Chapter 6

Teaching the Conversation

The title of this chapter can suggest an activity that encompasses the whole of teaching. Insofar as teaching refers to interaction in the human community, teaching is always a form of conversation. To be taught as a human being is simply to enter the human conversation. As one learns virtue by growing up in a virtuous community and one learns building by growing up in a building community, so one learns to converse by growing up in a conversing community. Or, put more simply, one learns conversation by joining the human race.

This chapter, however, is about a more specific kind of teaching. I have been examining the languages that can be sorted out within teaching situations. The two previous chapters have dealt with contrasting families of languages: the one where the community has a goal in view and helps the individual to move toward that goal; the other where the community is fragmented and the individual needs healing. The third family, to be discussed in this chapter, presupposes the other two. If the other two are imagined to run horizontally parallel, this third cuts across them vertically. In the other two cases, the teaching is in words but the words are still contiguous with bodiliness; in this third case, we have words on their own.

I have argued that choreography is a helpful image to describe the place of speech in teaching. At first, speech has the part of directing bodily action. However, speech itself can be taken as an action; thus one can have the choreography of speech. The teaching in this chapter is speech about speech; language is examined in relation to itself. This kind of teaching, not surprisingly, can be utterly vacuous. Nonetheless, it is the most specifically human form of teaching and potentially the most powerful. Richard Rorty notes that there are three ways to change a person's beliefs: change of perception, change of inference, and change of metaphor. Only the third brings about radical change in people. This chapter is about changes of metaphor, an examination of the language of the language of teaching.

At first sight, the discussion may seem headed for high-level abstraction. Terms such as "second-order language" or "meta-language" are sometimes interjected here. But my aim is not to construct an artificial language above ordinary language. With language, as Hannah Pitkin says, we are sailors out at sea who can never put in to port to fix our boats. Everyday speech is what is available for examining everyday speech. As the words are forced back on themselves, the result is not to abstract from the words but to go deeper down into the words. What are the controlling assumptions in any use of words? What is the meaning of a word and how far can the meaning change?

I said that this third family of teaching languages presupposes the other two. In regard to the first, storytelling, lecturing, and preaching involve a body of beliefs. The third family of languages does not reject those beliefs; neither does it accept them as true. Instead, the main question it raises is what these beliefs mean. The point would seem obvious that you have to have beliefs before you can criticize them. Nevertheless, much of modern criticism has not abided by that principle. Objecting to this modern approach, Peter Elbow says that "mental housecleaning by doubt" is futile. He suggests as alternative that we "sleep around" with a wide range of ideas if only to find out what is in our minds. Then we can ask critical questions about keeping or throwing out an idea.

As for the second family, the therapeutic languages, we also need to have experienced them before we can ask questions about the meaning of the pattern. These languages free us from trying to reach the end of speech and they return us to the giving and receiving found in ordinary life. If we are obsessed with the realization of some future project, we do not have the mental space to attend to the present. I quoted Wittgenstein earlier that the best philosophy is the one that allows us to stop doing philosophy. He goes on in the same passage to say that philosophy consists of dealing with various problems that do not ever come to an end. The conversation of this chapter has no end, no predetermined endpoint that concludes the conversation.

The second family of languages, I argued in chapter 5, is always needed for the individual's healing of a fragmented self. The future is not denied; it is simply bracketed for the time being. What are the deeper implications of this stance? Can we live without an end? Nie-
tsche warned that “a man would rather will nothingness than not will.” A world cannot live on willing alone; neither can it live on not willing. This chapter reflects back on the relation between the first two families, one of willing and one of not willing. It asks about the meaning of their relation to each other.

While this third family draws its material from the first two, the relation is not entirely one way. The analysis of this chapter reverberates back on the previous two. Like therapeutic languages, this third family has no end beyond itself, but by penetrating further below the surface it can unlock more healing power in language. It breaks the chain of language that can interfere with the use of therapeutic languages.

This third family is also like the first in being concerned with reaching understanding. The mind is called into play in its most intense way. In the first family, the question is, What is the meaning of this text for our lives together? In this third family, the question is, What does it mean to ask the meaning of texts? Not this text’s meaning or that text’s meaning, but the meaning of the search for meaning. A new kind of advocacy emerges here, which does not look to the changing of social structures. The advocacy is linguistic: how to speak so that greater understanding is possible.

In a well-known passage of modern philosophy, Hegel writes,

One word more about giving instruction as to what the world ought to be. Philosophy in any case always comes on the scene too late to give it. . . . When philosophy paints its grey in grey, then has a shape of life grown old. By philosophy’s grey in grey, it cannot be rejuvenated but only understood.

