous theodicy and counter-theodicy, and the religious wars – which underlie the culture wars, which underlie the political wars in the twentieth century Empire “homeland” – flared with startling suddenness into view. The turn to the Great Dispute threatened to physically scatter and disband the group. When it was at its height, three people had suddenly risen from their places and were on their way to fetch paper, sharpen pencils, go to the bathroom, etc., as if driven by a wind that had entered the circle and was blowing people around like leaves.

Near the end, the group itself saw the comic element in the situation, and self-regulated. Samuel, who had so deftly juggled his duties as name recorder with his quick-witted leadership in the discussion, had, with characteristic aplomb, the last word. In fact he delivered the accepted empirical explanation of why it rains, only slightly altering it by confusing evaporation with condensation – for this discursive arena an inconsequential detail – and smiled appreciatively at Pablo's slightly comically exaggerated protest. We might see this as a play or metalogue, a representation of conflict – of the conflict not only of ideas, but of personalities, persons on their fundamental level of individuals who find themselves drifting about in the world having to make do somehow – of “clouds” in the form of Abraham and Pablo and Talbot, Abraham himself pretending he is a “cloud” moving around the room and bumping into Peter – the obstreperous, daring, driven boys of power

bumping into each other as Christopher, their interpreter says, “fighting,” “playing,” “working together,” in those often ambiguous situations like the social context of their classroom, where they do not “purposely bump together, but when they do . . . sometimes . . . It’s like sometimes when someone bumps into someone else they say “Hey, watch it,” and then they start getting into a fight . . . but then if someone bumps into someone else and he says, uh, if there’s this kid that doesn’t have any friends and he bumps into someone and he says hey, can you be my friend, and then the other person says, yeah, and then it’s sort of like working together to be friends.” Abraham, inspired by this metaphorical account of life together in school, is triggered to dance and drama, in this magic, slightly dangerous, but also worklike psycho-circle. What more fitting culmination could there be to the series of conversations, especially given the subtle evaluation, perhaps representable only on a metaphorical level like this one, of conflict as something which is not really meant by anyone but always happens or can happen, and its odd proximity to being friends and working together too?

And what of the metaphysical convictions which were revealed in the exchange? I understand it as representing a shatter zone of various persuasions. The accepted view of nature as mechanism, of the biological “alive” as being the only alive there is, was clearly already firmly in place. Then there was the “kind of like,” the “as if,” the perceptual phenomenon which one had learned to doubt, and which had become, not just a metaphor but a fantasy, a mawkish trope coopted and adulterated by Disney and all his collaborators.

Piagetians and other Comteans would consider these “kind of likes” to be phylogenetic residues of outmoded stages, artifacts of the “mythological” world view of previous stages of cultural development. But for the countertradition which began with Romanticism in the early nineteenth century and which resists the Enlightenment deanimation of the cosmos as a hegemonic ideology, a form of worldview domination, it evokes another subject-object relationship. The latter is now confined among the great majority of Western adults to aesthetic experience; art has replaced religion. But for the Romantic countertradition, Piaget’s famous attribution of “egocentrism” to young children can be seen at least partially, rather than as a confusion of self and world, as the mark of a subject which dwells within the intentional field as a whole, in which self and non-self are like obverse and reverse, rather than a polarity.

And confounding it all was the question of God. The majority of them—with Abraham clearly excepted—seemed not yet to have thrown out the creator of the universe, yet the universe was purely mechanical, so in that sense they were Deists. But it was a deism conflated with the particularly unsavory Calvinist-American brand of patriarchal, triumphalist fundamentalism, in the sense that the God being invoked was the human’s authoritarian father God, the one outside nature (like those who invoked him), the one in whose image they were, but nothing else was. Only God-created humans—beings made in God’s (human, all-too-human) image—can talk, can think, can communicate, can work together—can be in conflict. Could it be this naïve, anthropomorphic pseudo-concept, a belief, apparently,



completely derived from direct socialization by adult authorities (which Abraham's atheism was as well), which allows for the perdurance—even a century after the demise of the Newtonian clockwork cosmos and the rise of the post-modern universe of quantum physics—of panmechanism, and the corresponding insouciance about preserving or at least not further degrading the non-human environment?

