Ricoeur's Dialectic of Distanciation and Appropriation in the Asynchronous, Online College Classroom

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Abstract

The digital age has brought about new dimensions of connectedness and alienation in the 21st century. New communication technologies and social media have transformed the everyday realities of human relations in many different ways, some positive and perhaps some negative. It is a legitimate question to ask what this is doing to interpersonal relationships and institutions.
One vitally important area of transformation in recent decades is in the area of college education. The traditional brick and mortar classroom is no longer the only option for those seeking a higher education. Online education has been making academic inroads in virtually all demographics, and it is a legitimate question to ask how this is transforming higher education. Having taught thousands of students in the traditional classroom and in the online classroom, I intend to explore a major difference in the relation of the spoken to the written word. The classic critique of the written word is, of course, found spoken by Socrates in Plato's dialogue Phaedrus (274 ff). Ironically, this critique would not be part of the contemporary philosophical discussion if it had not been written by Plato and read by students of philosophy for the last 2500 years. Philosophical hermeneutics is the best field to address this new dynamic, and Paul Ricoeur makes a plea for writing and via his dialectic of distanciation and appropriation. I intend to discuss some advantages and disadvantages of the asynchronous, online classroom and offer some reflections on the future of higher education online. In so doing, the question will be raised as to whether there should be a distinction made between the Socratic Method A, and the Socratic Method B.

There is no doubt that one vitally important area of social transformation in recent decades is in the area of college education. The traditional brick and mortar classroom is no longer the only option for those seeking a higher education. Online education has been making academic inroads in virtually all demographics, and it is a legitimate question to ask how this is transforming higher education. Having taught thousands of students in both the traditional classroom and in the online classroom, I will begin by exploring a major difference in the relation of the spoken to the written word as it relates to the live and asynchronous online college classrooms.

Philosophical hermeneutics, as the science and art of the interpretation of written texts, is vital to this endeavor in comparing the spoken word of the live classroom to the written word of the asynchronous, online classroom experience. Paul Ricoeur's "dialectic of distanciation and appropriation" can be applied to the asynchronous, online college classroom, in the attempt to understand and explain both the alienation and new form of connectedness in this 21st century mode of education. In so doing, the question arises as to whether there should be a distinction (to be explained) made in the famous pedagogical "Socratic method" between method "A" which can occur in the live classroom, and method "B" which can occur in the asynchronous, online classroom. This paper will end with that question, but we shall have to undertake a journey before we can get to the proper understanding of the question.

The classic critique of the written word is, of course, found spoken by Socrates in Plato's dialogue Phaedrus (274 ff). Ironically, this critique would not be part of the contemporary philosophical discussion if it had not been written by Socrates' student Plato and read by students of philosophy for the last 2500 years. For inquiring minds, the question arises as to why great teachers such as Socrates, Siddhartha, and Jesus never wrote down their teachings. Is this an accident of history or is there something about the written word that is fundamentally inferior to the spoken word? Of course, the great teachers are gone and we cannot ask them. Neither can we ask their disciples who wrote down their lives and teachings in the texts that we know and love. More to the point, we cannot ask the texts themselves, or we can ask, but the texts cannot answer.

For Socrates, there are a number of problems with the written word. Writing is an iconic, fixed expression of dialogue. Philosophers who rely on reference to written texts can only "remember" knowledge previously acquired, rather than develop new knowledge in dialogue with others. In this sense, the written word is a flat representation of reality, analogous to the two-dimensional representation of a real nature scene in a "realist" painting. In the viewing of a nature painting, there is no real interaction with nature, just as the writer of a written text has no real interaction with her reader. Also, a text cannot tailor itself to its audience the way that the live teacher with a command of the subject and rhetoric can. The text does not know its audience and what to leave in and what to leave out, when and how to "speak" and when to remain "silent."

However, the greatest weakness of the written word is that it cannot defend against or rescue itself from misunderstanding. In Plato's dialogues we have a plethora of examples of Socrates and his friends and the conversational rescue from misunderstanding on the road to the appropriation of understanding. The "Socratic Method" proceeds by question and answer, dialogical proposal, consideration,

acceptance or rejection, correction and proceeding with a new proposal until the participants in the dialogue have reached a mutual understanding of the truth of the subject under consideration. Here the meaning is one with the event of the dialogue and the spoken word is aided by the rhetorical forms of non-verbal communication that accompany the speech.

All good teachers know and continually aspire to the joy of the discovery of truth that occurs when in live dialogue with students, guiding them through a procession of thought until the students realize a new vista of understanding has revealed itself on their horizon of understanding! More rare but even a greater joy is when the questions and dialogue with students leads both the instructor and students to a legitimately new understanding of a subject! This is the Socratic method as depicted in the dialogues and referred to in the explanations of pedagogy in academic instruction. Here, misunderstanding is avoided and true understanding achieved by the interlocutors in the process of dialogue.