Hegel’s contrast in this passage and its affirmation of understanding led to an even more famous statement by Karl Marx: “Up to now philosophers have only tried to understand the world, the point is to change it.”

Marx’s opposition of understanding and change is a scandalous one from the point of view of teaching the conversation. At issue are the understanding of understanding and the image one associates with change. True, the understanding is not in the business of “giving instruction to what the world ought to be.” Nonetheless, understanding — and its concomitant change of language — is not the alternative to change but a most powerful force of change.

Understanding of this kind may require privileged spaces where other kinds of change are kept at bay. Many people grow impatient with an artificial segregation of “disinterested speech,” that is, inquiry that temporally suspends political and social engagement. Some eras become more insistent than others that all speech, to be genuine human speech, has to be rhetoric persuasive of political and social change. Language is pressed into the service of one overriding purpose.

Consider this comment by Stanley Fish:

In ordinary contexts, talk is produced with the goal of trying to move the world in one direction rather than another. In these contexts — the contexts of everyday life — you go to the trouble of asserting that “x is y” only because you suspect that people are asserting that “x is z” or that “x doesn’t exist.”

I have described in the previous chapter the “ordinary life” where a range of languages exist that are not arguments or explanations. Fish’s ordinary life sounds exhausting in its contentiousness. Where is the praise, thanks, confessing, or mourning that is not asserted against anyone’s assertion that “x is z”? The only point of “good morning” is to be pleasant. Most of ordinary life is speech that celebrates life — its shared sorrows and joys.

Fish’s statement that “everything we say impinges on the world in ways indistinguishable from the effects of physical action” is particularly directed at sanctuaries of “free speech.” He wants writers and professors to “take responsibility for our verbal performances,” which is, I think, an admirable aim.

However, the argument that everything said has effects indistinguishable from those of physical action seems wildly overstated. The statement lacks precisely those careful distinctions that a reflection on speech — perhaps in a sanctuary of disinterested inquiry — might provide.

**Truth and Meaning**

One way to elucidate the issue is through the distinction between truth and meaning. The asserting of the truth “x is y” may be held in suspension while we examine the meaning of x. In an algebraic context, x is simply the name of one clear-cut reality; it either is or is not the equivalent of y. However, in ordinary life, the meaning of “love,”
free speech,” “equal opportunity,” or “right to life” raises unsettling questions. Are we certain we know what we mean when we defend (or attack) free speech? Would we know what it meant to get equal opportunity? Could the right to life include a right to die?

As soon as such questions are asked, they reverberate across a web of related meanings. A term does not have its meaning in isolation. Words have their meanings in context; to understand the word is to be able to place it in context. The context or contexts spread out indefinitely to more and more participants in the conversation. If two people are speaking, the ambiguity in the meaning of any statement is held in check by innumerable factors of past history and present environment. The tone of voice and the facial expression are often the key to what is meant by the words. A person saying, “oh oh,” can mean at least half a dozen things, but in any particular instance of utterance the meaning is usually clear.9

In a written document, especially one from the distant past, fewer guidelines are available for discerning the meaning. When Baruch Spinoza in the seventeenth century introduced the idea of distinguishing truth and meaning into the reading of the Bible, he found himself in a lot of trouble.10 But an appreciation of the Bible demands an understanding of what the authors were attempting to write in its various books. To read Genesis, Job, and Song of Songs as if all three were the same kind of literature is to distort the meaning of all three. None of them consists of a series of assertions that “x is y.” Even to read Paul’s Letter to the Galatians and his Letter to the Romans without asking in each case who he was writing to, who he was fighting against, where he was writing from, and a dozen similar questions, will mislead the reader as to what each letter says.

It is amazing that the Bible has survived its defenders as well as its critics. The interpretive questions applied to that document are now widely used for other literature. Spinoza’s distinction of truth and meaning can now be seen not as disrespectful of the text but as a flight from truth, but as the way to a deeper appreciation of the text. Frank Kermod, referring to both the Bible and other texts, says, “All modern interpretation that is not merely an attempt at ‘recognition’ involves some effort to divorce meaning and truth. This accounts for both the splendors and the miseries of the art.”11

The distinction between truth and meaning allows for a playfulness with language. The truth is not to be toyed with; its opposite is false-

hood, which should not be entertained. But meaning invites the play of imagination and the testing out of alternatives. To be sure, meaningfulness is no friend, but it is a threat only when we cannot live in the house of single sense and yet cannot imagine an alternative. We assign “play” to children and it is indeed their metier. Nonetheless, the ability to play is also the mark of a mature attitude. This third family of languages for teaching cannot be grasped — or lightly taken hold of — unless the teacher has an ironic sense of humor. To teach in this instance is to suspend asserting that “x is y,” preferring instead to investigate playfully the meaning of x.