Of course the origins and perdurance of panmechanism and mindless environmental destruction and degradation can be searched out in more than one causal dimension. It is also the case, for example, that we live in a world in which what might be perceived as the dynamic power of the universe is felt in its translation into technology: it is the particular feeling of magic which comes from whisking effortlessly around town and over the new concrete skin of the earth in late-model SUV's with talking navigational devices and eight speaker cd systems, with real people talking to you through screens in your livingroom, from communicating on picture-phones from anywhere, or sitting at you late-model computer and causing things to arrive magically at your door. It is also a product, in other words, of the very technology to which, as an expression of an instrumental and manipulative attitude toward the material world, it made possible. Certainly it is not a world view which can be "corrected" or even changed in any way by classroom discussions led by aging visiting philosophical anarchists with Romantic ontological and epistemological convictions. But one starts where one can.

What Can We Learn from Conflict?

Palermo's last class ended much more smoothly. Indeed, the facilitator fell into the pattern of "happy endings" by asking an appropriately "end of the course" question—"What can you learn from conflict?"—which was fielded with characteristic both obedience and creativity by the class. Given the classroom teacher's benign reign of terror, any possibility of the half playful, half-serious staging of conflict with which River's class ended, or of the use of the name recorder device to put the construction of group order at least partially into the hands of the children, was so distant as to be unthinkable. The wild social dynamics of River's class, which she so long-sufferingly both tolerated and implicitly fomented through her very respect for the child's life and mind and developmental possibilities, was here crushed every time it appeared in anything but its most positive, adult-friendly form, but also sometimes sublimated into Palermo's wild male playfulness. He was more like a child than River, who was a mother; when he felt safe, he played with the children, whom he clearly enjoyed in a rough paternal sort of way, with his flashing smile and ebullient energy and fine physicality, and they loved (some of them, sometimes) to be close to him. But it was all, at all times, within the boundaries which he approved and monitored. Outside of his version of group self-control there was no control at all. Of course this both drove them to subvert (outright rebellion would have meant instant death), which increased his pressure—augmented by his grotesquely disagreeable, "bad cop" aide—which inevitably led to their capitulation to the sheer vociferousness of their combined drill-sergeant tactics.

Palermo: Let's go! . . . Take a deep breath before we start . . . Amanda put the water away . . . Shhh!! Nothing in your lap. . . hold on to . . . Brains open! . . . Excuse me! This is class time . . . Put your hands in your lap! Elizabeth! Fold your legs. Take a deep breath through your nose, out through your mouth . . . [thirty seconds of relative silence, as all breathe, facilitator included] Mary, I'd like you to go next to Mariette . . . Excuse me!? Before we start: Do you have her care bear?! . . . Thank you! It's over! (*referring to a care bear conflict, which the facilitator had not noticed*) O.K.! . . .

After a pause appropriate to our new-poised readiness to begin, I asked whether a bad dream could be called a conflict, and was immediately and in sequence offered a series of ambiguities, generated through spontaneous cognitive play with rapidly proliferating sets of binaries. Salvador started by saying "you might have a conflict in your own dream" – implying, or at least so the facilitator thought, that one could not therefore call the dream itself an example of conflict. Jodi then argued that anything bad involves or is a conflict, and that therefore a bad dream is by definition a conflict. Confronted with the facilitator's challenge to identify something bad which doesn't involve conflict, Joan offered an example of a movie – which is close to a dream – in which "there's this monster and another monster . . . and they're *bad*. And sometimes the monsters have a tea party together. They're still bad, and they're not having a conflict." Wendy, returning to the subject of dreams, offered another hypothetical:

Wendy: Uh, well like if you're in a dream but like there was somebody and the monster was chasing the person but not you, and like it wouldn't be a conflict with *you*, but with the other person.

Then Samantha, another example:

Samantha: Uh, well, say you're watching T.V. and . . . well I'm agreeing with Joan, because well *two*, 'cause sometimes will be on a show that . . . people like on a cartoon are bad, and they both get along, and they're both bad.

David: Wow! Two people agreeing to do a bad thing.

Samantha: Yeah, um, together, and um . . . and um (*head in hands, forgetting*).

David: You're saying it would not be a conflict.

Samantha: Yeah, because they're doing a bad thing together and it won't be a conflict and they're getting along.

Stephen: O.K., but it doesn't have to be two bad people doing something good, it could be two good people doing something bad. So it's not like all bad things can be conflict, it's like all good things can be too!

Stephen reversed the terms of the hypothetical, to show that either can satisfy the conditions of the negation of the negation. Veronica and Samantha and Martina, building on Wendy and then each other, then invented/discovered a few more steps in the binary dance:

Veronica: I want to agree with Wendy, because you're right – if you're watching something bad

David: Watching something bad.