This is not the case with the written word. In truth, the Socratic Method as depicted in Plato's dialogues *cannot* occur in anything *but* live dialogue with active participants in the propinquity of the live classroom (or its technological substitute) in which the meaning of the discourse is inextricably linked with the event of live discourse. Here, what Paul Ricoeur calls "the dialectic of meaning and event" is united in a "event-meaning" (1976: 27).

Ricoeur understands Socrates' criticism of the written word (and the critique as developed by Henri Bergson and others) and allows it a measure of validity in the search for truth. "The written word, as the deposit of this search, has severed its ties with the feeling, effort, and dynamism of thought. The breath, song, and rhythm are over and the figure takes their place. It captures and fascinates. It scatters and isolates. This is why the authentic creators such as Socrates and Jesus have left no writings, and why the genuine mystics renounce statements and articulated thought" (1976: 40).

There is no doubt that writing is "a kind of alienation" (1976: 38), however, Ricoeur makes "a plea for writing" and his hope is for a hermeneutic that can overcome this alienation inherent in the written word in a productive manner in the quest for truth. If possible, this would be a hermeneutic that validates the pedagogy of the asynchronous, online classroom and could address the issue of "the Socratic Method" in this educational environment. The place to begin is with the written word itself, the text.

A text is discourse fixed in writing. There are both negative and positive elements in fixing discourse in writing. Once words are fixed in writing, they become a "text" that has an independent existence. It can be copied and distributed and have its own "career" enduring throughout space and time beyond the life of its author. So, while there is the disadvantage that an author cannot defend her written word against misunderstanding beyond her own existence in space and time, there is the advantage that her words can still be understood beyond her own existence in space and time. The written word can speak to people and situations beyond the capacity of its author to even *imagine* when she originally wrote the text. Ricoeur writes, "To understand an author better than he understood himself is to display the power of disclosure

implied in his discourse beyond the limited horizon of his own existential situation" (1976: 93). The power of disclosure in discourse fixed in writing gives a text the autonomy to continually speak to new audiences and new situations.

This is no doubt the case with Plato's dialogues of his teacher, Socrates. To bring the idea of justice of Plato's *Republic* into "dialogue" with John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* is something that Socrates and Plato could never have foreseen 2500 years ago, but is something that the contemporary philosophy student of social justice in the West should not forego. Traversing the limits of space and time can be a definite advantage of writing.

In *Phaedrus* writing is compared to painting, as mentioned above. It is rather easy to imagine that seeing a painting or photograph of a nature scene that one has not visited, nor is likely to visit in one's lifetime, is preferable to never having seen "the nature scene" at all. But Ricoeur wants to elevate the status of painting and writing and art, in general, to a status above that of reality itself. What do I mean by that? Art produces what Ricoeur calls "iconic augmentation" (1976: 40). In the sense of vision this would be the focusing of attention on a particular aspect of the visual field that normally goes unnoticed in the ordinary reality of day-to-day living. "Iconicity" can present a subject under different aspects of space and time than are ordinarily experienced. Painting can capture aspects such as the play of light or momentary facial expressions that would otherwise escape attention.[1] Technology enables perception outside the "rainbow" light spectrum, through the galactic reaches of space and at the molecular level. Still photography can capture the wings of the humming bird in flight. Time-lapse photography or cinematography can enable us to see clouds forming and flowers blossoming. In a similar but even more pronounced fashion, impressionistic and abstract art can show dimensions of reality unavailable to normal vision.

Ricoeur goes so far as to say that "Iconicity, then, means a revelation of a real more real than ordinary reality" (1976: 42). Literature does this in the projection of modes of being-in-the-world. More than simply being a redescription of reality, literature is a means of revealing being in ways that are inaccessible in everyday living. For instance, through a narrator, the reader can have access to the trains of thought of all the characters in a scene and move back and forth in time and space. Literature can encompass a single moment in time or a century. It can be about the past or the future or any place mundane or fantastical. Most importantly, it can be about a different way of being. "This is very of iconicity - as aesthetic augmentation of reality - gives us the key to a decisive answer to Plato's critique of writing. Iconicity is that re-writing of reality. Writing, in the limited sense of the word, is a particular case of iconicity. The inscription of discourse is the transcription of the world, and transcription is not reduplication, but metamorphosis" (1976: 42).