The child consciously enters the human conversation as he or she senses the mysteries, the wonder, the simple fun of human speech. When Wittgenstein proposed the metaphor of “game” for language, some people thought this comparison not serious enough. But many games are very serious, calling forth concentration, dedication, and staying power. One has to follow the rules to play the game, but within the rules all kinds of variations can be tried out. A living language is always inventing new words and occasionally bending the rules as life bubbles up and flows over. The guardians of proper speech sometimes take themselves too seriously, instead of moving with the rhythms of the game.

The child who is just learning to speak flows with the structure of the language, plucking out of the air the words that resonate with the soul and awaken consciousness. There are two ways to understand the relation between thinking and talking. Talking can be understood as thinking out loud. Or, thinking can be understood as talking to oneself. The child regularly talks to himself or herself; adults are usually embarrassed to admit that they do also. Talking out loud on the subway to no one in particular is not to be recommended; it is usually indicative that the person’s life is empty of other people with whom to converse. But if one has human partners, then conversation with oneself is stimulated.

Knowledge begins not with an isolated consciousness but a conversation. Both Martin Buber’s “In the beginning is relation”12 and the New Testament’s “In the beginning was the word” refer to the Book of Genesis where God creates by speaking. Who was God talking to? He was apparently talking to himself, although when he gets to creating humans, one interpretation of his “let us make man in our image” is that God was speaking to the other animals.

The child, in any case, is not averse to taking both parts in a conver-
sation. Why does the child do that? To find out what he or she thinks. Thinking, says Plato, is "the conversation that the soul conducts with itself." Contemporary thinkers, including Dewey and Wittgenstein, pick up this same theme. If the child's sense of play is not suppressed, later he or she will be able to look at language from several directions. Words will be material for thoughtful artistic play rather than vessels that encapsulate thought.

**Dramatic Performance**

One of the ways that language is played with in adult life is in dramatic performances. Indeed, the staging of drama is sometimes called a "play." The actors step into roles and pretend to be fictional characters who create a whole world within our everyday world. Plays can fall within the first two families of languages. That is, some plays have directly instructive purposes; they intend to convey a message. Plays that moralize by dictating simple solutions to life's heartbreaks do not usually last more than a season. Other plays may have a kind of message but it is about life's complexities. Plays that are great tragedies, Oedipus, King Lear, or Hamlet, do imply some purpose or end to human existence. They warn against destructive obsessions without telling us how we should live our particular lives.

Other plays seem to fit in with the therapeutic family of languages. These dramas are concerned with life's little foibles and how we cope with them. Such plays give us release, let us laugh at ourselves or rejoice in life's triumphs. No struggle toward life's goals is at issue. A comedy of manners by Molière, Chekhov, or Noel Coward provides us with delight, which is of no small importance in life and in teaching.

The play also lends itself to the third family of languages, concerned with teaching human conversation. In fact, the structure of drama is itself designed to fit this form of teaching. Although the play can serve as the vehicle for telling a story or providing therapy, it has the possibility of transcending both kinds of language to become a reflection on language itself. One can perform that reversal in a novel, a short story, or a poem, but in these cases one has to twist the form beyond its shape. Within a play, the play of language is already in place with the adoption of the format. The characters' existence is a play; so it is not surprising when there is a play inside a play.

Much of twentieth-century drama has become fascinated by the structure of the play and its relation to "reality." What happens when the actors on stage break down the wall that creates an audience and the audience becomes part of the play? Or, what happens when the characters in the play start reflecting on what it means to be characters in a play? Such situations are sometimes called Pirandellian (after one playwright who explored these possibilities), but the tendency is found in much of twentieth-century drama. Shakespeare has his plays inside of plays; in Hamlet, "the play's the thing wherein we shall catch the conscience of the king." In the twentieth century, we have Tom Stoppard's lifting out of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; they then have their own play, within which is Hamlet. But now confusion is everywhere, not only in the characters of the play, but in the minds of the audience. We are left with Stoppard's dazzling word play. A typical Stoppard play is a wild sort of physical romp, together with philosophical ruminations on language. Of one of his plays, Stoppard writes, "The first idea I had was I'd like to write a play in which the first scene turned out to have been written by a character in the second scene. That was all I started with." Plays of the twentieth century are not necessarily telling a story; they more often reflect on storytelling and other forms of speech.

A favorite form of this century, not surprisingly, is the comedy routine between a couple of characters who continually misunderstand each other. The pun calls attention to the ambiguities in language. Good routines by Laurel and Hardy or the Marx Brothers work with children and adults, work in the 1930s or the 1990s. The Marx Brothers deserve a linguistic study of their own. Each of the brothers takes a different approach to the undermining of ordinary speech. Harpo reminds us that silence is part of speech, Chico regularly mangles the language, Groucho has the puns that endlessly delight. The worldwide collapse of Marxism suggests that Groucho is ultimately more subservient than Karl. And any course on the analysis of language could use Abbott and Costello's "Who's on first, What's on second, I Dunno's on third."