Veronica: You don't have a conflict.

David: You don't have a conflict.

Veronica: Because the people that you're *watching* have a conflict, but *you* don't have a conflict.



David: Yeah, but what about the people who are involved in what you're watching?

Veronica: They may not *think* they're having a conflict.

David: Oh! You can have a conflict without thinking that you are having a conflict? (*voices: "Easy" . . . "Yeah"*). O.K., this is a new idea. Martina?

Martina: Well I kind of agree with Joan, because two bad monsters can have a friendly tea party, but they're bad. They get along because the other person is bad.

Samantha: Yeah, and they're happy when they're bad, because –

Martina: Yeah, and so they could be happy that they're bad and they could sometimes be good. So –

Samantha: Yeah, they could, and I agree with Martina and Joan, because well sometimes it could be a conflict because say if the monster was bad before on T.V., and then the other monster turned good and the other monster was bad, then they would start having a conflict because the other one was good, and bad people don't really like good people.

David: So, good-good no conflict and bad-bad no conflict, but only conflict between good and bad.

At this point the facilitator, overwhelmed with trying to follow a passage of binary play in which the four possibilities of a statement and its negation were being a bit too rapidly adumbrated for his comfort – jumped to his next and final question, the question which, he thought, might bring some at least apparent closure to a conversation which, he could not help but think, had only just begun.

David: . . . what can we learn from conflict?

Hope: You can learn from conflict that . . . Like I'm fighting with Wendy (*Wendy is sitting next to her*) and I learned, I knew that, like if you have a conflict, you might lose, and you don't really want to lose, so you don't want to do conflict. So from conflict you learn that you don't want to do conflict.

David: Did everybody agree with that? . . . [*some commotion*] Martina?

Martina: Well I disagree with Hope because –

David: But if you would . . . Veronica, stay with us (*Veronica is talking animatedly with the person next to her*) . . . If you would, before you say how you disagree with her, would you restate what she said?

Martina: Um, O.K. Um (*pauses, thinking*)

David: Just to help you out, because I know that – could somebody restate Hope's –

Martina: But, but! –

David: I'm looking for a restatement. Jeremiah, what was Hope's point?

Jeremiah: Hope's point was that you could learn from conflict that you don't want any more conflict.

David: Right.

Martina: Well I disagree with that because it depends what you mean when you say "from." You can learn how to do . . . from your mistakes – that you messed up on, so you can learn how to do it better than you did it before.

Wendy: Yeah but you don't want to fight anyway.

Martina: That's not what I'm saying.

David: Yeah, I think she's going to a different sort of example from a fight.

Martina: Yeah, because if you try something new you sometimes make mistakes. Like when you first start swimming, like you can sink—you don't really start swimming yet, you have to learn—so you don't always get it right, then when you've just learned how to do it. So that's like, it's not really like a conflict, but—

Samantha: Yeah, it's like a conflict with your own self.

David: An internal conflict.

Samantha: You *could* have conflict. (*Meaning not necessarily*)

David: Stephanie, you want to comment on that? Then Davida I'll get to you.

Stephanie: I agree with Martina—well I sort of agree and I sort of don't, because I taught myself how to swim.

David: Hmm. So were there mistakes involved in your own self-teaching, Stephanie?

Stephanie: Um, well when I was first trying, I was doing . . . (inaudible) . . . And then I could swim!

David: And then suddenly you could swim. So you don't remember any conflict in learning how to swim? (*she shakes her head*) No? O.K.? O.K. let's get Davida first and then Samantha.

Davida: O.K., I sort of agree with Stephanie and Martina. Say I had a bet with Stephanie and Martina. And then if Martina won the fight—

Martina: The bet.

Davida: Yeah, the bet, and . . . then I could learn a lesson from that, saying I can't always win.

David: Oh, so that's another kind of lesson, related to Hope's but different. So one thing you can learn from conflict is that you can't always win—you can't always have your way. Like turn out the way you want it to turn out. Samantha?

Samantha: Well I agree with Stephanie because well, before I did swimming like entering the pool to swim instead of doing the class where you learn how to swim, um the first time and I went there with my teacher, whose name was . . . and then I learned how to swim and then when I learned how to swim I turned out to be a really good swimmer and when I first was in my class . . . well I turned out to be a really good swimmer, and I could go on the diving board and over there kind of it was—I think it was six feet of water, and I could swim in that.