The communication in the asynchronous, online college classroom proceeds via the written word (versus the live classroom that proceeds via the spoken word). At any given time, 24/7, students and the instructor may log on from anywhere in the world with internet access and read posts and respond to them at will. This takes advantage

[1] Here I am thinking of Claude Monet's series of paintings of the Rouen Cathedral and Leonardo DaVinci's *Mona Lisa* as prime examples.

of the nature of the written word. "Printed texts reach man in solitude . . . Abstract relations, telecommunications in the proper sense of the word, connect the scattered members of an invisible public" (1976: 43).
In truth, the asynchronous, online classroom creates a "world" where the praxis of the written word transcends the limitations of space and time. In the propinquity of the live classroom, there is extremely limited time for class discussion, and only one person may respond to a classmate or the instructor at a given time. Class sizes being what they are, not every student is even able to speak in any given class or perhaps any given week of a class, and the instructor is not able to hear and respond personally to every student in the class. In the asynchronous online classroom, there is an ideal situation brought about by the nature of the written word posted in the discussion thread or forum of the classroom. Every single student may speak on every posted topic during the week, and every student may read and respond to the post of every classmate, as they will. Every student may "speak" to the instructor and the instructor may "speak" to every student in the class every week. As discussion threads and forums develop, no student or comment is excluded because of distance in space or lack of classroom time. Discussions can develop based upon the sheer willingness and ability to read and comprehend the written word of one's peers.

Of course, there are disadvantages as well. At any given time one is logged on, there may be only a few, or no classmates logged on at the same time. The instructor may or may not be logged on. If there is a chat-room available in the online learning system, it may not be set up properly and is probably never or rarely used. Although one posts, there is no guarantee that anyone will actually read and respond to the post, including the instructor. If you take the time to carefully read someone else's post and substantively respond to them, there is no guarantee that they will read that response and reply back to you. However, there is the ideal possibility that everyone in the class will read your post, and everyone and anyone will respond to you. Your post will remain after the class is over. Even if you can no longer access the course and you did not save a copy of your own post, it will remain on the university servers, accessible by your instructor and administrators for a long time, perhaps indefinitely. At this point in history, there is the possibility that your posted words may live forever in the cyber-sphere, readily accessible to anyone who has the right code to access them. Once you have written and posted the words, they take on a life of their own, far from your capability to "take them back."

When we write words down, we "distance" ourselves from them. The exterior marks are inscribed upon a physical medium which is foreign to and has nothing to do with the spoken language itself. The inscription is separate from our physical selves and has the capacity to traverse our limits of space and time continue on to new spaces and new times. There it will speak without the benefit of our correction . Rather than an empty monument carved in stone, our word will be a living "thing" like any good work of art, that we have given birth to, and goes on beyond us, taking on a life of its own. We don't so much as create the distance, as we allow or enable the distance, once the words have been written.

In certain situations, when you write words, you don't know who, if anyone, is going to read them, and how they are going to interpret them. You hope for the best possible interpretation under the cultural circumstances, but you never know. If someone does misunderstand your words, you will not be there to correct them. The

very act of writing words down is the beginning of "distanciation." The ability of the hermeneutical process to take into account the distanciation of the writer and the necessary appropriation by the reader is the beginning of the understanding of Ricoeur's dialectic.

Ricoeur makes three moves in his essay *The Task of Hermeneutics* in order to follow up on some "decisive suggestions" in Gadamer's hermeneutics by rehabilitating the concept of alienating distanciation.[2] The first is to recognize the "distance" integral to Gadamer's concept of historically-effected consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*). Historical efficacy occurs over historical distance. There is a "paradox of otherness" here in that what is temporally distant (other) has a current effect here and now. Rather than resisting or trying to overcome "distance" the interpreter assumes it in a positive sense. The second move is to raise Gadamer's fusion of horizons into view. When horizons fuse, understanding happens by bringing into one's purview the *other* from a distance. While the other remains other, there is a participation in the other. It remains an autonomous other with respect to its distance even as the self remains an autonomous self. Distance here is a positive concept for one who desires to expand her horizon. One cannot see things from another's viewpoint without recognition of the distance that separates them from oneself. Ricoeur calls the fusion of horizons "an index of the dialectic of participation and distanciation." The fusion is never total, as in a total mediation or the breakdown of ontological differentiation. Part of the horizon of the other always remains unassimilated, distanced from the self. There is a mutual participation and distanciation in the fusion of horizons. The third move Ricoeur makes is to invoke the text. The text is discourse fixed by writing, and an autonomous text is the beginning point of turning alienating distanciation into a befriending distanciation. The text communicates at a distance *by design*, and so is the paradigm of distanciation in communication. In order to pursue the productive concept of distanciation, Ricoeur will elaborate on the nature of the text.