Perhaps the most revolutionary play of the twentieth century is Waiting for Godot. At one level it is a comedy routine in the manner of Abbott and Costello; the play is often acted by comedians. It is filled with outrageous puns and continual misunderstandings between the two clowns and between them and their visitors. The play goes nowhere in that the setting at the beginning and the end of both acts
has the characters in the same place. This play and others by Beckett are pure conversation; the characters exist because they are held in by the play of voices. Sometimes it is unclear whether the voices belong to one person or a plurality of persons. The ambiguity is not a failure of the playwright. The characters themselves are often unsure if the voices in their heads are coming from outside. The tape recorder plays a prominent part in several plays. Is the voice on the recording another person or the same person at another time? Is that a meaningful question?

Perhaps the purest form of Beckett’s plays is reached in Endgame. The text can be read as a conversation within one person’s head (the set design of the play appears as a head with the two main characters as eyes) or as a conversation between two people who cannot separate. The content of the play is play, with the two characters commenting on the play they are in. The human race seems to have disappeared. “Why do I stay with you?” asks the character Hamm. “For the conversation,” is the answer. Or as Estragon says in Godot, we are “incapable of keeping silent.” The plays of Beckett and Ionesco in the 1950s were sometimes called “theater of the absurd.” In fact, however, they are very rationally constructed plays that force us to reflect on the nature of conversation.¹⁷

Note that the play is not simply the text that comes from the playwright. The stage directions and the set design become part of the conversation, too. The whole performance is what is choreographed. Beckett was almost fanatical in his demand that directors abide by his directions for the set, lighting, and movement. In a staged play, the “teacher” is not an individual but the interplay of actor with actor, actors with audience.

Dialectical Discussion

For the second language I use the somewhat technical philosophical term “dialectical.” My aim is to use a term that can in fact include philosophical thinking but can also embrace ordinary discussions that bend back on the meaning of the terms in use. In the middle of a conversation between friends, the question might be heard, “What do you mean by that?” If not a hostile question, it is likely to engage the speakers in a dialectical discourse. Eric Havelock says that dialectic arose when a speaker in Greece was asked to repeat himself. The very act of repetition — one cannot reproduce exactly a set of statements — sets up a dialectical exchange within the speaker and disturbs the single strand of speech.¹⁸ Dialectical refers to their being two voices and a movement from one to the other. In that sense, dialectical discussion is just another name for dialogue. I am using “dialectical,” however, to indicate a more reflective use of language and a concerted effort to find the meaning of the words in the dialogue.

One might also speak here of debate or argument so long as we are still referring to a quest for meaning rather than the scoring of points against an opponent. In philosophy, as in the rest of life, questions are sometimes a cover and a dodge. The questioner is using language merely as a tool for polemical purposes. When Michel Foucault was asked why he avoided polemics — issuing harsh judgments on other people and their views — his admirable response was, “Questions and answers depend on a game — a game that is at once pleasant and difficult — in which each of the two partners takes pain to use only the rights given him by the other and by the accepted form of the dialogue.”¹⁹

The term “dialectical” is probably best known through its prominence in Marxism. For Marx, dialectical refers not to peaceful discussion but to the conflicts of class warfare. Marx borrowed the term from Hegel, who had posited a movement of history through the dialectical synthesis of opposites. Since Marx claimed to turn Hegel upside down (from philosophy standing on its head to standing on its feet), the relation between the two thinkers is itself dialectical. Thus, Marxism is part of a dialectical discussion about the meaning of “dialectical”; and other disciples and opponents of Hegel (for example, Kierkegaard) also become part of the dialectic.

Many people trace the idea of dialectical back to Socrates (or to a slightly earlier era; Aristotle traces it to Zeno the Eleatic). Socrates engaged people in intense discussions that open into a larger philosophical conversation. Socrates did not have much time for protecting reputations, though he also did not engage in ad hominem attacks. Aristotle carried forward the process in more orderly fashion by arranging the views of previous thinkers on particular topics. Dialectic became the mode of argument in the Middle Ages, starting with Abelard’s Sic and Non, which showed that the church fathers had contrasting views on many topics. The scholastic method at its best (for example, in Aquinas’s Summa) was a conversation that encompassed the centuries. The method often involved debate. One of the rules of debate was that you had to state your adversary’s position, to his satisfaction, before giving
your own. This rule would still be helpful to contemporary debate. One would be forced to see the world from the other's perspective; the debate would likely be more thoughtful.