David: Was there conflict involved in your learning how to swim, Samantha?

Samantha: Yeah.

David: There was conflict.

Samantha: No, there—

David: No conflict at all, the swimming—

Samantha: I'm just agreeing with Stephanie.

David: You had the same experience as Stephanie. So let's—we've had two—Hope and Davida have offered things that we can learn from conflict, right? Can somebody think of another thing, and it might be through an example: can somebody think of another thing we might learn? Jeremiah?

Jeremiah: Um, never mind, I forgot (*Expresses good-natured frustration non-verbally*)

David: Joan?



Joan: Well there's two . . . (*inaudible*) going way back . . . Bad people and people could have conflict, and sometimes they don't have conflict. They just don't always have to have conflict.

David: Can you jump forward from there? Because I think we've sort of decided—several people have said that conflict is *happening*—conflict is in the world, conflict is unavoidable, and some people have even said sometimes conflict is good, or necessary. But now, so I'm trying to think, what is it that we might learn? You've heard two things—Hope said we learn that we don't want conflict, and Davida said we learned that we can't always have things the way we want them. Anything else?

Brian: Well, I have. . . . With my brother . . . We go after each other with needles. (*slightly astonished reaction from group. Brian is smiling*)

David: With needles? In play.

Brian: Yeah. It's sort of a conflict.

David: Well we have to finish up. So, Hope, you want to say something?

Hope: Well there's another that we can learn from conflict, which is that if you always fight a lot, and you always win, you learn that conflict isn't so bad if you always win.

David: Jeremiah.

Jeremiah: Well I had a conflict with my friend Peter in kindergarten. I didn't know how to tie my shoes. So I bet him that I could learn how to tie my shoes in a week for one quarter and I practiced and practiced and I learned how to tie my shoes, and he gave me a quarter—and I learned from that that you don't always have to lose. Sometimes you can win.

David: Then in that case the conflict actually . . . You learned much faster to tie your shoes because the conflict kind of drove you to it. O.K.—Joan.

Joan: Well when I have a soccer game and I lose, sometimes I learn something from the other team—what they know that I don't know, and it makes me a better player.

David: So through their better playing you learn—even though you lose . . . (*silence*). O.K., we have to wrap up, guys. You can go on, or you'll probably rush outside.

Veronica/Joan/Wendy: Rush outside!!

Palermo: Wait till we're done!

David: Well thank you very much and have a great spring break. (*noisy*) . . . And when we come back we'll watch the videos. CUT TAPE.

How quickly the group, trained forcefully to pay attention under their adult mentor, could shift from a playful exercise in binary logic to a meditation on winning, losing, and that original theme—stated by Martina in the first session and here, at the end, restated by her—of the pedagogical role of conflict. And how thoroughly each of these was progressively explored—all through examples, except for three or four children who knew how to respond to calls for more general, propositional statements. Those who could not were no less adept at intervening in ways which developed the structure of the concept; it's simply that they did it through exemplification alone. In the end this is perhaps a slight difference—between stating a proposition through the vehicle of an example or counterexample, where its premises are hidden in a narrative syllogistic context, and stating it in a direct,

propositional form. Even in the latter, there is an enthymematic element, in that the premises are not always stated. And clearly the facilitator was playing a key role in maintaining and moving this structure forward—by restating in propositional form, connecting examples with arguments, developing categorical lists, calling for summarizations and direct responses to specific points, etc. Although it is clear from the transcripts that he either missed, misunderstood, or neglected to follow up on a number of possibilities, this phenomenon is, for any facilitator who regularly records and transcribes his or her own work, the rule rather than the exception.

There was never even a chance for this sort of close and rhythmic and controlled work on concept building in River's class. Order there was always tenuous, always on the verge of breaking down, but still maintaining itself. Children were stretched out on the floor over clipboards, taking notes or drawing; others (two, regularly) sat on the edge of the circle in chairs; people were always getting up to sharpen a pencil or go to the bathroom, without permission, or talking with the person sitting next to them, or squabbling over personal space in the circle. In Palermo's class leaving the circle at all, for anything, was a matter of raising one's hand quietly, waiting until called upon (which in that atmosphere, with the number of hands up, could have been five minutes), and making the request. Those children in River's class who were already somehow socialized to the Palermo model seemed to suffer more there—obedience to the understood rules of the classroom from previous experience resulted in silence and immobility. The "wilder" children—like Abraham, who in his hyperactivity could barely sit in one position for more than a minute or two before he was stretching or rocking or changing his place, or Samuel, whose enthusiasm was matched only by his insouciance with the normative principles of equal participation—appeared to be the ones more willing to take risks in the conversation, to question or confront other ideas, to explain their own at greater length. On the other hand, those children of a third type, for the most part girls, combined both: Elenor and Hillary, for example, had internalized the expectations of the adult "ideal speech situation," but not, I think, as a result of previous classroom conditioning, but . . . because of their family discourse patterns? Because they were females? At any rate, they tended to take fewer turns in this more chaotic setting because they were more decorous. In Palermo's class they might, like Martina and Davida for example, have spoken quite a bit more, and that is no small difference, because they would have brought their particular insights to the conversation.