> To interpret is to render near what is far (temporally, geographically, culturally, spiritually). In this respect, mediation by the text is like the model of a distanciation which would not be simply alienating, like the *Verfremdung* which Gadamer combats throughout his work . . . but which would be genuinely creative. The text is, *par excellence*, the basis for communication in and through distance (2007: 107).

Whether it is called "distance learning" or "online learning" or some other variation, the asynchronous, online college classroom uses the written word (text) as its means of communication. Instead of propinquitous speaking and hearing, the individual student and instructor reads and writes. We have seen the innate distanciation in the process of writing, now we should take a look at the "appropriation" process in reading. Ricoeur writes,

> The problem of writing becomes a hermeneutical problem when it is referred to as complementary pole, which is reading. A new dialectic then merges, that of distanciation and appropriation. By appropriation I mean the counterpart of the semantic autonomy, which detached from the text of its writer. To appropriate is to make "one's own" what was

[2] Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics" (HHS 2007, 43-62). What follows here is from pages 61-2.

> "alien." Because there is a general need for making our own what is foreign to us, there is a general problem of distanciation. Distance then, is not simply a fact, a given, just the actual spatial and temporal gap between us and the appearance of such and such work of art or discourse" (1976: 43).

Distanciation and appropriation appear in the asynchronous, online college classroom in the form of discussion threads or forums that are usually carried on through the academic week (or further). Here, students must make an initial post which is a response to a question, and read and respond to several of their classmates' posts. The classmates and instructor may not be online at the same time, so there is usually not an opportunity to for immediate feedback.

At the same time, there is the opportunity to read and think and reply, and to develop discussion threads or forums on specific branches of the topic of discussion, limited only by the students' and instructor's availability and willingness to log on and read and write during any given week or weeks! These branches of threads can become quite complex and substantive, and therefore meaningful to those who read the thread. Unlike the live classroom, however, there is no guarantee that every post made by a student in attendance, or the instructor, will be read by every other student in the class.

The software of different online learning systems can be managed in different ways. It appears that what we see here is a fundamental difference in the educational experience of the live, traditional classroom and the asynchronous, online classroom. This difference relates specifically to the difference between the spoken (and heard) and written (and read) word. Different technologies can certainly provide different formulations, and there are hybrid classes that incorporate elements of both. Both the live classroom and asynchronous online classroom have their advantages regarding communication. However, there is a greater level of responsibility for the students who read and write. As Gadamer says it, "Thus written texts present the real hermeneutical task. Writing is self-alienation. Overcoming it, reading the text, is thus the highest task of understanding" (1990: 390).

The fundamental difference between the spoken and written word raises a question concerning our philosophical pedagogy. We have discussed above "the Socratic Method" as it relates to the live classroom. This seems to be analogous to the literary portrayal of Socrates' style of communication in Plato's Dialogues, if we imagine these dialogues actually take place in space and time. This is not what we experience in the asynchronous, online classroom. In truth, what we experience in the asynchronous, online classroom is analogous to (in its ideal state) the actual written forms we have of these dialogues, such as in the text of Plato's *Republic*. The live classroom within the confines of brick and mortar is able to cultivate what is portrayed dramatically in the written text. There is no doubt about that. Let us call this the "Socratic Method A".

However, the written form of discussion threads and forums as they occur in the online classroom are analogous to the actual written text of the dialogues. Of course, the discussion threads represent real discussion, rather than the literary formulation of a single mind, a disciple of Socrates, putting words in the mouths of literary characters. But the discussion threads or forums of the asynchronous, online

classroom share with the writer Plato a certain "distanciation" in their composition. The readers of these discussions share the process of appropriation with the readers of Plato's Dialogues. Given the understanding of Ricoeur's dialectic of distanciation and appropriation as it applies to the asynchronous, online college classroom, it seems appropriate to delineate the educational communication there as the "Socratic Method B" while reserving the term "Socratic Method A" for the discussion that occurs in the live, brick and mortar classroom.

In the latter sense, the "dialogues" as a literary portrayal are analogous to the instructor in the live classroom with students in classroom discussion. In the sense of Socratic Method B, the discussion threads/forums that develop actually resemble the text of Plato's dialogues. If we are talking about "the Socratic Method," the question is, does it make sense to distinguish between the method as carried out in the live classroom as "Socratic Method A" and the method carried out in the asynchronous, online classroom as "Socratic Method B"? There is no judgment here on what is the preferred mode of education, simply the question of whether a distinction should be made. In closing I would like to share a few more words of Gadamer. "The mode of being at text has something unique and incomparable about it. It presents a specific problem of translation to the understanding. Nothing is so strange, and at the same time so demanding, as the written word." (1990: 163).

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