Political life at its best has some of the qualities that are associated with philosophical inquiry. The first responsibility of the political assembly is not that of passing laws or of making speeches. Rather, it is to be a forum that asks about the meaning of our lives together. In contrast, a politics that is based solely on polls and consumer goods is in danger of being swallowed by therapeutic speech, while being surrounded by ineffective lectures and sermons.

A political official cannot just be out to satisfy the people's needs. What constitutes real need can only surface in reflective discussions. "Human subjects have no privileged access to their own identity and purposes. It is through rational dialogue, and especially political dialogue, that we clarify, even to ourselves, who we are and what we want." And although harsh polemics ought not to be the heart of political dialogue, there is plenty of room for disagreement. A culture is not so much a place of common values as a place that has the means for allowing disagreements that do not destroy political life.

Dialectical discussion proceeds by oral exchange and by reading that is respectful of the otherness of the text. Learning to read so that one learns from opponents is a skill necessary to the survival of a living tradition. In a dialogue, an author's voice may have been silenced by death but his or her text still has power to speak. That power is in turn dependent on the willingness of someone to listen. The living thinker has to be gracious and receptive to the text. If the other person's written statements seem absurd, perhaps we have not yet understood them. Sometimes we will find that letting in a strange voice from the historical record will awaken a strange voice within ourselves.

Dialectical discussion is the immediate preparation for academic criticism, which is the topic to be discussed in the next section. By reading books or by listening to a discussion, a student can observe a play of conflicting ideas. One of the worst things about "textbooks" is that most of them have no texts, that is, original pieces of writing by thoughtful individuals. In what are called textbooks, the differing thoughts of reflective people have been boiled down into a thin soup. Most textbooks are veiled sermons rather than dialectical discussions. They give little sense of minds struggling to get a ray of light on complex matters that may not have solutions.

Teaching the Conversation

What the student has to find in genuine texts and in oral debate is the play of ideas, the fact that people of fine intelligence and good will imagine different worlds. John Stuart Mill, a champion of human debate, writes, "What Cicero practiced as the means of forensic success requires to be imitated by all who study any subject in order to arrive at the truth. He who knows only his side of the case, knows little of that." Sometimes in a political debate two individuals simply represent their party's orthodoxy. The result is more sermon than dialectical discussion. The same can happen in discussions between economists, psychologists, or social theorists. The spectator, who is trying to learn, is simply asked to choose sides and then he or she will have the truth.

Even when this attitude structures a debate, there may be moments when a breakthrough occurs. If each party is interested in truth, then the play of ambiguous meaning is liable to peek out. Can the one person simply imagine what it would be like to view the world from the other's point of view? If so, the debate will include dialectical moments, the granting of some truth to a position different from the speaker's.

Paradoxically, this recognition is often easier to get when the two parties have very different positions. A Freudian and a Jungian may be able to recognize that they start from differing assumptions, while spokespersons for two Freudian schools may find it more difficult to grant their opponent's legitimacy. Christians find it easier to acknowledge Buddhism's different truth than to grant Judaism's right to a distinct existence. Protestant and Catholic Christians have at times killed each other over doctrinal differences that to the outsider can look slight.

Academic Criticism

The last language in this last family of languages is academic criticism. As the very last, it incorporates all of the previous ones, which gives it its potential. As the furthest example along a process of turning language back on itself, academic criticism can be the most vacuous of languages. This characteristic is reflected in the frequent reference to something as "merely academic." For much of the population, academic matters are trivial or unreal. It could also be the case that public figures dismiss academic matters as trivial so that they will not have to be challenged by academic criticism. My intention in this section is to show
showing how: the act of teaching

guarantee what will be the outcome, except that many objects, ends and institutions will be surely doomed. Every thinker puts some portion of an apparently stable world in peril, and no one can wholly predict what will emerge in its place.  

Dewey's contrast here between "conservative" and "thinking" is not really fair. Most people, including those who call themselves liberal, would be more cautious today in setting up such an opposition. The act of criticizing may indeed come from the liberal side, but the material for criticism has to come from conserving the past. Another way to make the point is that we cannot live on criticism alone. Michael Oakeshott writes that "ceaseless criticism never did anyone or anything any good; it unnerves the individual and distracts the institution."  

One way forward out of conservative-liberal stalemates is to tie down criticism to the words of a particular text. One has to engage the texts before criticizing them. And after criticism, texts do not disappear; they often flower in meaning. "Liberal" need not mean rejection of the past in favor of an uninvented future. The impression has sometimes been given that the enemy of a liberal approach to learning is tradition and traditional beliefs. "Liberal" would then mean coming up with new thoughts. However, if one attends not to thoughts but words, then "the new does not emerge through rejection or annihilation of the old but through its metamorphosis or reshaping."  