What then is to be said about an ideal pedagogy except that there isn't one?—or that to find one, based as it is on what one loses in gaining something else, or on a process of group member selection beyond human calculation, is impossible? River's class was learning to self-regulate as a group, sometimes at great emotional expense—runny stomachs, and headaches, and perhaps a desire to escape this welter of clouds in collision. Palermo's class was learning to function as a "disciplined" group, at the expense of always needing someone shouting at them in order to do so. One was learning obedience, and the other cooperation. Is it the case that "the wildest colts make the best horses," or "train up a child in the way he should



go and he will not depart from it"? Which one makes for greater cognitive and emotional growth?

The question suggests too many variables—the temperament and developmental situation of each individual child, the emotional character and implicit beliefs of the teacher, the chemistry of the group, to name a few—to be able to answer in any definitive way. From the point of view of the system—and I mean system on all its levels—of which this school is a part, there is no question which is more “efficient.” A system based and calibrated on standardized test-driven curricula will never, ever accept a self-organizing classroom, a classroom which acts as a context for children to learn through their own communal process what Dewey called “social democracy” — a set of skills and dispositions which he considered necessary for political democracy. It’s simply too “slow.” Nothing would ever “get done.” One can only conclude that the system has not the slightest interest in developing social democracy, which leads unalterably to the second conclusion—that the system has not the slightest interest in building any more authentic a form of political democracy than the one we currently live with. Perhaps those who arm and guard and patrol the system don’t believe Dewey’s (1916) claim “that a society which not only changes but which has the ideal of such change as will improve it, will have different standards and methods of education from one which aims simply at the perpetuation of its own customs”; or that in such a society, the school will be the place where “instead of reproducing current habits, better habits shall be formed, and thus the future adult society be an improvement of their own” (pp. 81 and 79). Or perhaps they know that only too well, but what for a Dewey might mean improvement, for them instinctively represents danger. How could this be different, if custom is all they know, and habit means only habituation?

But just imagining for a moment that the people who regulate, plan, run and staff the vast majority of schools were not afraid of doing anything other than perpetuate their own customs—that they understood the school as in interstitial zone where adults and children—and by logical extension, the social institutions of adulthood and childhood—entered into dialogue, in the service of education as, again in Dewey’s (1916) words, “a constant reorganizing and reconstructing of experience” (p. 76)—which cannot but imply ethical reconstruction. What principles might the insights which these second graders developed together about conflict suggest about its role in building social democracy? Certainly they already understood conflict as a regulative phenomenon, as an interpersonal space where the constant interplay between order and disorder can be worked on and sometimes worked out (“ . . . if you don’t have conflict then the world would go crazy”). Those who, like Jodi and Hillary and Elenor, suggested the ethical categorical imperative of self-suppression as a possibility (“ . . . well, . . . you can . . . because if you take a deep breath you just walk away”) were in fact argued against by the *reductio ad absurdum* that restraining conflict puts you in worse conflict because you have no recourse for solving the problem which gave rise to it; therefore the suppression of conflict would lead to a world even more rife with evil than the one we already have. On this account, the existence of conflict has a double signification: not only is it necessary in order to solve the

fundamental problems of negative disorder in the system, but through its very corrective outbreak it transforms the system, and can therefore be identified as a major principle of change.