Academic criticism, like every other language of teaching, presupposes a community. The phrase "academic community" is tossed about as casually as those other "communities" that clamor for public support. The phrase "academic community" is both an assertion of positive cohesion and an opposition to the give and take of most areas of life where academic criticism would be dismissed. The cohesiveness of a particular group of scholars or the world of scholarship is quite fragile. The practice of academic criticism presupposes knowledge, discipline, and care for one's colleagues. When there is no sense of community, then criticism quickly turns cynical and self-serving; it becomes a sharp knife that does harm in ad hominem attack.  

As most small communities are, academic community is raised in opposition to the wider society. Those who practice its academic language often feel like a beleaguered few. Outside of some guarded preserves, the language of academic criticism is not often found. But although the larger society may sometimes seem the enemy, society's political and economic arrangements provide those guarded preserves of academic

how academic criticism can be among the most powerful of teaching languages.

As is true of the other languages in the third family, academic criticism presupposes the other two families. Without stories, lectures, sermons, and the like, academic criticism would have nothing to work on. Without a sense of the therapeutic, academic criticism could not achieve the distancing it needs, the suspension of belief and disbelief in stories, lectures, and sermons.

Academic criticism is also different from and similar to the other two languages in this chapter, dramatic performance and dialectical discussion. Academic criticism shares with them the calling into question of language itself. It may have some drama about it but it is not cast into separate roles for several players. It shares with dialectical discussion the conversation with great minds of the human race. But whereas in dialectical discussion the student is a spectator to Nietzsche discussing Kant, or Heidegger's writing on Nietzsche, in academic criticism the student is a participant. His or her words are the focus of the criticism.

Given this contrast to dialectical discussion, academic criticism is in one respect more personal, in another sense more impersonal. By becoming a participant in the conversation, the student is more personally involved. However, a distance is still allowed by the fact that it is not the student but rather the student's written and spoken words that are the direct object of concern. Criticism ought not to be personalized; the student should be able to get out of the way.

In ordinary speech, the term "criticism" usually has negative connotations. When someone offers "constructive criticism," the adjective has to be insisted upon to indicate that the intent is not destructive. This reputation for the negative is not without foundation. Although the ultimate hope is for a positive effect, to criticize is to call into question part of the established world. What up to this time was simple fact or assumed truth has its foundation undermined. The fact or truth in question may survive this challenge but it can never be accepted again in the same way.

Criticism therefore has its dangers both for what is criticized and for the critics. People who criticize should not be surprised to find themselves on the receiving end of criticism, one that is not necessarily restrained by an academic intention. "Let us admit the case of the conservative," writes John Dewey. "If we once start thinking, no one can
life. An all-out attack on society is neither fair nor gracious. No area of
society is exempt from criticism, but the criticism ought to be measured,
focused, and fair. It should be a radical questioning of specific policies
and institutional arrangements.

As the double negative is the sign of therapeutic speech, so the
ironic question is the mark of academic criticism. The teacher wishes
the listeners to hear their own questions and bend back on the ambigu-
ities in the words. If a teacher asks a straightforward question, it is likely
to draw forth information, the answer. If the question is a bit shocking
and forces the listener to consider whether the teacher is really serious,
then the question forces deeper questioning.

Consider the case of a famous speech by Philipp Jenniger on the
occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Kristallnacht, the beginning of
the Holocaust. Jenniger was at the time speaker of the West German
parliament. The audience, I imagine, was ready for therapy in the form
of confession and mourning, combined with a bit of a sermon. Jenniger
did those things at beginning and end, but in the middle he tried some
academic criticism, a move with disastrous consequences.

His remarks caused a worldwide uproar. The headline in Italy was
"Anti-Semitism in the German Parliament," in the Netherlands "Hitler
Worship Causes Mayhem in the Bundestag." His well-intentioned
speech turned out to be disastrous because the conditions were not
there for academic speech. In proper academic form, Jenniger asked
a series of ironic questions that included: "And as for the Jews, hadn't
they in the past sought a position that was not their place? Mustn't
they now accept a bit of curbing? Hadn't they, in fact, earned being
put in their place?"27 The members of the audience that evening were
not ready to be academic students. Jenniger's failure "had been to mis-
judge the occasion, which called for a memorial, not 'a sober historical
speech.'"27

The academic dialogue is between teacher and students. This dia-
logue can and does go on in other places, but the classroom is the
established place for this language. Conversely, other languages show
up in the classroom but academic criticism should be the centerpiece
of classroom instruction. In the following chapter, I will distinguish
the school from other educational forms. I will also distinguish the school
from the classroom that is within the school. The mix of languages
in the school differs from the classroom mix. Most often, classroom
speech cannot sustain two hours or even fifty minutes of academic crit-
icism. But a classroom without academic criticism is not functioning as
a classroom.

In academic criticism, the main point of reference is to the stu-
dent's own words. Of course, the exchange will be the more valuable
if students are in touch with a variety of sources for the topic at
hand. In educational discussions, phrases such as "experiential learn-
ing," "student-centered learning," or "self-directed learning" can be
slogans for avoiding the hard work of finding out what the human race
has said about science, politics, religion, love, family life, literary theory,
gardening, diet, animal breeding, or any other topic. In eras of rebel-
lion against any formality to education, and especially against academic
knowledge, teachers are supposed to avoid demanding that students ac-
tually know something about the topic being discussed. Great hope is
placed in the sharing of uninformed opinion.

In previous chapters I have insisted that most learning takes place in
educational forms other than schools and classrooms. We mainly learn
about family life by growing up in families; we best learn about animal
breeding by breeding animals; we best learn gardening in gardens. But
in this chapter I am speaking in support of one peculiar language of
Teaching the Conversation

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dent tries out the new design; then the process begins again. This sequence holds true in academic criticism. Student speaks or writes, teacher listens, teacher criticizes, student tries out new design. And again, the teacher’s design is not in generalities or hesitant suggestions. The teacher says, “I know what I am talking about. Try this out and you will find it an improved design of your speaking or writing.”

The teacher does not begin with the premise that “I am knowledgeable and you are ignorant.” The premise is, “We both know and we both are limited in our expression of the truth. But I have a better way of speaking and writing than you do. I am not necessarily a better person and there are other areas where you could be the teacher and I the student. Nevertheless, on this academic topic I have spent many years learning the language. Where I am convinced you are wrong, I will not let it go by. Where you are right, I will propose distinctions to enrich the meaning of your statements.” When two informed people strongly disagree, the issue is not usually truth against falsehood. One is richer in meaning because the metaphors assumed on that side allow more comprehensive and consistent meaning.

The search is to understand the words between us and to distinguish meanings in a way that leads to greater understanding. The teacher does not try to change the student or the student’s thinking, only the student’s words. Why should the student be convinced? For two reasons: the history of the words and their geography. The two sources are not entirely separable; history asks how the meaning has changed throughout the past and geography asks how the meaning changes from one group to another in the contemporary world.

For example, to understand “nature” one has to know how the term has shifted in meaning over the centuries and what its various meanings are today. There are things the student can say of nature that are simply false; there are other things that might be true but not revealing. And there are other ways of speaking that have been common but are misleading and unhelpful (for example, continuing to use “nature” or “natural world” as synonymous with the nonhuman world). The teacher’s job is to show that some ways of speaking about nature open new understanding and lead to profoundly practical conclusions.

The academic teacher thus is an advocate, an advocate of certain ways of speaking. In the academic world, the most common way to classify speech is description or prescription. The only choice offered

in this contrast is between a neutral statement of fact and a statement of how things ought to be. The metaphor is borrowed from the medical profession. Within the assumptions of this language, a person has a problem and goes to a physician. The patient delivers a description of the facts, or even better, a machine measures the problem numerically. The physician then writes out a prescription that gets filled by the pharmacist.

Teaching as linguistic advocacy borrows its metaphor from the legal profession. Within this language, the teacher as advocate of language neither describes nor prescribes. Human language, excepting mathematics, will already have cast the issue into language that is not neutral or merely factual. But the teacher’s job is not to prescribe a solution; most times there is no solution. The teacher can only advocate a way of speaking, plead a case before the jury. In advocacy, if one approach does not work, another can be tried. At the end, some of the jury may remain unconvinced. Those willing to try the position advocated may find their lives slightly bettered; they are the ultimate judges.

Two last claims must be noted about this process of academic criticism, one concerning age, the other gender. To turn the words back on the words and poke about for underlying metaphors may sound like a teaching strategy fit only for esoteric courses in the university. However, my intention is to describe academic work with any students of any age. Indeed, 6-year-olds may be better at this game than some 26-year-olds. Children are still in touch with the sound and feel of the words; human conversation is still an interesting new discovery. In contrast, the 26-year-old graduate student (or 56-year-old professor) may have become immunized against the excitement of words, their connotations and ambiguities.

People described as “intellectuals” are sometimes good at manipulating ideas but lack attentiveness to the words. If such people teach in schools — whether primary, secondary, or tertiary — their classrooms become places of prescribed ideas. University students find ways to cope with this problem (change courses, be absent, daydream in class). Six-year-olds have less protection; they may be forced to listen to one person all day. It is therefore more imperative for second-graders than for university students that classroom teaching be restricted to examining the words that the student willingly brings forth.