But the analysis went even deeper in places. Jeremiah, in invoking the “fork in the road” situation (“Like if you’re going to your friend’s house and there’s this fork in the road and you need to decide which way to go . . . I’ll go this way, it looks good – but no, I think I should go that way’ . . .”) identified the fundamental existential problem of multiplicity: in the moments where there is more than one choice – which could, depending on the dimension or level of choice, be interpreted as every and any moment – we discover conflict as absolutely fundamental to the nature of time and difference. When Veronica, her fiery red hair isomorphic with the smooth fire of the hushed, intense delivery of her insight, named “decision” as the key factor in conflict, she underlined this understanding, not by repeating it, but by drawing its ethical implication: faced with a universe characterized by difference, “decision” is the only tool we have for ordering it in such a way that it retains the consistency necessary to avoid madness, either individual or collective. Could it be that both these insights – the inevitability and necessity of conflict and the role of “decision” in charting a course through its troubled waters – provide at least one basis for the coming to terms with difference which is at the root of Dewey’s notion of social democracy?

Caveat Emptor

Space prevents me from including the 100 pages of transcript from which these selections are taken, and in fact my analysis represents only a fragment of what could be made of them. A transcript of this type – or perhaps any transcript – is like a palimpsest, a manuscript on which an earlier text has been effaced and the vellum or parchment reused for another, but on which the traces of the old remain. Each interpretation is a new, superinscribed text. I could analyze the transcript, either in its natural sections or as a whole, for a multitude of variables and dimensions, levels and categories: the facilitator’s use of language for example, the patterns of turn-taking in the group, the balance between those who were silent and those who spoke, the number of enthymemes (i.e. syllogisms with at least one unstated premise, which is how we usually talk) employed, the evidences of facilitator manipulation and control, the relationship between order and disorder in the sessions, and the triggers and containers for this pattern; evidences of the distribution of facilitation moves among the group; evidences of individual and group self-correction; categories and evidences of different developmental discursive levels among individuals in each group; the influence of the classroom teacher on each group, the influence of each group on its classroom teacher, on the facilitator, etc. I could count, sort and classify any number of behaviors. I could widen the analysis topographically by comparing these with the discussions which were held simultaneously about conflict in the fifth grade.² Then, of course, there are the possible alternate or even counter-interpretations, either of the pieces of transcript which I have included here, or of their interpretation within the wider context of the complete transcripts. A reader might see me as doing something quite different from what I think I was doing, just the way I probably saw Palermo.



Meeting Samuel or Christopher, or the intensely thoughtful—almost haunted by thought—noble Abyssinian beauty Martina, they might see quite different children, and wonder how possibly I could describe them the way I did.

If there is one thing, and only one thing I can consider as “proven” here, it is the simple observation that children in groups are quite capable—with the provision of a collaborative, dialogical context and some interactive guidance from an adult who is more interested in listening and clarifying their ideas than instilling her own—of reasoning in a way which is coherent and sophisticated enough to produce new insights and meanings. That this has so far been overlooked both in educational theory and practice is astonishing to me, and immediately provokes suspicion. Perhaps it is not so astonishing if one considers that in fact the intelligence it represents has not so much been overlooked as conscripted into the service of strategic, survival-oriented thinking behaviors. It has been forced to assume a form which devotes itself exclusively to figuring out what adults consider to be necessary to succeed in a context which they (adults) design and control—and then doing it successfully. When our reasoning capacity has no leisure to reflect it becomes reactive, and when it is oriented only to survival, mechanical.

Those adults who systematically overlook, undervalue, suppress or co-opt children’s capacity to reason collaboratively in educational contexts can perhaps be understood as adults in whom that capacity was ignored or even actively discouraged when they were children—both by family members and by the culture at large. In this case, it is adults’ learned incapacity which leads to the belief that children have no capacity. But if adults know that children can reason and would prefer them to memorize what they have told them and to accept the reasons they have provided them, it implies either that they are afraid of them doing something else than parrot them, or that they think that “something else” has no fundamental value, or that the school is not the place to do that “something else.” The fact is that for one reason or another they find it necessary to suppress children’s intelligence except in the service of instrumental goals, i.e. reasoning without the normative dimension. To cultivate and encourage the normative dimension in children’s reasoning would perhaps suggest the development of more autonomy than 1) they think healthy for a “well balanced” person; 2) than is useful for controlling them—for turning them into the worker consumer citizens who will be prepared for and pliable in the hands of the corporations, the media, and the state. Of course this is not “conscious,” not reasoned— it is naively assumed and cloaked in a host of other beliefs and assumptions. One does not have to invoke conspiracy in order to identify the hegemonic self-interest, individual and collective, which acts to suppress the possibility of social, cultural and individual transformation in any society. We can only conclude that the schools are “designed” by the hegemonic system—which still does not imply conscious intention—as agents of cultural and social reproduction, and that they are in fact exactly and specifically representatives of what Dewey described as a “method of education . . . which aims simply at the perpetuation of its own customs.”