My other point concerns a possible gender bias in the invitation to “put your words on the table between us.” Is that a typically male invita-
other religions and ethnic diversity. The story turns bad only when intellectual leaders exercise no academic criticism and unthinkingly interchange “United States” and “America.” Academic criticism should be aware of the history and geography of terms. Obviously, America and United States are not co-extensive. In time, America is two and a half times the age of the United States; in its geographical meaning (North, South, Central), America is two and a half times as large as the United States.

Academic writing or university teaching that does not regularly distinguish between the United States and America is enveloped in myth. The myth has been a destructive one for Latin America and for other countries as well. The scandalous fact is that the distinction is very seldom acknowledged in scholarly writing. The failure of the left-wing critics is far more shocking than their right-wing opponents. An endless stream of books attacking America goes nowhere. Unless one criticizes specific policies of the United States and its government, what we have is not academic criticism but preaching.

The second example from the therapeutic language family is "development." It is a way for people to talk about almost any kind of advancement. It is not only a modern term; it helps to define what modernity means. We live in what we conceive to be a modern world because we assume that things progress, advance, or develop. Development has become a backdrop of hope that everything will be fine if we keep out of the way and let things take their course.

I do not think that development is a bad idea. We probably cannot manage without some such metaphor of hope that things will get better. But the idea easily degenerates into mindless ideology unless it is subjected to academic criticism. What is badly needed is to understand the "development of development." The history of the term’s rise since the eighteenth century needs to be traced. And its geography includes two fields of usage that almost never intersect: economics and psychology. Academic criticism ought to find out how these two uses are related. The failure to explore the relation of these two worlds of development leaves both uses vulnerable to illusion. Is it possible that economic development is a psychological blindspot? Is it possible that psychological development is a rich person’s way of looking at things?

The third example, "to teach," comes from this chapter and the book as a whole. The most detailed example I have of academic criticism is what I have done with "to teach." I have tried to break open a too
narrow conventional meaning of "to teach." My route has been both history and geography.

Historically, I have brought in voices on teaching from Greek philosophy and ancient religions. I adverted to the etymology of the term and a thousand years of ordinary usage. I have tried to show a narrowing process since the eighteenth century which has created a moral crisis in the meaning of "to teach." I have referred to philosophers in this century who are allies in my attempt to retrieve the meaning of "to teach."

The geography of teaching is the other main source for resolving the moral crisis of "to teach." I pointed out the great variety of instances of teaching. The universe and all its life forms teach those who are ready to learn. Animals teach each other to behave in certain ways. The human community is always teaching, mostly in ways that are not directly intended. Even when the human individual intends to teach, much of the teaching, for better or worse, is outside the intended effect. Human teaching usually includes a verbal element, although initially the words have the function of directly commanding bodily behavior. To this point, there is seldom a moral problem with teaching. The learner signals what he or she is ready to learn; the teacher shows how to do what the learner wishes to do.

Conclusion

These three chapters, comprising part 2 of this book, have examined language when it takes on a specifically human character of being separated from bodiliness. The teacher now has to choreograph not a movement of body but a movement of language. And the crucial moral decision is to get the appropriate language or languages for the particular occasion of teaching. The learner provides the license, often signaled through an institutional arrangement.

Depending on whether I walk into a chapel, a classroom, or a counselor’s office (all three might be in the same school building), I indicate what kind of language I am ready to hear. If I go into a therapist’s office, for example, I give permission for questions that intrude on my privacy, a permission that I do not give by crossing the threshold of a classroom. We would recognize a moral problem if a therapist were regularly to say, "That’s terrible; don’t do that." We less easily recognize the corruption of teaching when taken over by preachers of “feeling good.” Or we do not grasp the moral problem of professors telling students what to think about the world.

The first and second families of language are concerned with speech that is separated from bodiliness, but the relation to the body is still immediate. In the first case, the language appeals to the understanding and will that flow from and toward an integral communal existence. In the second case, the appeal is to those forces of life that reestablish a healthy relation of mind and body, individual and community. The success or failure of the teaching can usually be judged by tangible results in bodily activity.

The third family is one step removed from bodily life; its immediate contact is not with the body but with other languages. Its first concern is with meaning, not truth, with intellectual understanding, not physical activity. It is not neutral toward forms of love, work, politics, religion, and every other sphere of life; it is a questioning of every form. It advocates ways of speaking that would let loose better forms of life. Its positions are not demonstrably correct but neither are they merely idiosyncratic. They arise out of conversation with humanity. With no one in principle excluded, the conversation is with whatever part of the human race is available. This form of teaching can never replace the other forms, but with their help it can transform the world.