Given that childhood represents the gateway to social and cultural transformation, children are Marx’s perennial proletariat. Their liberation

represents the real revolution, if construed as the liberation to think reasonably (in the sense at least in some way demonstrated by these transcripts) for oneself and with others in collective moral discourse. But just what does the liberation of children entail? In fact their liberation implies the liberation of the adults they will become, and is the only real hope the species has for transformation. Typically we place our hopes on the slow emergence of a class of adults who are liberated either through their own parents (whether in emulation or in negative reaction), or an extraordinary school or teacher, or through an experience of conversion of some kind, or even what appears to be a natural development in childhood or adulthood. These adults then turn—as parents and teachers—to liberate their children. By “liberate their children,” I mean nothing more or less than to provide a context, both in the home and the school, for the leisure and the stimulus to think reasonably and deeply for oneself and with others—and, concurrently, to apply the judgments arrived at collectively to the ongoing collaborative reconstruction of their life together as a group.

This gradualist vision of cultural evolution is the liberal hope: the incremental, cumulative (r)evolution, the great white hope of “progress.” The optimism with which it has been held over the course of the twentieth century—even in the face of repeated, endemic fascisms—has faltered in the twenty-first with the relatively sudden rise of radical neoconservatisms of various sorts, the stagnation of socialist-humanist ideals, and the new capacity of state power to withdraw guarantees of legal protection and entitlement, simultaneously abandoning its subjects to the violent whims of law and private interest and intensifying state power (Agamben, 2005). That emergent class of adults dedicated to humanization now finds itself ignored or overridden by various putative exigencies, whether “the economy,” “terrorism,” or religious authoritarianism. Children are among the first to feel the screws tightening, for when thought must be controlled, children are considered the most vulnerable to “corruption.”

The even longer hope of the species, but the surer, lies in the phenomenon of neoteny—the prolongation of maturation rates, and the carrying of infant features into adulthood, the result of alterations in the regulatory system that slow down the general rate of development in humans. Neoteny is the secret weapon of cultural evolution because it allows for difference and multiple influence: it represents a sustained developmental moratorium, a prolonged moment in which each member of the species has an opportunity to reflect on itself and what it might become. In brain theory parlance, neoteny means the literal provision of a time and a space in which to construct alternative neural pathways. The school as it is and always has been constructed by the mainstream is designed to override the possibilities of neoteny by reifying Dewey’s “custom” as instinct—to set up a uniform stimulus-response circuit, which acts just like instinct, i.e. to construct a set of neural pathways mandated by a collective cultural source called “our customs” and even “our intelligences,” and certainly “our moral possibilities,” guarded through hierarchical power constructs.

The school as suggested by Dewey, by his fellow-travelers, and by those who share in the tradition for which he was for a time chief spokesperson, is



designed for the creature characterized by neoteny, not for those who would take advantage of neoteny to monologically shape its creature. Such a school suggests an evolutionary think-tank, in which adults work to construct a dialogical space within the extraordinary organismic situation of neoteny, that is, a situation in which there is difference and multiple possibilities for goal and direction. The latter implies multiple voices, continual reconstruction of social relations, including relations of power, and a greater measure of choice and autonomy among activities, or curriculum. Obviously, dialogue does not imply capitulation to naked impulse or “spoiling” – but it does imply, not just the capacity, but the active intention to listen to the Other as a full-fledged interlocutor, which implies constructing contexts which allow for and encourage that.

The current situation of our species—a terrorist world war which could well last as long as the Cold War which it replaces; a global economy which, for the moment anyway, is acting increasingly to concentrate wealth in the hands of a relative few; and an environmental crisis advanced to near the point of no return—suggests that the change demanded of us in order to survive as a species almost demands a change in human nature—either that or the invention of a technology which neutralizes our own, which is the same thing. Darwin (in Steveson, 2000) suggested over a hundred years ago that individual morality—including what he calls the “instinct of sympathy”—has its origins in loyalty to a group which in turn is set for survival *against* a hostile Other, an out-group. If this is true, then the highest human virtues depend on having a collective enemy. We can take this suggestion as the naïve psychosociology of a Victorian “citizen” of the British Empire in its Autumn; a capitalist version of the origins of conscience, based on a human ontology which assumes group competition and enmity—that is, the subspeciation of others—as fundamental to “morality” and “progress”; as a biosocial instantiation of Hobbes’ notion of the “war of the all against the all”; or, reading it through Marx, as a comment which implies that “human nature” is in fact partially or to a great extent a function of material, economic and social organization, and that as the latter changes, so will the former.

If we choose Marx, we can interpret Darwin’s characterization as reflecting the species-existence of relatively small bands of hunter-gatherers, strangers to each other in a world the larger perimeters of which no one had much of an idea, making for much greater possibility of subspeciation. Now, thousands and thousands of years later, the species is in quite a different situation—gone global, layered with inter-group dependencies, with ever-increasing intervisibility and thus mutual introjection of patterns and forms of life. In this sort of information environment, the potential unity of the species is revealed. It is recognized that every group has more in common with other groups than it has differences, and it may be at this point that James’ (1967/1910) notion of the moral equivalent of war becomes imaginable: that is, the whole species constructs a different sort of collective enemy. It is perhaps at this moment that the social and educational innovation introduced by the great culture-hero Socrates—mutually distributed reason through communal dialogue—can finally begin to take more universal effect. It would require that the school, set up originally by the modern state as an agency of

social reproduction, begin to understand itself as an agency of social reconstruction. It is possible that, if it came at a moment of “critical mass” in the global situation, such a shift, although profound, would appear like a small step in relation to its profundity.

Whatever the case, neoteny will not yield its transformative potential to custom. Development—both individual and social—*will* self-regulate in a social context, which Dewey (1934, p. 54) calls the source of discipline (“it is not the desire of any one person which establishes order, but the moving spirit of the whole group”), but only if protected in a structure of dialogue, and with mutual collaborative reasoning as its *modus operandi*. Adults are necessary—in fact are themselves part of—this self-development, but dialogical schools require a special kind of adult, of a sort not currently encountered much in educational circles. They require adults who not only are interested in listening to children carefully and with a sense of the possibilities—given children’s power to reconstruct habit—hidden in their words; but who are also in a reflective relationship with the elements of the experiment which this sort of schooling represents, i.e. adults who are *themselves* interested in personal and social reconstruction on the most basic level. Such schools require adults interested in working in the most crucial human developmental zone of all—the zone of neoteny—on constructing together with all their interlocutors relationships of justice, shared power, interhuman sensitivity, and moral courage. Such an adult works on the front lines of the boundary between impulse and habit which, on Dewey’s (1988/1922) account, is the space of transformation. An educational culture of classrooms in which group life can evolve in dialectical fashion, marked by authentic collaboration, will offer the culture at large new models for group life among adults—group life in which, inevitably, conflict plays its necessary part.

DISCUSSION PLAN AND EXERCISE ON CONFLICT

DISCUSSION PLAN: CONFLICT

- 1) Is conflict natural?
- 2) Is conflict necessary to anything?
- 3) Is conflict avoidable?
- 4) Should conflict always be avoided?
- 5) Can conflict be good?
- 6) Does conflict have to be about something particular?
- 7) Are there different kinds of conflict?
- 8) What can cause conflict?
- 9) Can one be in conflict with oneself?
- 10) Can one be in conflict with an idea?
- 11) Can one be in conflict with a group?
- 12) Can one be in conflict with another who is not in conflict with oneself?
- 13) Can one be in conflict and not know it?
- 14) What is the opposite of conflict?



- 15) Do animals have conflict?
- 16) Do one-month old babies have conflict?
- 17) Do trees have conflict?
- 18) Can one have conflict with a person and be friends?
- 19) Is conflict real?
- 20) Are there things that are the same about all conflict?
- 21) Are all conflicts solvable?
- 22) Are there rules for avoiding conflict?
- 23) Are there rules for solving conflict?

EXERCISE: ARE THESE EXAMPLES OF CONFLICT?

- 1) A storm
- 2) A traffic jam
- 3) An automobile accident
- 4) A robbery
- 5) A card game
- 6) A sporting event
- 7) A test
- 8) A bad feeling
- 9) A bad day
- 10) A bad dream
- 11) A friendly wrestling match
- 12) Choosing sides in a game
- 13) Standing in line for something
- 14) Not enough parking places for everyone
- 15) Poor people

NOTES

1. *Elfie* (Lipman, 1988) is one of a series of eight novels for children, developed by the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, and designed to stimulate group philosophical discussion.
2. The project here described also included two fifth grade classrooms in the same school, facilitated by two graduate students at Montclair State University – Nathan Brubaker and Joe Oyler – who used the same discussion plans in their conversations.

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